
KEY TAKEAWAYS

A Candid Conversation with Ambassador Mona Juul on the Gaza Situation, Two-State Solution, and the Future of the Middle East

Thursday, 30 May 2024 - The Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia (FPCI) held a public discussion with Ambassador Mona Juul, Permanent Representative of Norway to the United Nations (2019 - 2023). This public discussion discussed the Oslo Agreement, updates on Gaza, the future of the Middle East, the Western response, and two-state solutions. This event was attended by up to 200 online and in-person participants.

(Rewatch via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZtqWuzb3-s&t=4091s>)

Speaker:

Ambassador Mona Juul, Permanent Representative of Norway to the United Nations (2019 - 2023)

Moderator:

Dr. Dino Patti Djalal, Founder and Chairman of the Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia

Key Takeaways

1. Norway expressed condemnation of the Hamas attack on 7 October; equally strong as well, condemnation of Israel's action on Gaza; and Norway has recognized the Palestinian state (along with Spain and Ireland).
2. She claimed that there are no double standards in the Norway case. Norway carefully regards how the country puts the principles of self-defense in case of Israel's retaliation attack on Hamas. The current ruling by ICJ and ICC pointing to Israel and its violation of the rules strengthens Norway's stance that there is Israel's misconduct.
3. Netanyahu has been aiming to end the Oslo Accords since he came to power in 1996. The sentiment is strong as well among the Israeli population making it hard to expect any difference or softer stance in Israel dealing with the Palestinian issue.
4. Immediate cease-fire after 7th October is needed. The US and other countries like Qatar are trying to put effort into this and put forward humanitarian assistance. The profound mistrust between Hamas and Israel has rendered a resolution unattainable. Thus far there is a complete lack of trust with Hamas. Norway is not at the table in the discussion, but it is trying its best to speak to both sides to find a way out.
5. There is no other way than the two-state solution. What happened since 7th October is the omen that the Palestinian issue could not be placed on the back burner. Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia, are taking a more proactive role in advocating for a two-state solution, while the United States, as the primary actor capable of influencing Israel, must play a constructive role in achieving a ceasefire and facilitating long-term peace negotiations.

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6. What made the trust-building among Palestinians even harder is the fact that there are factions internally and Norway is trying to bring all of them together. There is a need for generational change in the Fatah leadership, because the voice of younger generations and those in the occupied territories, coming from exiles, differs from the current generation. The general election will play an important role in resolving this issue. There have been efforts of reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas. However, a positive result is unlikely. The big question – in the case of Fatah and Hamas reconciliation – is what role Hamas will play?
 7. What is lacking to solve the conflict is political will. Strong leaders agree to compromise and are willing to move forward from both sides if needed. The case is for Israel, they have the ability but not the will, meanwhile, for the Palestinians, they have the will but not the ability.
 8. Without any resolution to solve the Palestine issue, the Middle East will remain in disarray. The current situation in Gaza led to the normalization between Saudi and other regional countries with Israel, especially after the Abrahamic Accords (made with UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco, among others), which cannot go continuously unless Israel recognizes the Palestinian state. There is hope for regional arrangement if they link this normalization process with a solution to the Palestine issue. However, in the Middle East, there is a lack of a regional organization where they can get together, like ASEAN in Southeast Asia.
 9. In the Middle East, there is a lack of a regional organization where they can get together, like ASEAN in Southeast Asia. There is a hope for regional arrangement if they link this normalization process with a solution to the Palestine issue. Without any resolution to solve the Palestine issue, the region will remain in disarray.
 10. Even if Israel recognizes a Palestinian state, deep-rooted tensions will persist. The current Palestinian generation carries trauma from the conflict, making immediate reconciliation unlikely. The two-state solution isn't about fostering friendship, but rather establishing clear, hard borders to enable coexistence. The challenge lies in creating a Palestinian state while ensuring security for both Israel and Palestine. To build trust and understanding, people-to-people initiatives are crucial, helping Israelis and Palestinians recognize their shared humanity and common interests.
 11. The situation in Gaza is a test of the rules-based international order. The inconsistency in applying the rules-based international order to the Gaza situation creates polarisation on the issue. The inconsistent response of the U.S. and Western countries to the Gaza situation could lead to a loss of credibility for the rules-based order and widen the gap between the Global North and South. This time is a complex situation for European countries' relations with Israel. This is highly influenced by the remnants of the Second World War and the Holocaust in European history. For

Norway, it is important to maintain diplomatic relations with Israel in order to keep the line of communication open.

