

The Palestinian Strategic Report 2006



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Chapter Four

The Palestinian Issue and the Arab World

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The Palestinian Issue and the Arab World

Introduction

No significant change had taken place in the Arab attitudes towards the Palestinian issue throughout the year 2006. In fact, the various Arab positions towards the issue remained basically the same as in previous years. The Arab policy towards the settlement issue with Israel was also the same, as the Arab countries kept their call of having the Arab Initiative, agreed upon in the Beirut Summit of 2002, as the basis of peace negotiations. But Israel rejected this offer and the Initiative itself. However, the interesting development in this regard are the positions of the Arab countries towards the victory of Hamas in the legislative elections, and the defeat of Fatah that controlled the PLO since 1968, and with whom the Arab countries had interacted throughout these long years. The victory of Hamas has introduced a new player in the Palestinian arena that have a different vision and political discourse, and with whom the Arab countries have never dealt with before.

First: The Arab Position towards Hamas' Victory in the Legislative Elections

The Arab positions towards the victory of Hamas in the legislative elections, held on 25/1/2006, varied considerably. Some Arab countries welcomed the outcome of the elections, but others expressed reservations, while a third group considered the incident as an internal Palestinian concern, and called for non-interference in the democratic options of the Palestinian people.

1. Official Arab Positions

The League of Arab States hailed the transparency and fairness of the elections, and asked for the acceptance of their outcome as it reflects the free will of the Palestinian people. In response to the Israeli refusal to negotiate with the new Hamas government, 'Amr Musa, the secretary-general of the Arab League, publicly maintained that Israel should respect the outcome of the elections and negotiate

with the new government. Israel, he added, should not use this development as a pretext for procrastination or suppression of the peace process. Musa told the Palestinians that their struggle is passing through a delicate phase, and urged them to unite around a national program. He added that Hamas should be given the opportunity and the time to crystallize its attitude and policies.

Musa warned the USA from pursuing a double-standard policy by saying, “Washington cannot speak of the necessity and urgency of democratization and, at the same time, refuses to accept the results of this democratic election.” On the margin of Davos Economic Forum in Switzerland, the secretary-general said that Hamas will exhibit a new face in government, and added, “If Hamas is to form the government and be in charge of governance and negotiations of a peace settlement, then we will see a different Hamas from the one that we know in the street.”¹

Meanwhile some Arab states welcomed these democratic elections. The Yemeni President ‘Ali ‘Abdullah Saleh, called the Palestinian President Mahmud ‘Abbas to congratulate him for the success of the elections, and demanded that Hamas and the new PLC actively engage themselves in the peace process in accordance with the decisions of the international community, and for the sake of achieving the Palestinian ambitions, hopes and national legitimate rights. Fu’ad al-Sanyurah, the Lebanese premier, congratulated Hamas for its success, and agreed with Khalid Mish‘al, the president of Hamas’ Political Bureau, to resume negotiations on the Lebanese-Palestinian relations.

The Qatari *Amir*, Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani, called the Palestinian president to congratulate him for the success of the elections that will have positive impact on the process of building an independent Palestinian state. He also called Khalid Mish‘al to congratulate him for the victory of Hamas in these legislative elections.²

During the first Arab tour of Mahmud al-Zahhar, the Palestinian foreign minister, ‘Amr Musa renewed his call to all sectors of the Arab community, citizens, peoples, institutions and organizations, to extend immediate support and generous financial contributions to the Palestinian people. He pointed to the extensive negotiations that al-Zahhar had with the permanent representatives of the Arab countries in the Arab League. Musa emphasized that the Arab Initiative does not extend any concessions to the other side for nothing, but rather it is a framework for negotiations that should achieve the Palestinian rights within the umbrella of the international community.

Khalid Mish'al paid visits to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Sudan, Libya, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman, where the officials there emphasized the necessity of national Palestinian unity, and reiterated their support to the Palestinians. In his address before the European Parliament in Strasbourg, Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani, criticized the hostile position of the western powers towards Hamas government by saying:

Rather than being remunerated for their democratic experiment that hardly exists in our region, the Palestinian people were penalized. I cannot understand how sanctions could be imposed on a democratically elected government, and collective punishment be dictated on an entire nation just because it exercised its democratic right to select its own rulers.

