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Palestine

Palestine on a Precipice

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The rise and expansion of right-wing populism and the dramatic unfolding of global politics in the Trump era have had significant and alarming implications for the Palestinian people, leadership, and question overall.

In typical bombastic fashion, the Trump administration has taken a series of policy steps that appear to radically shift traditional U.S. positions regarding the "Israel-Palestine conflict," resulting in direct financial and diplomatic pressures on the Palestinian movement.

While the true nature of these shifts is not evident without appreciating the broader arc of U.S. engagement, these measures nonetheless further embolden Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and effectively green-light and even turbo-boost the revisionist Zionist agenda he has led for the past eleven years in power.

Adding to these blows are a series of longer-standing dynamics that further weaken Palestinian strategic positioning. These include the ebbs and flows of the region's post-2010 revolutionary/counter-revolutionary currents, which have sidelined the Palestinian issue, leading to less political and financial interest from donor states and the world at large; the abandonment of non-normalization norms by increasing numbers of Arab (particularly Gulf) states vis-à-vis Israel, as survivalist instincts and anti-Iranian fixations consume them; and the internal Palestinian geopolitical divide between the Fateh-governed West Bank and the Hamas-governed Gaza Strip, greatly complicating the formulation of a unified Palestinian institutional and political position capable of overcoming the grave contemporary and historical predicaments that Palestinians face.

The combined effect of these trends places the Palestinians people and leadership alike in an unenviable and complex position of historic vulnerability, insufficiently recognized, but not to be underestimated.

While disorientation and demoralization may be natural consequences of these trends, the situation is actually too dire locally and globally to allow a loss of focus or heart.

Alternatively, and as this article will argue, significant opportunities have actually opened up within these dynamics, allowing for real advances toward progressive causes, including in and *through* Palestine.

This article will attempt to unpack these entanglements with an eye toward informing progressive audiences and invoking debate, organizing, and action.

Trump on a Rampage

In a relatively short amount of time, the Trump administration has shifted a series of traditional U.S. positions vis-à-vis the "Israel-Palestine conflict."

These shifts include the moving of the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem; the withholding of all funds to the Palestinian Authority (PA), excepting to its security services; the closing of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Mission in Washington DC; and the cancelling of annual funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which has been providing health and educational services to millions of Palestinian refugees in

the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) and regionally since 1949.

While the rapid succession of these shifts indeed makes them appear radical in nature, a sober historical assessment reveals a more complex picture.

The formal relocation of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, for example, represents a public acknowledgment (hardly hidden) of the truly bipartisan U.S. support for Israel's annexation of the city. It also simultaneously removes any pretense that the United States constitutes an honest broker regarding Israeli-Palestinian "final status" issues, of which the fate of Jerusalem is one.

Ever since the passage of the 1995 U.S. Embassy Act, both the U.S. House and Senate have overwhelmingly recognized Jerusalem as Israel's "eternal and undivided capital," despite the fact that Israel's occupation, annexation, and colonization of the city represent clear breaches of international law and were opposed by Washington in earlier years.

While all presidents since Clinton have publicly supported the principle of Jerusalem as Israel's "eternal undivided capital," they nonetheless withheld the embassy's final transfer citing national security concerns. Keeping the embassy in Tel Aviv was considered a nod of appeasement to the broader Muslim world and pro-U.S. Arab allies (inappropriately referred to as the "moderate Arab regimes" Jordan, the Gulf Cooperation Council states, Egypt, and Morocco), allowing them to maintain close U.S. ties despite congressional recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

Trump's decision to move the embassy thus aligns an existing, public, two-decade-old U.S. political position with operational reality, simultaneously removing pretenses that allowed for the coexistence of seemingly contradictory positions.

Removing More Cosmetic Pretenses While Tightening the Rope

U.S. cuts in non-security-sector Palestinian aid also echo the theme of removing cosmetic pretenses surrounding American imperial agendas.

This aid, which totaled \$230 million in 2018, will now be "reprogrammed" to other hitherto undisclosed priorities.

