

The Palestine Issue

Historical Background & Contemporary Developments



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Revised and Updated Version 2022



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Chapter Four

The Palestine Issue 1967–1987

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The Palestine Issue 1967–1987

Introduction

1967–1987 was a period characterized by the emergence of the national Palestinian identity, the leadership of the PLO by Palestinian factions, and the PLO's success in achieving recognition as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, obtaining observer status at the UN.

The period was also characterized by the decline of the Arab dimension of the Palestine issue, with occupied Palestine's neighbors shutting off their borders to Palestinian resistance activities, as well as the end of the official state of war between some Arab countries and Israel and the conclusion of a peace treaty between Egypt and the latter.

The Palestinian resistance's expulsion from Jordan and its subsequent sinking in the quagmire of the Lebanese civil war, and then its exit from Lebanon in 1982, came with an increased inclination by the Palestinian leadership to pursue political settlements, temporary solutions, and the establishment of the Palestinian state on any liberated part of Palestine.

This period also witnessed the rise of the Palestinian Islamic movement both inside and outside of Palestine, as it became a significant popular force, active in mosques, schools, universities, trade unions, and charity associations. There emerged also during this period the first nuclei of Islamic armed resistance.

First: The Emergence of the Palestinian Identity

The 1967 War left Arab dignity in tatters. The Arab regimes attempted to absorb the shock and restore the people's trust in them, with the Arab leaders meeting in Khartoum between 29/8–1/9/1967, where they proclaimed that there shall be no peace, negotiations, or recognition of Israel. Arab countries pledged to support Palestine's neighboring countries in rebuilding their armed forces. Egypt and Syria entered a war of attrition with Israel (August 1968–August 1970) that contributed greatly to restoring trust and improving the morale of the Egyptian and Syrian armies.

In order to avoid the wave of popular anger and to overcome the feeling of hopelessness resulting from the 1967 War, Arab regimes had to open the way for Palestinian resistance action, which was able to build a strong and broad base in Jordan and Lebanon. Palestinian resistance organizations, led by



• **Yasir ‘Arafat at the UN 1974**

Fatah, were able to take leadership of the PLO, which came to be chaired by Yasir ‘Arafat in February 1969. Armed popular struggle and guerilla warfare became prominent, and the emergence of national Palestinian identity gained significant momentum. The PLO was able to obtain recognition as the sole

legitimate representative of the Palestinian people from the Arab states, at the Arab Summit in Rabat in October 1974. It achieved a political victory the following month when Yasir ‘Arafat was called on to give his speech at the UN headquarters in New York, and the PLO was granted observer status thereupon. The UN no longer dealt with the Palestine issue merely as a refugee issue as it had for the previous 20 years. Indeed, it recognized the existence of the Palestinian people on 10/12/1969 and issued resolutions in the 1970s in support of the right of the Palestinians to self-determination and to adopt all legitimate means to obtain their rights, including armed struggle.

In 1974, the Palestine issue returned as an independent item on the UN agenda for the first time since the 1940s. One of the most important resolutions of the UN was Resolution 3236 issued on 22/11/1975, which reaffirmed the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people in Palestine including (a) the right of self-determination without external interference, (b) the right to national independence and sovereignty, (c) the inalienable right of the Palestinians to return to their homes and property from which they have been displaced and uprooted, and (d) the right of the Palestinian people to regain its rights by all means in accordance with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the UN. Then there was a succession of resolutions of international “legitimacy” supporting Palestinian right, and the Israelis found themselves in a state of political siege, especially when the UN began, in 1975, to issue resolutions that equated Zionism with racism. However, the US was always ready to stand beside Israel and use its veto power against any binding international resolutions.¹

Thus, armed struggle forced the world to listen to and respect the voice of the Palestinians. However, the blows dealt to the Palestinian resistance and the fragmentation of the Arab and Muslim world decreased the chances of the Palestinians effectively benefiting from international support.