The Algerian President 'Abdelaziz Bouteflika, had also condemned the Israeli-west blockade on the Palestinians that had penalized them simply because they exercised their democratic right to elect Hamas. Bouteflika dismissed the Israeli policy that is based on starving the Palestinian people and violating the sanctity of their sanctuaries, defying the decisions of the international community, and imposing the de facto situation. He urged that due consideration be given to the Road Map and the efforts that had been exerted towards its implementation, as it is, more than any time before, the only vehicle to overcome the stubborn current deadlock of the peace process.³

Similarly, the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) demanded that Hamas be given the opportunity to govern as it had won the elections. Besides, this is essential for the realization of stability and peace in the Middle East. The council emphasized that Israel should honor its commitments, including the peace treaties that it signed in Madrid, and the Palestinians should never be penalized for their democratic option by such measures as the stoppage of financial aid. Finally, the council urged support to the Palestinians, and vowed that its member states would extend financial and other support to them.⁴

2. The Positions of the Arab Masses

The Arab street enthusiastically welcomed the victory of Hamas in the legislative elections and praised its insistence on the Palestinian fundamentals, resistance to the occupation and firm opposition to corruption within the institutions of the PA.

Similarly, the Arab national and Islamic parties, welcomed the outcome of the elections as an important initial step in the struggle against the Zionist-American projects, and in alerting the Palestinian people to the dangerous conspiracy that they are confronting.

The Muslim Brothers in all Arab countries welcomed the victory of Hamas in the legislative elections, which they viewed as a success to the option of resistance, and to the Islamic project and methods to resolve the Palestinian issue. The Islamic Action Front Party (IAF) in Jordan maintained that this victory tantamounted to a correction exercise of a wrong route and to the peace process that started in 1993. The Muslim Brothers vowed to extend financial support to Hamas through wide campaigns that they undertook to organize to collect subscriptions and donations. Each of the 43 representatives of the Justice and Development Party in Moroccan Parliament donated a day's salary to Hamas, and the party, as well as other Islamic forces in the country, called upon the Moroccan masses to support the Palestinian people financially and morally.⁵

Hamza Mansur, the secretary-general of the Jordanian Islamic Action Front Party, considered Hamas victory as a wake up call to all Arab and Muslim rulers to support this new orientation that the Palestinian people had freely chosen and pursued, notwithstanding the warnings and threats that the USA and the EU had loudly voiced against Hamas. Sa'id Thiab, the secretary-general of the Jordanian Democratic Popular Unity Party, viewed the victory of Hamas as a new and a quality phase in the history of the Palestinian people that will enable them to present alternatives priorities and means of struggle, and to end the widespread corruption within the PA.⁶

The Muslim Brothers of Egypt congratulated Hamas for its victory, and called the organization to unite the Palestinians against Israel. Their leading leader 'Isam al-'Aryan urged Hamas to draw lessons from the previous Palestinian struggle, and to reconstruct and unite the internal front behind the new PLC. He called all the world powers, particularly the USA, to respect the free choice of the Palestinian people, and maintained that the outcome of the Palestinian elections is a clear indication that all the occupied peoples in the region have adopted Islam as a way of life, as has been the case in Iraq and Palestine.⁷

Second: The Position of the Khartoum Arab Summit towards Hamas and the Peace Settlement

Hamas' victory in the legislative elections and its formation of the Palestinian government had dominated the meetings of the Arab foreign ministers, as well as the 18th Khartoum Arab Summit convened on 28/3/2006. The ministers emphasized at the end of their meetings in Cairo the necessity of respecting the will of the Palestinian people, non-interference in their internal affairs, and not to pass prior judgments, or to impose unfair conditions on their elected leadership. Nonetheless, some Arab countries started to rally behind the Palestinian presidency instead of standing neutral between the Hamas led government and the Fatah controlled presidency. Besides, the Secretariat of the Arab League officially invited the presidency to attend the Arab summit, but it declined to do so to the government, or even its minister of foreign affairs. To add insult to injury, the Palestinian delegation to the summit did not include a single representative of Hamas.

No doubt, the USA had been forcefully behind the exclusion of Hamas government from participation in this summit, a development that had been openly welcomed by President Mahmud 'Abbas. However, some of the Arab kings and presidents had conspicuously absented themselves from this summit, which made it so unimportant that some observers had labeled it the weakest of all Arab summits.