Non-security-sector U.S. aid to the PA used to ensure the buoyancy of Fateh as the animating political entity within it. This aid came in the form of budget support (subsidizing PA operating costs and debt), together with funding for developing and running certain infrastructure projects (particularly water and roads often alternative networks needed because Israel closed off roads to Palestinian access). It also used to support Palestinian "private sector development," which can be read as code for indirectly supporting Fateh's businesspeople, who inevitably used to enjoy the lion's share of these economic perks.

By reprogramming this aid, however, while retaining its security dimensions, the United States has decided to tighten the rope around Fateh: In one swoop it weakens the ability of Fateh to create and retain economic loyalists, while also strengthening the security networks within the PA that Washington views as vital to controlling the West Bank in a post-Mahmoud Abbas era.

The U.S. shift thus speaks to the squeezing of Fateh while aligning the public spectacle of U.S. diplomacy with the *actual and historically consistent* position of U.S. imperialism toward the Palestinians namely, that the United States unequivocally opposes Palestinian self-determination, sovereignty, or statehood *anywhere*, and that the PA should be prevented from means that could enable it to realize sovereignty. From this U.S. view, the PA's role should be delimited effectively to that of an apparatus capable of administering constrained Palestinian autonomy while serving subcontracted Israeli security and governance interests. The persistence or existence of *any* genuine democratic or national dimensions to PA activity contradicts the reasons for its founding, and hence is summarily opposed by the United States and Israel.

Turning Back the Clock, Liquidating the Cause

When we analyze the final two major steps taken by Trump against the Palestinians, and combine them with the others, a sinister image of Trump's agenda emerges.

The shuttering of the PLO mission in Washington DC effectively turns the political clock back to the days before the Oslo Accord, when the United States refused to acknowledge or accept independent Palestinian representation. Before 1993, the United States designated the PLO as a "terrorist entity," and attempted to enforce Jordanian suzerainty over Palestinian affairs. Today the issue of enforcing Jordanian suzerainty is back on the table, as floated by Jared Kushner and U.S. Middle East Envoy Jason Greenblatt in September 2018.

Whether Trump actually believes he can turn history that far back is ultimately less important than the fact that the closure of the PLO mission means that the Trump administration is only interested in dealing with the PA, and particularly its security services, and not the PLO. Despite the latter being the nominal body to which the former is accountable, *de facto* the PA is financially and diplomatically accountable to donors and Israel, with only these actors occupying the commanding heights over PA political legitimacy and finance.

Similarly, U.S. cuts to UNRWA funding also aim to strike a decisive blow to another core "final status" issue namely the Palestinian refugees. The United States used to be the largest funder of UNRWA, providing \$6 billion since 1950, and \$360 million in 2017. But come 2019, these streams will end entirely.

UNRWA is the main supranational body linking the Palestinian issue to international legal norms protecting their right to return to the properties from which they were expelled or fled during the 1948 War. The agency's very existence creates institutional continuity with the legal regime protecting Palestinian refugee rights *qua* refugees and hence is a very public obstacle to the elimination of the Palestinian question overall.

U.S. cuts to UNRWA aim to break this continuity and institutional guardianship, weakening the ability of Palestinians to use UN fora *or any fora* to argue their case.

Of course the United States historically financed UNRWA not because it supported Palestinian refugee rights, but because it understood that social provisions to this constituency provided a modicum of social and political stability in countries where Palestinian refugees were located particularly within Jordan, a key U.S. ally where the largest concentration of Palestinian refugees reside. The decision to defund UNRWA thus throws caution to the wind regarding Jordanian stability and that of other Palestinian refugee host states, while aiming also to aid the institutional and political weakening of Palestinian claims overall.

The Trump Agenda in Sum

To summarize these steps: Trump's bombastic moves appear to *aim at the liquidation of Palestine's core facets from within* chiefly the issue of independent Palestinian political representation, the question of Jerusalem, and the question of refugees. The elimination of these core facets is believed to *remove the need for negotiations at all*, as it clears the way for a Trumpist vision of U.S. imperial interests to be consolidated and aligned with Revisionist Zionist interpretations of "securing Israel" and accomplished without the hindrance of a Palestinian "partner." When combined with the Trump administration's broader regional efforts to bring about public Israeli-Arab state normalization, seen as necessary to confront Iran, we begin to understand what Trump means when he speaks of his "Deal of the Century."

