Ethno-Territorial Conflict and the Mirror of Power: Rethinking Palestine in World Politics

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Abstract - The Israeli Palestinian conflict exemplifies the contemporary global shift toward ethno-territorial conflict, challenging conventional models of sovereignty, statehood, and international order. Drawing on recent scholarship that reconceptualizes territory, nationalism and occupation (Moore, 2016; Natarajan, 2024; Reingewertz, 2025), this article argues that the Palestinian question should be understood through a "mirror of power" framework: external actors, particularly extra-regional powers, do not merely project influence on the Middle East, but reflect and reproduce the region's contested territorial and identity dynamics while pursuing their own geopolitical and resource-security interests. The piece critically examines how the legal status of Palestinian lands, long subject to occupation and contestation, destabilizes traditional sovereignty, revealing instead a "post-Westphalian" order marked by contested legitimacy and competing ethno-territorial claims (Richmond, 2002; Knotter, 2024). Through historical and legal analysis—including the legacies of peace negotiations and agreements, and the evolving recognition of Palestinian statehood under international law—the article situates Palestine within broader global trends: the rise of ethno-territorial conflicts, the erosion of normative legal protections, and the reconfiguration of global power relations. In doing so, it challenges the assumption that state sovereignty remains the universal organizing principle of world politics, suggesting instead that contested sovereignty, identity-based territorial claims, and mirrored external interventions will increasingly shape global order.

Keywords: Palestine; ethno-territorial conflict; sovereignty; mirror-power; contested statehood; international law; external intervention.

I.   INTRODUCTION

The Israeli Palestinian conflict endures as one of the most defining and persistent ethno-territorial struggles in modern international politics. Its longevity, global visibility, and symbolic weight make it a paradigmatic case for understanding how historical grievances, territorial fragmentation, and competing national identities shape conflict trajectories far beyond the West Asia. Despite decades of diplomatic initiatives, the core issues surrounding territory, sovereignty, and political recognition remain unresolved. International legal bodies have repeatedly affirmed the unsettled status of Palestinian territory, most notably in the International Court of Justice's advisory opinion on the construction of the separation wall, which underscored the ongoing illegality of occupation practices and the incomplete nature of Palestinian statehood (International Court of Justice, 2004). This unresolved sovereignty is not merely political—it represents a juridical ambiguity that challenges foundational assumptions of the international system. Against this backdrop, the role of external powers has grown increasingly complex. Rather than functioning as neutral stabilisers, extra-regional actors such as the United States and Russia often mirror regional power dynamics, reflecting and amplifying local tensions through their strategic alignments, security partnerships, and geopolitical objectives (Fawcett, 2023). This "mirror-power" dynamic complicates traditional models of external intervention and raises questions about agency, responsibility, and the reproduction of conflict structures.

The persistence of the Palestinian question also highlights wider transformations in world politics. Growing ethno-territorial conflicts in multiple regions reveal an erosion of the liberal "world-society" paradigm that once underpinned global governance and peacebuilding efforts (Richmond, 2002). As norms weaken and contested sovereignties proliferate, Palestine becomes a lens for reassessing how international relations confront fragmentation and identity-based territorial claims.

This article therefore asks: How does the Palestine question illustrate shifting norms of sovereignty? How

do external powers shape—but also mirror—regional dynamics? And what does this case reveal about the global rise of ethno-territorial conflict?

II. HISTORICAL AND STRUCTURAL CONTEXT

This section situates the Palestinian question within its historical roots and structural legacies — revealing how contested territorial claims and successive peace-process frameworks have institutionalised a fragmented, partial sovereignty for Palestine.

2.1. The Territorial Roots of the Conflict

The conflict's origins lie in the competing nationalist and territorial claims that emerged in the early twentieth century, as different identity-communities articulated contradictory visions of homeland and statehood. Over decades, these tensions crystallised into cycles of displacement, contested borders, and protracted violence, shaping a deeply entrenched ethno-territorial conflict. The legacies of displacement, dispossession, and demographic fragmentation have continued to burden Palestinian society, embedding territorial conflict in the core of the dispute (e.g., displacement, land expropriation, contested identity, etc.).