In the Khartoum Summit, Mahmud 'Abbas urged the Arab kings and presidents to adhere to the following:

1. Total and comprehensive commitment to the Arab Initiative, and to present it to the international community as the basis for any future settlement.
2. To confront the imposed policies of the blockade, starvation and suspension of aid by a real, substantial and all around support to the Palestinian people, of which the most important are a special Arab fund and a unified Arab political and moral stand.
3. The Arab position towards the accelerating developments in Palestine should supersede the current status of silence, apathy and complete surrender to pressures, particularly that of the USA.⁸

The Arab summit discussed three major issues that are related to the Palestinian question:

The first issue: The political situation: the summit emphasized the centrality of the Palestinian issue over all other Arab concerns, and highlighted the Arab Initiative, endorsed in Beirut Summit of 2002, as a basis to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict and to achieve peace in the Middle East in line with the relevant decisions of the international community. However, a just and permanent peace in the Middle East can only be achieved through a complete Israeli withdrawal from all the occupied Palestinian and Arab territories, including the Syrian Golan Heights, until the demarcation line of 4 June 1967, and the currently occupied lands in Lebanon. Other prerequisites for stability in the region are the establishment of the Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, and a just settlement for the problem of the Palestinian refugees through an amicable decision based on UN General Assembly Resolution 194.⁹

The second issue: The position towards Hamas victory in the legislative elections: the Arab kings and presidents hailed the democratic exercise in Palestine as well as the fairness and transparency of the elections. They also expressed their total support to the PA, both leadership and institutions, and commended their strive to maintain national unity. The kings and presidents rejected the Israeli unilateral decisions, and asked the international community to respect the will of the Palestinian people in selecting their leadership, and to refrain from interfering in their internal affairs. The summit also asked for the implementation of the decision of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the construction of the Separation Wall in the occupied Palestinian lands and its legal repercussions.

The third issue: Arab financial support to the Palestinians: The Khartoum Summit reiterated the commitment of the Arab kings and presidents to continue extending financial support to the PA according to the mechanism decided in Beirut Summit of 2002. In particular, to inject additional amounts in the funds of *al-Aqsa* and *al-Quds Intifadah*, besides strengthening the Palestinian economy and to free it from the current subjection to the Israeli economy.¹⁰

The Palestinian delegation asked the Arab summit to allocate a monthly sum of \$170 million to the PA, in case the USA and the European countries decide to stop their aid to the Palestinians, in retaliation for their support to Hamas in the legislative elections.

‘Amr Musa urged all governments, institutions and organizations as well as the Arab masses to extend financial aid and contributions to the Palestinian people and to the PA. He announced the opening of a special account to receive contributions from individuals and institutions, and urged Arab banks to do likewise in implementation of the decision of the Khartoum Summit. However, the Palestinian responses to the outcome of the Khartoum Summit had varied considerably. While the PA commended the decisions of the summit as a true reflection of the aspirations of the Palestinian people, Hamas considered them to have exhibited an Arab unanimity towards the Palestinian issue, but maintained that the urgency is to a tangible financial and moral support to the Palestinian people.¹¹

Third: The Positions and Roles of the Major Arab Powers

1. The Position of Egypt

The Egyptian government was rather concerned by the victory of Hamas in the 2006 legislative elections, as this may adversely affect the course of the peace negotiations, and Egypt’s influence among Palestinians and its relations with Israel. Besides, this victory could boost the image of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt. Thus, Egypt’s interaction with the Palestinian issue during 2006 was largely focused on the existence of a Hamas dominated Palestinian government, besides an attempt to play an intermediary role to ease the confrontational relations between Hamas on one side and Fatah and the institution of the presidency on the other side, and to help in the task of forming a Palestinian government of national unity. While announcing his country’s respect to the Palestinian will, the Egyptian minister of foreign affairs, Ahmad Abu al-Gheit, had, however, admitted that the outcome of the elections engendered a new political reality.

The Egyptian media admitted that Egypt never expected the sweeping victory of Hamas, which it described as a political earthquake as this was the first time in the Arab region in which a faction of political Islam wins majority in a parliamentary election. The prospect of cordial relations with Hamas, in the eyes of the Egyptian government, depends on its recognition of Israel, and the Egyptian premier had openly asked Hamas government to respect all the previous agreements concluded between the Palestinian leadership and Israel.