Of course a good many of these maneuvers like much of the Trumpist spectacle in general relies upon a not inconsiderable dose of sleight of hand.

Defunding organizations like UNRWA cannot magically disappear millions of refugees, their legal claims, memories, organizing efforts, and institutions. There are other possible donors to the organization, while lessened aid also lessens U.S. influence and leverage.

Equally so, U.S. recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel cannot and will not discount Palestinian claims to and presence within the city, nor the wide swaths of other interests (Arab, Muslim, and Christian among others) that equally resent Israel's commandeering of the "holy city."

But there is no question that these moves complicate the task at hand in a context where the Palestinians have few reliable allies.

Even if we can expect Trump's moves to simplify and unravel years of more carefully constructed U.S. regional diplomacy and political arrangements, further narrowing U.S. influence and leverage and raising its risk level, and those of its partners, the task before the Palestinian movement remains daunting.

The Israeli Front

The gravity of U.S. moves, however, can only be fully appreciated once we combine them with Israeli maneuvers in the shadow of Trumpist encouragement.

Indeed, since Trump's election, Netanyahu and his coalition of unapologetically racist, fascist, neo-messianic settler allies have made a dash to pocket as many political, demographic, and legalistic achievements as possible in the service of their broader agenda.

This includes the ratcheting up of genocidal policies in the Gaza Strip, including tightening the 11-year siege; mass maiming and killing of thousands of civil protestors attempting to bring attention to the devastation the siege has caused; a robust colonization impetus in the West Bank that includes accelerated land grabs, preparing for Israeli annexation (minus the areas of dense Palestinian population Areas A and B in the language of the Oslo Accords which total roughly 40 percent of the West Bank) and where 2.8 million Palestinians reside; the strategic and targeted ethnic cleansing of 300,000 Palestinians from the areas prepared for annexation (Area C), especially in and around Jerusalem (Khan el Ahmar) and the Jordan Valley; and the elevation of apartheid legislation within Israel to constitutional status through the "Nation-State" bill, aiming to permanently disenfranchise Palestinian citizens of

Israel and undermine their ability to use the limited democratic channels afforded within the "Jewish democratic" state for purposes that might protect their individual, let alone collective, rights.

This non-comprehensive list of assaults under Netanyahu, encouraged by Trump, is hardly trivial and more often than not entails the exercising of brutal colonial force of different orders and magnitudes.

Ground Zero: The Gaza Front

The most brutal of these frontiers is unquestionably the Gaza Strip, where weekly showdowns between Palestinian protestors and Israeli snipers separated by a narrow buffer zone of fencing and barbed wire have led to recurrent bloodbaths of varying intensity.

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the human toll of the Great March of Return stood at 228 Palestinians killed between March 30 and mid-November 2018; 43 of the killed were children and two were women. An astonishing 24,362 persons have also been injured (nearly a quarter of whom are children), while 12,778 of these have been hospitalized *5,866 from live gunshot wounds*. According to an October 21 report from the World Health Organization, 86 amputations have taken place, while 1,200 patients require long-term limb reconstruction.

These gruesome statistics from the Israeli-Gaza Strip frontier only couch an even longer list of yet more brutal humanitarian statistics documenting 11 full years of besiegement. Gaza today suffers from 53.7 percent unemployment, with 85 percent of the population being food dependent. The UN already considers the Gaza Strip to be an unlivable toxic wasteland, with poisoned water, crumbling infrastructure, a collapsed economy, and with indications that the territory's biosphere is now prone to the spread of waterborne diseases thanks to chronic electricity shortages and the lack of sewage treatment. (A recent RAND Corporation report warns that if the chronic state of emergency in Gaza's water and sewage sector continues, an epidemic disease outbreak or other public health crisis is imminent, with the risk of it spreading to Israel and Egypt.) In the past five years alone, the strip's population density has increased by more than one thousand persons per square kilometer from 4,383 people/km² to 5,479.