In the mid-twentieth century, as colonial rule receded and new states formed, competing claims over historical territory hardened into structural conflict. The outcome was not a clean, stable national boundary, but a fragmented geography: parts under direct Israeli control, others under varying degrees of Palestinian administration, and many areas under contested or shifting governance.

This fragmentation undermines any conventional model of stable statehood and turns territory itself into a site of ongoing conflict — a contested, fluid space where identity, legality, and power intersect.

2.2. Peace-Process Architecture: Madrid, Oslo, Israel–Jordan

Over the past three decades, the dominant approach to resolving the Israeli Palestinian conflict has relied on a series of negotiated peace frameworks. Three stand out for their structural and symbolic importance:

- The 1991 Madrid Peace Conference marked the first major multilateral attempt to integrate Arab states, Israel, and the Palestinian question within a diplomatic settlement, embedding the Palestinian issue into regional diplomacy rather than treating it as a bilateral Israel–Palestine problem.
- The Oslo Accords (1993–95) introduced a model of limited Palestinian autonomy under a phased, interim governance arrangement. However, while Oslo recognised Palestinian administration in parts of the West Bank and Gaza, it deferred final status decisions — meaning that sovereignty remained legally unresolved.
- The Israel–Jordan Peace Treaty (1994) established a bilateral Arab-Israel peace model, bypassing Palestinian statehood and resolving Israel's eastern border via direct agreement with Jordan. This shifted part of the Arab–Israel settlement on a state-to-state basis, marginalising the Palestinian territorial question.

These frameworks institutionalised a: Palestinians received limited self-governance, but full sovereignty and territorial integrity remained unrecognised. The result is a structural status quo in which Palestinian territory remains contested, governed through a patchwork of administrative arrangements, occupation practices, and external interventions.

III. THEORETICAL INSIGHTS: ETHNO-TERRITORIAL CONFLICT AND CONTESTED STATEHOOD

Understanding the Palestinian question through international relations theory requires situating it at the intersection of ethno-territorial conflict, contested sovereignty, and the evolving nature of global order. Ethno-territorial conflict refers to struggles in which identity-based groups seek political authority through territorial control, often resulting in prolonged disputes over land, representation, and legitimacy. Moore (2016) argues that such conflicts arise when territory becomes a symbolic and material resource for identity groups, turning geographic space into a core marker of collective belonging. This framework maps directly onto the Israeli–Palestinian case, where claims to homeland, sacred geography, and demographic presence intensify competition for exclusive political space.

Alongside the ethno-territorial dimension is the issue of contested statehood, which characterizes political entities that possess varying degrees of governance

capacity but lack clear or universal international recognition. Knotter (2024) conceptualizes contested statehood as a condition in which actors operate within a fragmented international order, where legal sovereignty is uneven, conditional, or externally mediated. Palestine exemplifies this predicament: it has partial diplomatic recognition and limited administrative authority yet remains without full sovereign control or universally acknowledged territorial integrity.

The inadequacy of traditional sovereignty models becomes increasingly clear when applied to this context. Classic Westphalian assumptions—where states exercise exclusive control within defined borders—fail to capture the layered sovereignty seen in Palestine, where authority is divided among the Palestinian Authority, Israel, de facto governance structures in Gaza, and external actors. This reflects what Richmond (2002) describes as the erosion of the liberal "world-society" paradigm, in which global norms and peacebuilding frameworks struggle to accommodate complex, fragmented, and identity-driven conflicts.

Together, these theoretical insights demonstrate that the Palestinian question is not simply a regional dispute but a critical example of the limits of conventional IR frameworks when confronted with ethno-territorial realities and contested sovereignty.