The Egyptian policy towards these new developments in Palestine pursued two lines. First, Egypt tried to mediate between Hamas and Fatah to resolve their differences, and to persuade Hamas government to change within six months its extreme position towards the peace process and accept to negotiate with Israel. The second Egyptian course of action was to avoid contacts with Hamas leaders and members of its government in compliance with the mounting American pressure to corner Hamas.

Egypt played an important role in the effort to bridge the gap between Hamas and Fatah over the issues of the Palestinian political system and the formation of the government of national unity. With this aim in mind, Major-General ‘Umar Sulayman, the president of the Egyptian General Intelligence Service, repeatedly met in Gaza officials of both movements, though the Egyptian officials declined to see the Palestinian minister of foreign affairs, Mahmud al-Zahhar, during a visit that he paid to Cairo at the beginning of his first tour to Arab-Islamic countries. However, the Egyptian government denied that it succumbed to American pressure in this respect, and the minister of foreign affairs, Ahmad Abu al-Gheit, claimed that his many other preoccupations prevented him from seeing al-Zahhar, who had, anyhow, specially come to Cairo to see the secretary-general of the Arab League. However, Abu al-Gheit met al-Zahhar in the latter’s way to Gaza, after he finished his external tour.

Though Egypt had tried its utmost best to pose as an honest broker, it was, in fact, inclined towards Fatah and the Palestinian presidency, but extreme when dealing with Hamas. It considered the institution of the presidency, not the government of Hamas, to be the spokesman of Palestinian foreign policy.

During the Israeli aggression on Lebanon in the summer of 2006, the Egyptian President Husni Mubarak criticized the Palestinian and Lebanese resistance, arguing that their activities achieved very limited gains, but the ordinary people will by the end of the day be the victims of these hasty actions. In a press conference, Mubarak said, “No body doubts the rights of the peoples to resist the occupation forces, but such a resistance will have to be cautious and calculative of the gains and losses.” He added that the tendency of the Palestinian resistance to ignite the situation to achieve limited gains ignores the Palestinian fundamental objective, namely the establishment of an independent state. Likewise, in his view, is the Lebanese resistance, as “the Israeli escalation in Lebanon will drag the region into a dangerous slide,” and the Lebanese people, like the Palestinians, will be the ones to pay the price.¹²

One of the most important developments in Egypt during this year is the utterance of President Mubarak that the Egyptian army is for the defense of Egypt and not to fight Israel. In response to those who asked that Egypt enters the war in defense of Lebanon or Hizbullah against the Israeli aggression, Mubarak said, “These peoples are not aware that the time for external adventures is over. If this were at all possible when Egypt’s population was 24 millions, it is now utterly impossible with the figure of 75 million Egyptians who need development, services, job opportunities and housing projects.” The Egyptian president emphasized that “he is not ready to spend the budget of the Egyptian people on a war that is not theirs,” and reiterated that “Egypt’s army is for defense of its territories only.” He advised all parties not to be dragged into fervent but reckless adventures that do not calculate the dire consequences, and the heavy price that the peaceful peoples will pay.¹³

Signs of difference between Egypt and Hamas appeared after the leakage of some messages exchanged between Major-General ‘Umar Sulayman and Khalid Mish‘al. In one of these messages, on 23/9/2006, Mish‘al told Sulayman that Egypt, and not any other power, should shoulder its responsibilities and do its utmost best to patronize a Palestinian government of national unity on the basis of the National Conciliation Document. Moreover, Mish‘al recorded his observations on the issue of the captured Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, and expressed reservations on the Egyptian proposal that after the release of a symbolic figure, fixed by Israel, of Palestinian detainees, the negotiations be conducted between Mahmud ‘Abbas and Ehud Olmert. After three days, ‘Umar Sulayman responded by a message that emphasized Egypt continuous and sincere quest for a just peace settlement. On the Israeli prisoner, Sulayman pointed that this is not a prime issue for Egypt, but the Israeli side insists that all future movements are conditioned on his release. It seems that Egypt had disclosed these two messages to the USA and Israel, a development that infuriated the leaders of Hamas.¹⁴