While Palestinian political gains increased in the Arab and international arenas during that period, armed Palestinian action and effective Arab support, which rose at first, went in to decline during the second half of this period with negative repercussions for the political gains themselves.

Second: The Armed Palestinian Struggle

The period between 1967 and 1970 proved to be a golden era for armed Palestinian resistance, for which borders were opened between Palestine and Jordan (360 km) and Lebanon (79 km). The battle of Karamah, which took place on 21/3/1968 between Palestinian resistance fighters and Jordanian forces on one side, and the Israeli forces on another, led to enormous losses on the Israeli side and represented a big moral victory for the Palestinian resistance. Tens of thousands volunteered to fight alongside the resistance, and Palestinian armed action grew from 12 operations per month in 1967 to 52 per month in 1968, then 199 operations per month in 1969, and 279 operations per month in early 1970.²



• Yasir ‘Arafat after the battle of Karamah



• King Hussein standing on a destroyed Israeli tank after the battle of Karamah

However, the violent clashes between the Jordanian army and the Palestinian resistance in September 1970 and July 1971 led to the exit of Palestinian resistance from Jordan and thus deprived it of one of its most important arenas. The Palestinian resistance was able to strengthen its base in Lebanon, but was forced to battle with the Lebanese army to

achieve this, before the Cairo Agreement was concluded in November 1969, which allowed the resistance to conduct armed operations through Lebanon.



• **The ‘Ain al-Rummaneh bus incident, the spark that ignited the Lebanese Civil War in 1975**

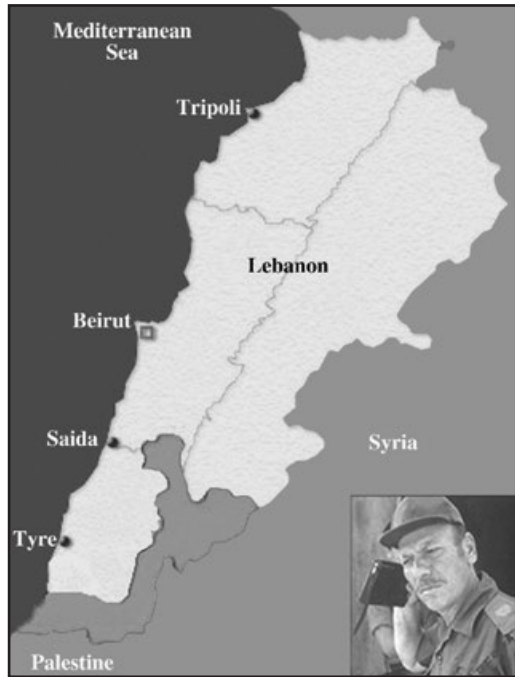
the Palestinian camps for more than two years (1985–1987). Moreover, Egypt and Syria closed their borders in the face of the Palestinian resistance, thus rendering any cross-border Palestinian resistance operations virtually impossible.

Israel retaliated harshly against the areas that harbored the Palestinian resistance, both in Jordan and Lebanon, particularly against innocent civilians and civilian infrastructure, including factories, bridges, power plants, and even agricultural crops. In Lebanon, the Israelis led intense campaigns on al-‘Orqoub (1970–1972) and assassinated three PLO leaders on 10/4/1973, Muhammad Yusuf al-Najjar, Kamal ‘Adwan, and Kamal Nasser. They also conducted a broad invasion in the South of Lebanon in March 1978, in which they succeeded in creating a buffer zone on Lebanese territory with the help of Sa‘ad Haddad, a Lebanese ex-army officer who led the South Lebanon Army, a military faction that collaborated with Israel.