IV. THE MIRROR OF POWER: EXTRA-REGIONAL INFLUENCE

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict cannot be understood without analysing the role of extra-regional actors whose political, strategic, and economic interests shape the dynamics of the region. Rather than acting as neutral stabilisers, these powers often mirror existing regional divisions, reinforcing local patterns of competition and contributing to a layered sovereignty structure. Fawcett (2023) argues that the Middle East has long been defined by a pattern in which external actors reproduce regional alignments, rather than resolve them, as their policies reflect geopolitical interests, ideological preferences, and shifting security partnerships.

4.1. The United States as a Mirror-Actor
The United States remains the most consequential external actor, maintaining long-standing security, military, and economic ties with Israel while simultaneously managing strategic relationships with key Arab states. These relationships are rooted in defence cooperation, counterterrorism frameworks, and resource-security arrangements in the Gulf (Fawcett, 2023). American policy therefore tends to mirror the power asymmetries on the ground: strong support for Israel, conditional engagement with Palestinian institutions, and selective pressure on Arab partners. This dynamic reflects what Richmond (2023) describes as "counter-peace," where external interventions unintentionally reinforce the structural conditions of conflict by aligning with dominant actors' security priorities.

4.2. Russia, the EU, and Multipolar Engagement
Russia's involvement in the broader Middle East—particularly its military presence in Syria—illustrates a strategic effort to project influence and challenge Western dominance. However, its engagement largely reflects regional cleavages rather than transcending them, reinforcing the mirror-power pattern (Fawcett, 2023). The European Union, by contrast, provides extensive development and humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian territories and emphasizes international law, yet lacks the coercive capacity to alter structural dynamics (UN OCHA, 2024). The EU's normative approach highlights the widening gap between legal frameworks and geopolitical realities.

4.3. Selective Sovereignty and "Regime-Change" Politics
Debates around sovereignty are further complicated by instances where external powers support political transitions or "regime-change" efforts in other regions. Richmond (2002) notes that such interventions challenge established norms of non-interference and expose inconsistencies in how sovereignty is applied. When compared with the Israeli–Palestinian context, these inconsistencies underscore the selective nature of international responses: strong commitments to territorial integrity in some cases, but tolerance of prolonged occupation or fragmented governance in others.

4.4. Post-Gaza Legal and Humanitarian Debates
Recent humanitarian assessments indicate that the intensification of hostilities in Gaza has raised significant concerns regarding compliance with

international humanitarian law. Human Rights Watch (2024) documents allegations of unlawful attacks and restrictions on humanitarian access, invoking debates around the Fourth Geneva Convention. These legal contests reveal how external powers often adopt positions that reflect their geopolitical alliances, reinforcing the mirror-power effect through selective interpretations of international norms.

4.5. Implications for Sovereignty and External Agency

In sum, extra-regional engagement reproduces local power structures and deepens existing asymmetries rather than resolving the underlying ethno-territorial dispute. The mirror-power dynamic demonstrates that sovereignty in Palestine is shaped not only by regional actors but also by global patterns of selective intervention, geopolitical rivalry, and inconsistent application of international law. This complicates traditional IR assumptions about external stabilisation and raises questions about the capacity of the international system to address protracted identity-based territorial conflicts.

V. ARAB STATES' DILEMMA: IDEOLOGY VS. REALPOLITIK (≈320 WORDS)

Arab states occupy an ambivalent position in the Israel–Palestine nexus: historically committed to the rhetorical and political cause of "free Palestine," yet increasingly driven by strategic, economic and security considerations that complicate or contradict that commitment. The ideological memory of Palestine—rooted in anti-colonial nationalism, pan-Arab solidarity and collective identity—remains a potent element of political discourse and public sentiment across the region (Said, 1992; Khalidi, 2020). At the same time, the post-2010 regional recalibration has produced new incentives for pragmatic engagement with Israel and the United States, including security cooperation, technology and trade linkages, and shared threat perceptions (notably Iran). The Abraham Accords (2020) and subsequent normalization initiatives illustrate how state elites have prioritized strategic and economic interests over older solidarities (Vakil, 2023).