Qualitatively, the siege aims to isolate and target the expression of any new forms of Palestinian political organization. Its initial imposition came in the wake of Hamas' dramatic winning of the 2006 Legislative Council elections in which the movement promised to implement a wide series of democratic civil governance reforms to the PA while realigning its political agenda. The realignment was to include acknowledging that the Palestinians were still in a phase of "national liberation" and had "the right to strive to recover their own rights and end the occupation using all means, including armed struggle." This collective agenda resonated with Palestinian society in the context of heavy disappointment with the structure and outcomes of the Oslo process (which had never been put to a national referendum), the disappointing performance of the Fateh-led PA during 1990s, and the devastation wrought on Palestinian society in the wake of Israeli repression during the second Intifada. After a 2007 U.S.-backed coup attempt through right-wing Fateh elements was exposed and aborted, Israel and the international community imposed a full-blown siege on the territory, attempting to contain and suffocate this reformist political tendency. The aim was to force Palestinians to accept the Oslo process framework, and its strict political parameters designating the PA as a subcontracted Israeli security-provider, as the "only game in town."

By combining horrific military assaults with siege tactics, Israel and Egypt and the Western bloc of states who observe the siege aims to generate humanitarian, political, and financial crises that create leverage over the Palestinian movement, while scuttling the ability of Hamas to perform its political and reformist mandate.

As it did with Fateh previously, Israel seeks to tame Hamas by forcing it to internalize compromises generated through the management of these crises. Israel thus works to divide the Palestinian front by splitting it between its Gaza and West Bank wings, ensuring that each individual territory is governed by Oslo or Oslo-like arrangements. Israel becomes the overseer of an indirect governance arrangement of Palestinian affairs, leveraged and managed through the self-preservation instincts of each of the two main political parties of Palestinian politics today Fateh and Hamas. International donor aid subsidizes this arrangement at no cost to Israel, with Western funds used in the case of the West Bank, and with Qatari/Turkish/Islamist funds plus residual Western aid (through UN bodies and NGOs) subsidizing Gaza.

Through these means, Israel effectively divides and rules the Palestinian polity, with Gaza receiving the stick to Fateh and the PA's West Bank carrot, albeit with the latter also being whittled down in size. Between the two, Palestinian organizing is hamstrung and with it the possibility of generating significant leverage on the regional and international fronts. Israel is seemingly absolved from its responsibility to conform to international legal norms or even to engage in negotiations, thus freeing it to accelerate its settlement project without restraint.

Oslo's Carnage

This cunning approach to liquidating the Palestinian question has made important advances since the Oslo process began a quarter century ago. The "peace process" laid waste to the historical political and institutional structures that were launched locally and in the diaspora to protect and mobilize the Palestinian people and movement. Of course the PLO's deterioration preceded Oslo and in fact led to its signature of the accords. The Oslo agreement has since successfully coopted or corralled significant sections of the rich field of popular committees and organic intellectuals who emerged across the OPT after the 1967 occupation and who witnessed the height of activity and political effectiveness during the first Intifada. A quarter century of peace process effectively led to the mass demobilization of wide swaths of these actors, as the creation of the PA, and the process of NGOization, set in motion powerful institutional and political parameters for activity and finance that reversed accountability, from the grassroots to donors and the Oslo agenda. This led to exposing the vulnerability of Palestinian communities and their historical political agenda and rights, generating the shift of popular support toward Hamas.

The nature of PA "self-rule" autonomy rather than sovereignty also ensured Israeli control over borders and movement, thereby allowing Israel to funnel Palestinian economic activity toward its own designs. Israel's imposition of Palestinian de-development ensured that no forms of horizontal economic linkages and synergy could be created between the OPT's fragmented parts. The result was the geographical, political, economic, and institutional fragmentation of the OPT, dependent on Israel and donors. All of this occurred beneath the rubric of "peace building," "state-building," and "security," funded by Western taxpayers. The de facto apartheid archipelago that has emerged has meant that Palestinians are now fragmented into more than 200 different islands across the OPT, while more than 150 Israeli settlements enjoy territorial contiguity, with an infrastructure that is integrated into pre-1967 Israel.

Within the new territorial and institutional map emerging from Oslo, it is the Gaza Strip that actually represents the largest single demographic and political obstacle for Israel, despite its smaller territorial size and population in comparison to the West Bank. The latter's effective transformation into Swiss cheese through Oslo has meant that Gaza now carries the majority of the historical and political mantle of the Palestinian cause. If Gaza can be broken, Israel will win another generation of settlement expansion across the West Bank, while conducting mop-up work across the individually fragmented West Bank cities. This process will be accelerated in the post-Abbas era as there is no clear successor within Fateh powerful enough to assert leadership over the entire movement. Fractious dynamics and Israeli deal-cutting with local elites and security bosses will increase.