• **The assassination site of Kamal Nasser 1973**

In the battle of the Beaufort (*al-Shaqif*) on 19/8/1980, the Palestinian resistance achieved an important success against Israel, after it was able to deter an attack by an army that outnumbered it 15 to one. The Israelis thus incurred great losses that led it to withdraw.³ In the period 10–24/7/1981, Israeli aircraft and artillery batteries intensively bombed 46 towns, villages, and bases belonging to the Palestinian resistance in al-Nabatiyeh region, killing 150 and wounding 600 others. The Palestinian resistance retaliated with a barrage of shells and rockets on around 30 Israeli military bases, settlements, and towns in northern occupied Palestine (Israel).



• **Security Zone in South Lebanon (formed by Sa'ad Haddad – lower right corner)**



• **The Israeli invasion of Lebanon 1982**

The Israeli army's invasion of Lebanon in the summer of 1982 was the most violent attack of its kind on Lebanon. Israel was able to invade South Lebanon with relative ease and speed. However, it stopped at the gates of the capital, where it was fiercely confronted by the Palestinian

resistance and its allies, while the Arab, Islamic and international states stood idly by. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon began on 4/6/1982, with about 125 thousand soldiers, supported by 1,600 tanks.

On June 9th, the Israeli invasion forces reached the capital, and the ensuing battle of Beirut lasted 65 days (9/6–12/8/1982). The Israeli forces had to agree to a ceasefire on 12/8/1982, after failing to capture West Beirut.

However, they were able to achieve their objectives in general, as the ceasefire arrangement included the exit of the Palestinian resistance and PLO leadership from Lebanon. This led to the exit of around 11 thousand Palestinian fighters, who went to encampments in Syria, Iraq, Tunisia, Yemen (both South and North), Algeria, and Sudan.

The Israeli forces did not adhere to their commitments and invaded West Beirut two weeks after the exit of the Palestinian resistance and supervised the massacre perpetrated by the Christian extremist forces in Sabra and Shatila on 16–18/9/1982, in which 3,500 Palestinian and Lebanese civilians were slaughtered, including children, women, and senior citizens.

The 1982 war resulted in 55 thousand Palestinians and Lebanese deaths and injuries, and despite the courage and ability of Palestinian fighters and the failure of the Israelis in crushing the resistance and their leadership, they succeeded in destroying most of the infrastructure of the Palestinian resistance, which no longer posed a serious threat to Israel. The PLO thus found itself far from Palestine and deprived of the ability to carry out military operations from Palestine’s neighboring countries.⁴



• Israeli plane bombarding Beirut 1982



• Departure of PLO fighters from Lebanon



• Sabra and Shatila Massacre 1982

• The attackers of Savoy Hotel 1975



As a result of these events, the number of external Palestinian resistance operations greatly decreased in the 1970s and 1980s, to very modest levels. Nonetheless, there was a significant number of noteworthy operations, such as the Savoy Hotel Attack on 6/3/1975, which was executed by Fatah in Tel Aviv and which led to the killing of 100 Israelis; the Kamal ‘Adwan operation also executed by Fatah on 11/3/1978, which led to the killing of 37 and the injuring of 82 Israelis.



• The PFLP hijacking and destruction of airliners 1970

led to the killing of 18 Israelis and injured 15 others,⁵ as well as the Hang Glider Operation in November 1987. Moreover, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) executed important operations such as the Tarshiha Operation on 15/5/1974, which led to the killing of 27 Israelis and the injury of many, in addition to various operations in Bisan, Tabaria, ‘Ain Zaif, and Jerusalem.