1. Oslo Accords 1993 and the Declaration of Principles

The Oslo Accords or the Oslo Process was a major breakthrough at the time. In 1993, the handshake outside the White House in Washington, where the arch enemies of the world, or of course in the Middle East, but also globally between the Israeli Prime Minister at the time, Issa KRobin, and the head of the PLO, Yasser Arafat. These two could be compared now to Israel and Hamas. It was illegal for Israelis to have any kind of contact with the PLO. It was considered a terrorist organization that was shunned by almost all the world, including the US and others. For the PLO to meet with Israel was quite an achievement just to bring them together. It was the PLO who took the initiative. They came to us and asked Norway if we could help them with getting in direct contact with Israel, because at the time we had good relations also with Israel. So Norway was an in-between country.

What then took place during secret negotiations for nine months, and produced several outcomes. **We managed to get them to mutually recognize each other. Israel recognized the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinians and the PLO recognized Israel as a state.** The parties also agreed to not a full-fledged peace agreement, but a declaration of principles, which was like a roadmap that would gradually lead to the two-state solution. They also agreed to establish a Palestinian authority, bringing Arafat back to Palestine, but first to Gaza. Then the idea was that they should gradually also take over the West Bank. The Oslo Accords also made it possible for Israel and Jordan to make a peace agreement that happened the year after in 1994.

The expectation during the process was to build confidence along the way, where it would be easier for the two sides to commit themselves to certain steps. That confidence should solve the final status issues, meaning Jerusalem, final borders, and the refugees. Unfortunately, that did not happen.

2. Norway's role in the Israel-Palestine conflict

They (PLO) came to us and asked Norway if we could help them with getting in direct contact with Israel, because at the time we had good relations also with Israel. The roots of Norway's mediation capabilities consist of (1) Norway has no history as colonial power; (2) Norway's financial resources allow the facilitation of mediation inside and outside the country; (3) Norway has played a role in peace and reconciliation because we have civil society organization working in other countries for years and try to help on request; (4) As a nonmember of the European Union (EU), we consider Hamas as a terrorist organization but they are not formally listed as

one and we are not adhering to the terror listing that the EU has. You have to speak with the enemies to make peace.

Since the aftermath of 1993, Norway has been trying to build and strengthen Palestinian institutions to be ready to become a state. We have been leading the donor efforts and still are. **We were very strong in our condemnation of the Hamas attack on the 7th of October, but equally strong in our condemnation of Israel's warfare in Gaza, violating the Geneva Convention, international humanitarian law, and international law.**

3. Leadership in Israel and Stance towards the Palestinian issue

The confidence in the negotiation started to slip away because neither side kept to their commitments according to that declaration of principle. Israel continued with settlement building. Prime Minister Rabin was shot and killed by one of his people because he went into an agreement with the arch-enemy, the PLO. **After a few years, the first time Prime Minister Netanyahu came into power, he wanted to end the Oslo Accords.** That was his program already in the late 1990s. On the Palestinian side, at least some of the Palestinian factions continued with violent resistance and struggle. That also made it more difficult with the trust building among them.

The domestic situation in Israel has been deeply affected by the events of October 7th. This date is seen by many Israelis as an existential threat to their nation and identity, intensifying feelings of vulnerability and survival. Looking forward, there is a possibility of new elections in Israel, which might result in a different government. However, given the strong sentiments among the Israeli population, it is uncertain how much a new administration would alter the current approach and mindset. The pervasive sense of threat and the need for security are likely to continue shaping Israeli policies and public opinion.

4. Palestinian Leaders Issue

The question remains: who should represent the Palestinians? Changes are needed on both sides. With the current Israeli government, it will be very difficult. The young Palestinian generation also needs a way to express their views, such as through an election in Palestine that has been postponed for too long. **A representative government is needed on the Palestinian side, and certainly, changes are needed on the Israeli side as well.**

As you referred to, the split now between Hamas and Fatah has of course been very damaging to the Palestinians. With the current leadership on both sides (Palestinian Authority and Hamas), that will take place, now there needs to be somebody coming in on the other side, also on the Israeli side.