However, if Gaza can withstand its predicament, the moral, political, and institutional model can continue to influence

and spread beyond its borders, weakening Western- and Israeli-backed designs for the West Bank and the view that the PA is "the only game in town."

The Importance of the Great March of Return

Gaza's grave humanitarian predicament and the historical and political questions it encapsulates have thus transformed the territory into an erupting volcanic fount of political, social, and military magma.

The launching of the Great March of Return demonstrations by ad hoc popular committees, working with political factions, was an attempt to direct the process of combustion, ensuring that it was an explosion rather than implosion. The weekly confrontations on the front lines in Gaza, despite their enormous costs to a population with little means, have subsequently provided inspiration to Palestinian communities across historical Palestine and beyond.

On top of this one cannot ignore or discredit how Gaza has also produced a not-insignificant military potential led by Hamas (but including all other factions, including non-Abbas-led Fateh branches), which includes a wide range of infrastructure (bunkers and tunnels, potentially *hundreds* of kilometers long, described sometimes as an "underground city") and industries (for rockets, weapons, and bomb production).

While Israel clearly enjoys asymmetric military superiority over its Gaza rivals, there is also no question that the Palestinian experience with employing armed force in Gaza has significantly matured. The Gaza armed force is now significant enough to selectively hold in check Israeli military excess, through targeted disruption of "normal" life in the south, as well as potentially beyond. It is able to do this not because its military might is so significant, but rather because it has developed tactical field acumen and coordination through the creation of a unified, 13-faction-strong, *joint* command and control room. It is also able to exploit the fact that Israel has become increasingly concerned with Gaza's grave humanitarian conditions and its potential to impact Israeli communities in the south and beyond: diseases don't respect human-made barriers; Gaza's sewage flows into the sea with currents that head north to Israeli beaches; rocket barrages weaken investment and tourism, as well as Israel's strategic interests in "strengthening the [Jewish] population of the south"; resistance factions also retain the ability to hit areas further north (including the airport) for extended periods of time, creating factors that Israel cannot summarily discount. Israeli militarism is somewhat restrained through these factors, especially in a context where Israel does not intend to invade and eliminate Hamas because it would subsequently become responsible for the horrendous humanitarian situation in Gaza. In fact, this responsibility is precisely what Israel was attempting to free itself from through Oslo and the 2005 Gaza "disengagement" in particular.

The strategic, tactical, and political alignment in Gaza around one agenda (resistance), with its multiple forms chiefly popular unarmed demonstrations but retaining a military option has taken the initiative away from Israel, while giving it to Palestinian actors in Gaza. Gaza today should be identified as the key site where contemporary and future questions about Palestine will be determined, especially if dynamics around resistance, and principles and practices of field unity, can be generalized to other Palestinian theaters.

Projecting Gaza Beyond

One should not discount the moral, political, and organizational implications of what is happening in Gaza for the other Palestinian theaters, particularly the West Bank and Jerusalem, although it is unclear at this stage how those implications will take form.

There is broad consensus across Palestinian society that the Oslo process and Fateh's approach have failed to protect or achieve Palestinian aims and that the two-state solution is by this point chimerical. What replaces this vision and strategy has yet to be definitively determined; however, all eyes look to Gaza as providing some of the most mature articulations of the answers.

While reproducing the "Gaza model" is not practical for the other clusters of Palestinians, what these dynamics have done is shift the center of gravity of Palestinian political and moral legitimacy from the West Bank and the PLO/PA and definitively posited them in Gaza.

Concomitantly, the West Bank and Jerusalem struggle in their own right to resist the wave of Israeli repression and colonization as it articulates itself locally.