This elite-level realignment, however, runs up against active and often hostile public opinion. Surveys and polling after the Gaza war show overwhelming popular solidarity with Palestinians and significant grassroots resistance to normalization with Israel—constraints that complicate governments' maneuvering and limit the political space for deeper cooperation with Israel (Arab Barometer, 2024; Doha Institute Arab Index, 2024). Domestic politics therefore mediate elite choices: leaders pursue pragmatic partnerships while trying to contain public dissent and preserve regime legitimacy.

Several states exemplify this dilemma. Gulf states such as the UAE and Bahrain have moved toward open ties with Israel for economic and strategic gain, even as they rhetorically support Palestinian rights (Vakil, 2023). Jordan—uniquely proximate to the Palestinian territories and host to a large Palestinian population—has publicly resisted proposals that would displace Gazans and has sought to preserve Palestinian political rights, reflecting both strategic concern and domestic political sensitivity (IISS, 2024; AP, 2025).

The result is a fragmented Arab posture: formal diplomatic engagement with Israel in some capitals, vocal condemnation and mass mobilization in public spheres, and cautious policy hedging in others. Reingewertz (2025) argues that this fragmentation undermines coherent regional strategies and produces policy paralysis, leaving Arab states caught between historical solidarity and contemporary realpolitik. For international relations, the Arab dilemma demonstrates how domestic politics, economic incentives, and regional security dynamics jointly reshape state behaviour toward ethno-territorial conflicts.

VI. RETHINKING SOVEREIGNTY AFTER GAZA

The Gaza war has accelerated a profound rethinking of sovereignty in the Israeli–Palestinian context and, by extension, in international relations more broadly. Traditional peace processes assumed that liberal norms, institutional negotiation, and gradual confidence-building would ultimately lead to a stable political settlement. Richmond (2002) argues that such liberal peace frameworks rest on the idea of a functioning "world-society" in which international norms, institutions, and negotiated settlements guide conflict resolution. Yet, the post-Gaza landscape reveals the fragility of these assumptions. Instead of advancing toward a negotiated sovereign arrangement, the conflict has intensified patterns of fragmentation,

occupation, and non-linear governance, underscoring the collapse of the liberal order's peace-building expectations.

6.1. Erosion of "World-Society" Assumptions

The events in Gaza illustrate how liberal peace models fail when power asymmetries are extreme, international norms are selectively applied, and external actors prioritize strategic over humanitarian considerations. Richmond (2002) demonstrates that liberal frameworks often overlook the structural violence and exclusion embedded in conflicts like Palestine, making their peace prescriptions inadequate. The Gaza crisis thus exposes the limits of universalist assumptions regarding sovereignty, rights, and negotiated coexistence.

6.2. Gaza and the Crisis of Humanitarian Legitimacy

UN OCHA (2024) reports severe humanitarian deterioration in Gaza, including mass displacement, disrupted essential services, and restricted humanitarian access. These developments highlight a growing crisis of humanitarian legitimacy: international humanitarian law depends on state compliance, yet repeated violations—from indiscriminate attacks to the obstruction of aid—erode the credibility of global norms. When humanitarian protections become conditional or inconsistently enforced, sovereignty shifts from a responsibility-based concept to a power-based one, weakening the normative foundations of international law.

6.3. The Human Dimension: Historically Deprived Populations

The Palestinian experience represents a case of long-term structural disenfranchisement, wherein a population faces fragmented governance, limited mobility, and exclusion from meaningful political sovereignty. Their situation challenges international relations theories that center the state as the primary unit of analysis, revealing the need for people-centered approaches that foreground lived experiences, inequality, and dispossession. The Gaza crisis thus reinforces that sovereignty cannot be understood solely through formal institutions—its legitimacy depends on the protection and political agency of affected populations.