The PFLP carried out a number of prominent hijackings of airliners, especially in 1970, as well as the attack against Lod (Lydda) airport on 30/5/1972, which claimed the lives of 31 people with 80 others wounded. The PFLP–General Command (PFLP–GC) carried out al-Khalisa Operation on 11/4/1974, which



• Members of al-Khalisa Operation 1974

Hence, since 1982, the military fatigue of the PLO led to political weakness, and the supporters of “realpolitik” rallied more people towards adopting peaceful solutions. In fact, the PLO began to change its political discourse as early as the late 1960s, calling for the establishment of a democratic secular state for both Palestinians and Jews, and abandoned the condition of the return of Jewish emigrants to their countries. It then adopted, in its 12th Palestinian National Council (PNC) (1–8/6/1974), the ten–point program, which included political action as a means for liberating Palestine, replacing armed struggle as the sole route for such liberation, as well as transitional solutions and the establishment of the “independent combatant national authority for the people, over every part of Palestinian territory that is liberated” (or retrieved by other means). The PLO’s approval of the Fez Arab Project for Peace in 1982 represented a huge compromise, as it included an implicit recognition of Israel and its violation of most of Palestine’s land in 1948, when it called for “guarantees of peace between all States of the region, including the independent Palestinian State” (including Israel), and agreed to enter into negotiations.⁶ The PLO went through bleak years in 1983–1987, which were reflected in a decrease in armed struggle, and declining political influence and effectiveness, even within Arab circles.

Third: Arab States and the Palestine Issue

For the Arab states, upholding Palestinian national identity and the PLO’s sole legitimate representation of the Palestinians practically removed the burden of responsibility from their shoulders, leaving it to the Palestinians alone. Calls for the “pan-Arab nature of the battle” died down, and the struggle became restricted within a narrow Palestinian framework. The Palestinians were left alone to confront some of the most powerful entities in the world. With time, especially after 1973, the responsibility of the Arab countries became confined to political and economic support, and even economic support became weaker in the 1980s, after each state focused on its local priorities, and oil-producing countries became preoccupied with their problems resulting from the fall of oil prices. The PLO also had problems with a number of Arab regimes that prevented it from carrying out its mission. Indeed, its problems with Jordan, the broadest and most important arena had spanned most of the 1970s, and with similar problems with Lebanon persisted throughout the subsequent period. The PLO’s problems with Syria inflamed in 1976, and then escalated again from 1983 onwards, when

Yasir ‘Arafat was expelled from Damascus and an attempt was made to end the presence of his supporters in North Lebanon, especially in the Nahr al-Bared and Baddawi refugee camps that same year. This was in addition to the enmity with the greatest Arab power, namely Egypt (especially in 1977–1983) after it accepted the principle of a peaceful settlement and signed the Camp David Accords with Israel. Meanwhile, Iraq was occupied with its war against Iran in 1980–1988 and was thus unable to exert any serious influence on the development of the Palestine issue.



• Egyptian forces crossing the Suez Canal in the October War of 1973



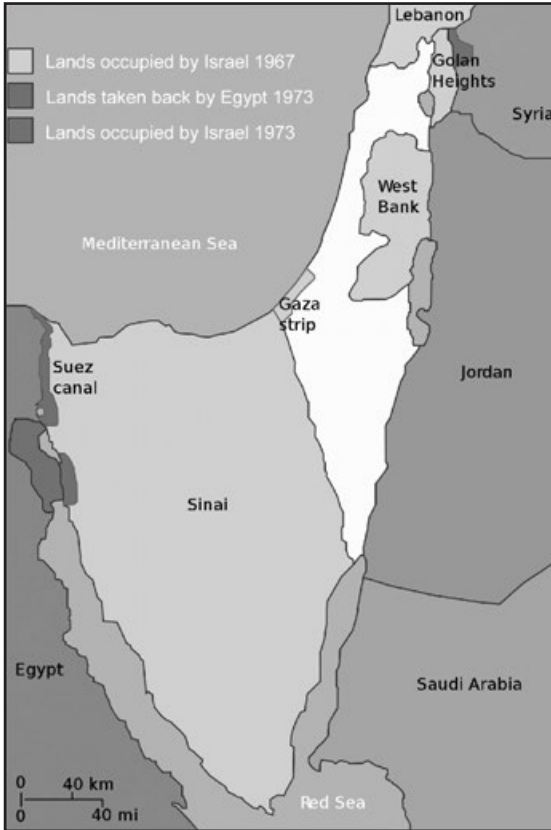
• The hoisting of the Egyptian flag in the October War of 1973