5. The two-state solution and international involvement

We think that the two-state solution is the best option because of the rights of the Palestinian people of their own state. It should also be an argument for the Israelis because this is the only way that Israel can claim to continue to be a Jewish state.

Both of the involvements, much stronger involvement of other Arab states, and we now see Saudi Arabia, being much more active in pushing also for their two states, the initiative actually, the Arab initiative. What we now see a little bit more is the involvement of the Arab and Gulf states. There is a need, especially after the Abrahamic or the normalization accords that were made with the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco, not being all the same.

Currently, animosity and a very complex relationship exist between Palestinians and Israelis. **Hamas brought international attention to the conflict in an unprecedented way. Restoring trust and finding a solution is now more difficult. This is why the international community needs to lead more and provide guarantees, rather than leaving it to the two parties, who cannot resolve it on their own.**

6. Long-Term Outlook of Israel-Palestine Dispute Settlement

That day represented in all its brutality and not only Israel, but the US and the international community, have put the Palestinian issue on a back burner for too long. There was this thinking that the Palestinian issue could somehow be managed. **It is being realized that a solution needs to be found. Realization now is much stronger than it was before the 7th of October.**

To enter into a compromise, you cannot get it all. **You need to have strong leaders on both sides who can carry the compromise and sell a compromise to your own population.** What has been the case, even since you have not had that? You might have a strong leader or the ability to sell an agreement, but not the will on the Palestinian side. This might be the opposite. There has been a will, but not an ability to be together in going for that kind of a compromise.

It may take many years, especially after the 7th of October and what is going on right now. Two states mean separation because of the vision of borders where they can coexist side by side. We have to find a way to establish a sovereign Palestine state with their security being guaranteed and Israeli security being guaranteed.

7. The eroding credibility of the US and the rules-based international order

The key player and the only one that has some leverage and can put pressure on Israel is the US. They are not doing it to the extent that we all would have liked to

see. But it is a sad reality that they are the only ones who have the tools to do it. Of course, there are no commons at the time when you have the US election. We cannot give up the hope that we will see a new international effort headed by the US and the Arab states to push for a two-state solution.

But those normalization accords where they simply skipped the Palestinian issue, cannot happen again. We know that **Saudi Arabia and the prospect of a normalization between Saudi and Israel is being pushed also by the US, and we see there are interests on both sides.** But it currently has a clear commitment to the establishment of a Palestinian state. Norway and other countries need to support that. It will also bring the US differently because they were strongly behind the normalization.

When you talk about sort of the international community, for example, the ICJ and the ICC ruling pointing to exactly that when it comes to Israel, they violate those rules and vis-a-vis Putin in Russia.

8. European country's relation with Israel post-7 October

Hamas and the Norwegian government had sort of contact and we consider them as a terrorist organization. But we thought that it was important to have that channel open with them. We need to maintain diplomatic relations with Israel in order to talk to them, so open communication channels are important. Our advantage so far, heading sort of the donor efforts vis-a-vis the Palestinian Authority. We also had a good relationship with Israel. Even we have been criticized by Israel, as they were not happy with our decision to recognize Palestine, but seen from our point of view, we are doing the right and necessary thing at this stage.

We need to have some rules to be adhered to. Every country can do what they want and pursue their own interest. We need to make sure that the wrong thing does not happen. Norway does not apply double standards because we have been extremely consistent in our condemnation of Russia's aggression and the Israel-Palestine issue. We respect the principle of self-defense. But it is all about how you do that. We think that Israel violates international law in that respect too.

When it comes to Europe and the relation with Israel that has some historical factors, that is probably more of an explanation and not an excuse for not applying the same standards vis-a-vis Israel. But there are sentiments in Europe that go back to the Second World War and the Holocaust.

9. Ceasefire Outlook after 7th October

We need to concentrate our international efforts on a two-state solution. We need to stop this terrible thing that is going on in Gaza with massive killing and targeting of

civilians. We can refer to those efforts and negotiations as our first priority to at least get a ceasefire.

Despite extensive efforts by the US, Qatar, and other nations to halt the ongoing conflict and deliver essential humanitarian aid, the profound mistrust between Hamas and Israel has rendered a resolution unattainable thus far. The issue of hostages further complicates the situation. **Although not directly involved in the negotiations, our role (Norwegia) has been to engage with both sides, striving to broker some form of compromise to end the tragic violence.**