Meanwhile Muhammad Basyuni, a former ambassador of Egypt in Israel and the president of the Committee on Arab and Foreign Affairs and National Security in the Egyptian Consultative Council (Egyptian *Shura* Assembly), said that his country strives to crystallize a Palestinian national consensus to overcome the current political crisis. In this respect, he added, Egypt had presented three demands to Hamas:

1. All internal conflicts and fighting, particularly between Fatah and Hamas, should cease forthwith. For it is impossible to resume negotiations and the peace process in such tense environment.
2. Palestinian policies and positions should be formulated by the Palestinian political institutions, and not by foreign quarters.
3. Since politics is the art of possible, the decisions of the Palestinians should be pragmatic and realistic. In other words, they should not cry for the moon because they will not get it. Within this framework, Egypt is ready and willing to help in overcoming the crisis resulting from the sharp differences between Hamas and Fatah.¹⁵

The Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs refused the demand of some members of the People's Assembly to withdraw the Egyptian ambassador to Israel in protest of Israel's criminal acts against the Palestinians. Ahmad 'Abd al-Mu'ti, the minister plenipotentiary, said that Egypt was not then in favor of this proposal because of its harmful impact on Egyptian interests.¹⁶

On 24/4/2006, a major explosion took place in Dahab Resort in Sinai in which 23 were killed and 160 wounded, of whom the majority were Egyptians. Later, it was revealed that those who undertook this operation were trained by some Palestinians in GS. Besides, on 30/5/2006, Israel killed an Egyptian who tried to sneak through the Egyptian-Palestinian frontiers into the 1948 occupied territories, and arrested five other Egyptians. The Israeli army claimed that it monitored six persons who tried to cut with sharp instruments the frontier fence in the southern region of "Katsi'ut" in Negev in an attempt to enter Israel. When they refused the orders of an Israeli force to stop, it fired at them killing one and arresting the rest of the Egyptian youth, with whom an investigation was conducted.¹⁷

On the political front, Mubarak, the Egyptian president, and King 'Abdullah Bin 'Abd al-'Aziz of Saudi Arabia met on 31/5/2006 in Sharm el-Sheikh where the two leaders called for the respect of the Palestinian options. A few days later, Mubarak met Ehud Olmert in Sharm el-Sheikh to revitalize the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations on the basis of the Road Map. But Olmert's visit was widely criticized, and some Egyptian independent newspapers dismissed it as shameful. But the Egyptian government claimed that the aims behind this visit were to achieve some urgent Palestinian interests, emphasize Egypt's role in the Palestinian-Israeli dialogue, lift the blockade imposed on the Palestinians, and explore ways and

means to resume negotiations between ‘Abbas and Olmert rather than to leave the political scene for unilateral Israeli solutions.

Within the contest of Arab consultations, an Egyptian-Syrian summit was held on 22/6/2006. Moreover, the Egyptian president held a number of meetings with the Jordanian King ‘Abdullah II and the Palestinian President Mahmud ‘Abbas.

Meanwhile, within the bilateral relations between Israel and Egypt, the Egyptian minister of Legal Affairs and Parliamentary Councils criticized the suggestion of an Israeli general to include in the final settlement of the Palestinian issue a clause that allows the incorporation of some 600 km² of Sinai land in GS.

Egypt interfered to diffuse the crisis that had erupted between Israel and the Palestinians over the arrest of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. It tried to play the role of an intermediary between Hamas and Israel to secure his release in return for the release of the Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails.

However, relations between the Egyptian government and Hamas had become tense because of the latter’s refusal of the Israeli demands, and the criticism by the Egyptian government of Hamas’ position on the issue of swapping the Israeli soldier with Palestinian prisoners. But Hamas fired back by insisting that the negotiations of this deal had already broken down by the intransigence of the Israelis, which had further infuriated official Egypt. The year 2006 had, thus, ended with the failure of the Egyptian attempt to play the role of a broker between Israel and the Palestinians on the issue of the prisoners apparently because of the Israeli dogmatism and procrastination.