VII. IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY

The Israeli–Palestinian case, especially in the wake of the Gaza crisis, exposes fundamental tensions within mainstream international relations (IR) theory. At its core, the conflict demonstrates that sovereignty is no longer a fixed, territorially bounded attribute of states, but a fragmented, layered, and externally mediated construct. Richmond (2002) argues that liberal peacebuilding presumes coherent state authority and functioning international norms—assumptions that fail in contexts where competing sovereignties, occupation, and asymmetrical power define political life. The Palestinian case reveals the limits of these assumptions, illustrating how sovereignty can be simultaneously claimed, denied, and partial.

7.1. Rethinking Sovereignty

Rather than treating sovereignty as absolute, the Israeli–Palestinian context shows it to be contingent and negotiated. Palestine's partial recognition, fragmented territorial control, and overlapping authorities challenge classical Westphalian models. Knotter (2024) conceptualizes such cases as "contested statehood," an increasingly common category in global politics. The Palestinian experience thus pushes IR theorists to redefine sovereignty beyond juridical categories and toward practical authority, legitimacy, and lived realities.

7.2. Ethno-Territorial Conflict as a Global Pattern

Moore's (2016) work on ethno-territorial conflict shows that identity-based territorial claims are becoming central to global politics. The Palestinian struggle exemplifies this shift, where land, identity, and symbolic geography drive political behaviour more than formal institutions or negotiations. As similar conflicts emerge elsewhere, the Palestine case serves as a key reference point for understanding how ethno-territorial disputes persist under conditions of asymmetry and contested legitimacy.

7.3. Mirror-Power and the Future of External Intervention

The interaction of extra-regional actors' further challenges IR theory. Fawcett (2023) notes that external powers increasingly act as "mirror-actors," reproducing local divisions rather than resolving them.

This undermines traditional assumptions that outside intervention stabilizes conflict zones and instead suggests a multipolar environment where competing powers reinforce fragmentation.

7.4. Normative Implications: The Decline of International Law's Universality

Human Rights Watch (2024) documents repeated violations of humanitarian norms in Gaza, revealing selective enforcement of international law. Such inconsistency weakens the universalist claims of the liberal international order and raises questions about whose sovereignty is protected, and whose is ignored. Taken together, the Palestinian case underscores the need for IR theory to integrate contested sovereignty, people-centered analysis, and the political consequences of external "mirror-power" dynamics

VIII. CONCLUSION

The Israeli Palestinian conflict, intensified by the Gaza crisis, illuminates the deep structural limits of contemporary international relations in addressing ethno-territorial disputes, contested sovereignty, and protracted displacement. Across this analysis, sovereignty emerges not as a stable legal category but as a fragmented, conditional, and externally mediated process shaped by asymmetrical power relations and selective international engagement. The mirror-power dynamic, where external actors reproduce rather than resolve regional cleavages (Fawcett, 2023), underscores the inadequacy of traditional expectations that great-power intervention can stabilize contested spaces.

The Palestinian condition also resonates with Hannah Arendt's reflections on statelessness and the "right to have rights." Arendt (1951) argued that when populations are deprived of a political community capable of guaranteeing their rights, they fall into a condition of structural vulnerability. Palestinians embody this predicament: they face fragmented authority, limited protection, and exclusion from full political membership—conditions that expose the shortcomings of state-centered IR theories and the fragility of international law.

The Gaza crisis further demonstrates that humanitarian norms, while formally universal, fail when compliance becomes selective and geopolitical interests override legal obligations (UN OCHA, 2024). As liberal "world-society" assumptions erode (Richmond, 2002), the Palestinian question becomes a critical lens for understanding the future of global politics.

Ultimately, this case shows that IR theory must evolve toward frameworks that centre people rather than states, acknowledge contested and multilayered sovereignties, and confront the moral and political implications of enduring statelessness.

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