The Egyptians were able to advance towards the eastern part of the Suez Canal and penetrate into Sinai, while the Syrians were able to penetrate the Golan Heights. However, the Israelis soon benefited from a US airlift and took control, breaking through the western part of the Suez Canal (Deversoir Gap) and

The Arab stance at the beginning of that phase was stringent, through the Khartoum conference in 1967 and the participation of Egypt and Syria in a war of attrition with Israel. **On 6/10/1973, the Arab-Israeli war (October/ Ramadan War) began**, in which Syria and Egypt took part against the Israelis and achieved some early successes.



• Ariel Sharon heading to Deversoir Gap in the October War of 1973



• Results of the October War of 1973

20 to 30 km away from the eastern side of the Canal, and the maintenance in Egypt of limited forces in the lands it retrieved east of the Canal (8–12 km deep).⁸ On 21/2/1974, Israeli forces pulled out from west of the Suez Canal (Deversoir Gap). The Separation of Forces Agreement was signed between Syria and Israel on 31/5/1974, upon which Israeli forces withdrew from the Sa‘sa‘ pocket (551 km²), which it had occupied during the 1973 war, and from Qunaitra and its surroundings, which it had occupied in 1967 (112 km²).⁹

The relative improvement in the Arab performance and the heavy losses incurred by Israel in the October War broke the myth of Israel’s invincible army and brought back the morale and trust that were broken in the 1967 War. The October War was portrayed as a victory for Arab countries, and the Syrian and Egyptian leaderships were considered heroes. However, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat used this war to move towards a peace settlement, and benefited

retrieving what they had lost in the Golan Heights, as well as occupying 39 new Syrian villages (in what was known as the Sa‘sa‘ pocket). Nonetheless, Egypt’s approval of the UN Security Council resolution to stop the war on October 22 surprised the Syrians and forced them too to stop the war. After this, the war of attrition resumed, lasting around 80 days (13/3–31/5/1974), halting with the signature of the Separation of Forces Agreement.⁷

Egypt signed an Agreement for the Disengagement of Forces with Israel on 18/1/1974 stipulating the pullout of the Israeli forces from the west of the Suez Canal to a position

from it to ward off accusations of failure or reluctance vis-à-vis Israel, as he was now the “October [War] hero” and Egypt had “fulfilled its obligations” towards Palestine. Sadat visited Israel in November 1977 and signed the Camp David Accords in September 1978, thus putting an end to the conflict between the two parties and regaining the Sinai Peninsula. The Palestine issue thus lost the most active and important party in the conflict against the Israelis, and the prospect of any future large-scale military confrontation with Israel was lessened.



• Sadat’s visit to Israel 1977



• Camp David Accords Signing Ceremony 1978

Perhaps it is worth mentioning that following the burning of *al-Aqsa* Mosque, the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) was established in 1969 (now known as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation), and was the source of hope for uniting the efforts of Muslims to support the Palestine issue. The OIC held numerous meetings and issued tens of resolutions in support of the Palestine issue politically, financially and militarily. However, its resolutions remained mere ink on paper because they lacked any real and binding implementation mechanisms. Ostensibly, many Islamic states used the OIC as a platform to “vent out” the feelings of their peoples that craved unity and the liberation of the holy sites, instead of adopting any practical and effective programs. What was more, some Islamic states, such as Turkey, maintained relations with Israel, and all the Islamic states held the Palestinian side responsible, as the PLO was “the legitimate and sole representative” and most of them contented themselves with expressing their wish to see Palestine liberated. Some even erected obstacles in order to maintain the status quo. This led to the confinement of the conflict within Palestine and the practical removal of its Arab and Islamic dimensions. The conflicts among the Muslims themselves also negatively affected the role of the Islamic world, such as the Iraqi-Iranian war in 1980–1988, which exhausted the two countries’ energy and resources.