Meanwhile, Egypt suddenly and conspicuously ruled, without clarifying the reasons, that all Palestinians who wish to visit Egypt or cross its borders to GS should apply for entry visa, including bearers of Palestinian passports and Egyptian travel permits that the authorities usually grant to the Palestinians of GS.¹⁸

On 9/2/2006, an Egyptian diplomat, Husam al-Musli, was kidnapped in Gaza by an anonymous quarter, but he was released three days later, thanks to the direct intervention of President Mubarak and the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Israeli aggression against Lebanon in July 2006 infuriated the Egyptian masses. The judges demanded the immediate abrogation of the humiliating Camp David Accords between their country and Israel, called for popular resistance as the only means to protect the Arab Nation against the Israeli aggression, and warned against the imperialist design of a new Middle East. The lawyers also

went on a general strike during which they boycotted the courts' sessions, and the union of professionals, which represent 20 trade unions of seven million members, declared a one-hour strike from which only the doctors on call were exempted. Dr. Hamdi al-Sayyid, the president of the Egyptian Doctors' Union and a member of parliament, maintained that Hasan Nasrullah, the secretary-general of Hizbullah Party, told him that the resistance is not in need of volunteers but looks for moral support only. Nasrullah also told a group of journalists that the Egyptian army agreed to airlift to Lebanon all the aid that may be collected for the support of the resistance forces.

Meanwhile, the opposition movement, *Kifayah* (literally enough is enough) demanded that the export of Egyptian gas and petrol to Israel be immediately stopped. The judges condemned the Israeli brutal attacks on the Palestinian and Lebanese people, and rejected the imperialist project of a new Middle East that the American President Bush wanted it to be completely void of any Islamic dimension or orientation. For this project will reconstruct the region and place it under Israeli arrogance and American hegemony, and where the souls of hundreds of Arab children will not be viewed or treated on a par with one single Israeli privileged child. The judges reiterated their utter belief in popular resistance as the only vehicle for the defense of the Arab Nation and the maintenance of its honor. They also declared their complete and unconditional support to the courageous leaders and members of the Lebanese resistance, and expressed their admiration and respect to all sectors of the Lebanese society.¹⁹

In retaliation to the Israeli raids on the Lebanese and Palestinians, a total of 100 Egyptian members of parliament asked President Mubarak to expel the Israeli ambassador in Cairo and to recall his Egyptian counterpart in Tel Aviv. In their message to President Mubarak, they wrote: "The official Arab position neither reflects the aspirations of the Arab masses nor tallies with the gravity of the incident that requires firm response and substantial aid to our peoples in Palestine and Lebanon." Thus, they called for unlimited and all kinds of support to the Lebanese resistance and to the democratically elected Palestinian government, and the revision of all political economic and security treaties concluded with Israel.

2. The Position of Jordan

The position of Jordan towards the Palestinian issue during the year 2006 was dominated by its reaction towards the victory of Hamas, and its attempts to activate

the peace process so that the two sides, the Palestinians and the Israelis, return to the negotiations table. Initially, the Jordanian government viewed the victory of Hamas as an internal Palestinian concern, but it subsequently showed a measure of uneasiness because of its deteriorating relations with Hamas, particularly after the expulsion of four of the leaders of this movement from Jordan, and the Kingdom's fear that this success popularizes the Muslim Brothers in Jordan. Thus, the Jordanian premier, Ma'arif al-Bakhit, warned the Muslim Brothers not to exploit Hamas' victory. He cautioned, "It is essential to distinguish between an organization like Hamas and a Jordanian one." He added that it is unbecoming that some unrealistic people had become more catholic on the Palestinian issue than the pope himself. Al-Bakhit continued to say that his government distinguishes between Hamas in the interior and that in the diaspora. Its current relations with the former is balanced, just like that with any other Palestinian faction, but in future everything will depend on the agenda and program of Hamas government. As for Hamas of the diaspora, the premier said that his government has for specific reasons legal and political problems with some of its leaders, and that any change in the attitude towards them requires a significant change in the status quo, which is not likely to take place.²⁰

However, al-Bakhit emphasized that his country will continue to be the closest to the Palestinians and to the Palestinian issue. In an address before a group of Palestinian refugees in the camp of al-Baq'ah, al-Bakhit said that the Palestinians and the Jordanians are destined by history and geography to be closely together, and told his addresses, "You are here to share with your Jordanian brothers everything, the sweet and the bitter." In describing what he considered to be the reality of the relations between Jordan and Palestine, King 'Abdullah II said that Jordan is Jordan and Palestine is Palestine. With respect to Khalid Mish'al and the possibility of Hamas' return to Jordan, the King said that the issue of Mish'al had unnecessarily been blown up and given more attention than it deserves. The fundamental issue, he added, is how to help the Palestinians and restore their legitimate rights.²¹