Both territories have actually been in distended states of low-intensity conflict for the past two years, as evidenced by the persistence of almost weekly stabbings, car rammings, and shooting attacks, to say nothing of daily confrontations with settlers and soldiers. Most of this activity is unorganized, and it often reflects the actions of individuals under conditions of particular despair. One also should not discount the fact that the West Bank and Jerusalem unlike Gaza are under more-immediate forms of occupation, in the sense that Israel does not even respect or observe the PA's self-policing role in Area A and simply enters these areas when it pleases to conduct arrests or assassinations. (Israel has less room to maneuver for this in Gaza.) This means that the political and institutional organization of these areas is much more difficult, as political actors are forced to operate much deeper underground in comparison to Gaza.

One also should not forget that Jerusalem witnessed a short-lived but significant mass uprising in the summer of 2017, when Israel attempted to impose new restrictions and electronic metal detectors in and around the Al Aqsa Mosque compound. The mass mobilization and fightback by Palestinians in East Jerusalem was so powerful it actually forced Israel to fully retreat. Though the nature of the mobilization was defensive to return the situation in the Old City to the status quo before the imposition of metal detectors the episode demonstrated that the Palestinians in Jerusalem had not been bought off because of their more privileged identity-card status, which allows greater freedom of movement and economic opportunities within the Israeli labor market. On the contrary, it demonstrated that despite the immediate and daily confrontation that East Jerusalemites have with the occupation, they can organize around collective goals and win.

Concluding Thoughts

The point here is to emphasize that in the post-Oslo world, the main clusters of Palestinian communities in historical Palestine from the river to the sea those in the West Bank, Gaza, Jerusalem, and Palestinian communities in Israel all interact and experience Zionist settler colonialism differently, in ways particular to the historical and local evolution of conflict dynamics and Israel's particular interests in each locale together with other factors. While the Oslo process did indeed do grave damage to the Palestinian movement overall, it did not succeed in killing it. What it did do was fragment it and develop sophisticated means of controlling it, which in turn transformed the way the conflict was experienced collectively and subsequently the relationship of the Palestinian movement to itself and to its oppressor. The resulting diversification of national expression that emerged regionally and institutionally remains a process in flux, but one that is not all negative.

Today, Trump's demagoguery and the very public association of his tenure with Israel have set the stage for more organically integrating the question of Palestine into the vocabulary and actions of the broad progressive countercurrents to that agenda and slowly making moves to gain traction against it.

Moreover, the United States and Israel have largely exhausted the traditional carrot-and-stick toolbox used to such effect against the Palestinians since the Oslo process began. Though these techniques have certainly chalked up important strategic advantages in managing their "Palestinian problem," the victory is pyrrhic in that these methods have not fundamentally altered or defeated Palestinian aspirations for national self-determination. The result is the diversification of Palestinian national activity and expression, politically, institutionally, and territorially. Palestinian national resiliency now manifests itself in resurgent ways across Palestine's fragmented landscape. While this poses problems in coordination and communication, it nonetheless creates conditions to imagine a genuine post-Oslo politics and movement, both locally and internationally, un beholden to the cynical buzzwords around "peace" and "state-building" that derailed the movement and its supporters for the past quarter century. Moreover, especially after the launch of the Great March of Return popular movement in Gaza, a defiant political movement and tenor is emerging that will continue to influence the other theaters of conflict, doing so in dialectical fashion according to its own time frame and according to the particular local structure and articulation of power therein.

As these dynamics play themselves out, it is incumbent upon progressive political actors in the West to inform themselves of the new and evolving dynamics of Palestinian politics and to find ways to integrate those dynamics into their politics and action. Palestinian oppression is directly subsidized by Western military, diplomatic, and financial support, such that it is possible to articulate a clear conflict of interests between the interests of average U.S. taxpayers and those of imperialists and Zionist sympathizers. The case can indeed be strengthened when one considers the central role Israel has played in the post-9/11 world, fashioning itself as a chief research and development facility for the control, surveillance, and repression technologies used globally from the Mexican-United States frontier, to the scandals of Israeli private investigations corporation Black Cube. Moreover, since revisionist Zionism under Netanyahu has sought to capitalize on global right-wing populist trends and abandoned the pretense of representing liberal Jews and their concerns, important cleavages between these have been more clearly exposed and can now also be widened. These contradictions must be exploited as part of a broader strategy of building left political forces that can pose an alternative to the slippery slope of fascism down which world politics seems to be sliding. The fate of Palestine, and of a great many other causes of global concern and survival appears to be held in the balance.

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