Fourth: The Emergence of the Palestinian Islamist Trend

It is noteworthy that the Islamic trend among the Palestinians was revived during that period, and more people moved towards Islam, after they witnessed, what they believed, the failure of nationalist, secular, and leftist ideologies in resolving the Palestine issue. The participation of the MB Movement in the Palestinian resistance operations in 1968–1970 through what was known as the “Sheikhs’ Camps” in Jordan in coordination with Fatah, was one of the early indications of this revival, as they acted under the cover of Fatah, while maintaining internal administrative autonomy. Close to 300 men were trained and distributed among seven resistance bases. Despite their limited resources and participation, MB members offered outstanding examples in strong operations such as the Green Belt Operation on 31/8/1969 and Deir Yasin on 14/9/1969, where 13 of them were killed.¹⁰

In 1980, the secret organization *Usrat al-Jihad* (lit. The Family of Jihad) was uncovered in the land that was occupied in 1948 “Israel,” and around 60 of its members were arrested after conducting several operations.



• Sheikh Ahmad Yasin

The first indications of the establishment of the MB’s military wing appeared when its leadership sent some members abroad for training in 1980. Sheikh Ahmad Yasin established the military wing in GS, and it was first led by ‘Abdul Rahman Tamraz then by Salah Shehadeh. However, the uncovering of the military wing dealt it a blow in 1984 and led to the arrest of Sheikh Ahmad Yasin and some of his companions. The military wing was restored and rebuilt in 1986 under the name “the Palestinian Mujahidin,” and became active before the 1987 *Intifadah*. The

MB's security apparatus was established in GS in 1981 as part of the military action, and it was restructured and expanded in 1985. In the summer of 1985, the MB command took the decision of exploiting any incident to take part in the confrontation against the occupation.

The Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine (PIJ) was formed in 1980, and was headed by Dr. Fathi al-Shaqaqi. Its founding members were former members of the MB Movement, and it conducted several resistance operations. The Jihad Brigades (that merged with PIJ) conducted the Mughrabi Gate Operation on 16/10/1986, which killed and injured around 80 Israeli soldiers.



• Dr. Fathi al-Shaqaqi

Generally speaking, PIJ operations remained limited and modest during that period, compared with other Palestinian organizations, especially Fatah, but nonetheless represented a prelude to a future phase in which it would play a more central role. The Islamic movement's main achievement was its broad popularity and growth, especially since the mid-1970s, both within Palestine and in Jordan, Kuwait, and Lebanon. Islamists began to win in student elections by the end of the 1970s, such as in An-Najah National University in Nablus and the Islamic University–Gaza, as well as in Jordanian universities. They also dominated in trade unions. The Palestinian Islamic movement was strongly present in Kuwait University, where Khalid Mish'al and some of his companions founded the Islamic Justice list in 1977 for the elections of General Union of Palestinian Students. After his graduation, his colleagues established the Islamic Association for Palestinian Students in 1980. The Palestinian Islamists succeeded in charity, social, and educational work, which enabled them to have a strong and broad base of supporters. Indeed, the Islamic movement (and more specifically the MB Movement) became the principal rival of the secular current represented by Fatah, which controlled the PLO.¹¹

Endnotes

- ¹ On the Palestine issue in the UN, see *al-Mawsu'ah al-Filastiniyyah*, vol. 1, pp. 360–362 and 552–563, and vol. 2, p. 260.
- ² Salah Khalaf, *op. cit.*, pp. 96–98.
- ³ *Al-Mawsu'ah al-Filastiniyyah*, vol. 2, pp. 638–641.
- ⁴ According to Israeli sources, the PLO losses until mid-July 1982 were one thousand killed and six thousand prisoners, and Syria's losses were 370 killed, one thousand injured and 250 prisoners. Syria also lost 350–400 tanks, 86 fighter aircrafts, five helicopters and 19 rocket launch pads. Israel lost 35–40 tanks, one fighter aircraft, two helicopters, 300 killed and 1,600 were injured.
See Chaim Herzog, *The Arab-Israeli Wars: War & Peace in the Middle East* (New York & London: Random House, 1982), p. 353.
- ⁵ On these operations, see *al-Mawsu'ah al-Filastiniyyah*, vol. 2, pp. 313–314 and 567, vol. 3, pp. 661–662, and vol. 4, p. 42.
- ⁶ On the settlement projects, see Munir al-Hur and Tariq al-'Isa, *Mashari' al-Taswiyah li al-Qadiyyah al-Filastiniyyah 1947–1985* (Settlement Projects for the Palestine Issue 1947–1985), 2nd ed. (Amman: Dar al-Jalil li al-Nashir, 1986). See also Political Programme of 9 June 1974, 12th Palestine National Council, UNISPAL, 9/6/1974, <http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/BA7A9909F792340F8525704D006BDAF1>; and General Assembly, thirty-seventh session, A/37/696, Security Council, thirty-seventh year, S/15510, Agenda items 31, 34, 58 and 134, UNISPAL, 15/12/1982, <http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/A65756251B75F6AD852562810074E5F4>
- ⁷ On the war at the Syrian front, see Chaim Herzog, *op. cit.*, pp. 285–307; Haytham al-Kilani, *al-Istratijiyyat al-'Askariyyah li al-Hurub al-'Arabiyyah* (Military Strategies of Arab-Israeli Wars) (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 1991), pp. 368–372; *al-Mawsu'ah al-Filastiniyyah*, vol. 2, pp. 188–191; and Muhammad 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nawawi, *Ru'yah Islamiyyah fi al-Sira' al-'Arabi al-Israeli* (Islamic Viewpoint of the Arab-Israeli Conflict) (n.p.: n.p., 1983), vol. 1, p. 452.
- ⁸ See Text of Egyptian-Israeli Agreement for the Disengagement of Forces, 18/1/1974, site of Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development, http://sadat.umd.edu/archives/Egyptian_Israel%20Negotiations/AADMDisengagement%20Agreement%201.18.74.pdf
- ⁹ See Separation of Forces between Israel and Syria, 31/5/1974, site of Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Peace+Process/Guide+to+the+Peace+Process/Israel-Syria+Separation+of+Forces+Agreement+-+1974.htm>; and Haytham al-Kilani, *op. cit.*, pp. 448–452.
- ¹⁰ See Mohsen Moh'd Saleh, *al-Tariq ila al-Quds*, pp. 196–198.
- ¹¹ On the Islamic trend during that period, see *Ibid.*, pp. 164–170.

This Book

This book seeks to present a comprehensive overview of the Palestine issue, its historical background, as well as its modern and contemporary developments.

The book, in a documented, methodical, and concise style, and in plain language, delves into the history of Palestine from its early history throughout the Islamic era, and the background of the emergence of the Zionist movement, as well as the British occupation of Palestine and the founding of Israel. The book analyzes the various phases of the Palestine issue and its developments, shedding light on the struggle of the Palestinian people, their uprisings and revolutions, and the role of the Palestine Liberation Organization and its factions, as well as the role of the Palestinian Islamic movements.

The book places particular emphasis on the first two decades of the twenty-first century, so that the reader would be able to obtain a clear picture about many of the issues related to the contemporary aspects of the Palestinian question.

The revised and updated edition of the book covers the period up to the year 2021, and contains a large collection of pictures and maps to illustrate its points.

The book is an important source for readers seeking to acquaint themselves with the Palestine issue, and to become informed of the pertinent facts in a balanced manner. It can also serve as an introduction to further studies of the Palestine issue.

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ISBN 978-614-494-020-4



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