However, the relations between Hamas and Jordan had become extremely tense after an allegedly pro-Hamas group was arrested and accused of sneaking in Jordan and smuggling armaments and explosives that threatened the country's internal security. Hence, the government of Jordan cancelled a visit that Mahmud al-Zahhar, the Palestinian minister of foreign affairs, was scheduled to pay to Jordan on 19/4/2006, though Hamas had denied these accusations that were, in its judgment,

just a pretext to cancel the visit. To ease the tension, the Palestinian Premier Isma‘il Haniyah detached his government from any attempt to smuggle arms into Jordan or to threaten its internal security, and, through some intermediaries, appealed to King ‘Abdullah II to interfere personally to contain and resolve the crisis between Jordan and Hamas. The Jordanian prime minister expressed appreciation to Haniyah’s efforts, and emphasized that his government does not plan to prolong the crisis or to exploit it to boycott Hamas government.²²

In response to some threats against the Jordanian diplomats in Gaza, Haniyah visited on 6/3/2006, at the head of a senior Hamas delegation, the house of the top Jordanian diplomat, where he condemned these threats that transgress the values of the Palestinian people, and expressed his hope to visit Jordan after the formation of the Palestinian government for consultation and coordination.

Nonetheless, the relations between the Jordanian government on one side and Hamas and the Palestinian government on the other side alternated between coolness and tension throughout the year 2006. It was even reported that the Jordanian government was actively coordinating with President ‘Abbas to topple Hamas government, and that Sharm el-Sheikh Summit of June 2006 will explore the possibility of providing arms to ‘Abbas’ Presidential Guard.²³ Moreover, on the request of the USA and the initial approval of Israel, ‘Abbas and the government of Jordan were reported to have made preliminary arrangements to transfer Badr Brigade from Jordan to Palestine to support the Presidential Guard. Some analysts viewed this development as a Jordanian support to ‘Abbas in his confrontation with Hamas. However, Israel had apparently hesitated to give its final approval to the project.²⁴

King ‘Abdullah, Mahmud ‘Abbas, and the presidents of the Intelligence Organs of Jordan, the PA, Egypt, Israel and two Gulf states were said to have met in ‘Aqaba in early October 2006 to discuss ways and means to confront the axis of Iran, Syria, Hamas and Hizbullah and to stop the flow of funds to them, as well as to obstruct the negotiations for the formation of a national Palestinian government and to topple Hamas government.²⁵ But Nasir Judah, the spokesman of the Jordanian government, denied these reports that had, however, widely spread through the media.

By the end of 2006, there seems to have been a cautious improvement in the relations between Hamas and the government of Jordan. The chief of the Jordanian

Intelligence had a frank and constructive meeting with leading representatives of Hamas, and Premier Ma'arif al-Bakhit, officially invited on 25/12/2006, Premier Isma'il Haniyah to visit Amman together with President Mahmud 'Abbas.²⁶ Haniyah declared his acceptance of the invitation,²⁷ but 'Abbas hesitated, and the visit was finally postponed.²⁸

Meanwhile, relations between Israel and Jordan passed through a tense phase because of a prophecy by an Israeli general, Yair Naveh, that the Jordanian political regime will experience serious difficulties and a bleak future. The Jordanian government was so infuriated and angered, even much more that it had been after the Mossad's abortive attempt to assassinate Khalid Mish'al in Amman several years ago, that it stopped receiving Israeli officials during the first half of the year 2006.²⁹

However, the Jordanian-Israeli relations improved during the second half of the year 2006. The Israeli premier, Ehud Olmert, paid a visit to Jordan during which King 'Abdullah II emphasized his country's position towards the peace process in several points. First and foremost, is the resolution of the human tragedy of the Palestinian people. The King made it clear that their denial of basic necessities will provoke extensive anger and rejection, aggravate the crisis and obstruct all attempts to achieve peace and security in the region. Secondly, the King demanded that the international community in general and Israel in particular should strengthen the political and financial capabilities of President Mahmud 'Abbas, as this is essential to secure and maintain Palestinian unity. Intra-fighting and conflicts in Palestine, the King warned, will have adverse effects on the security of Israel and all the countries of the region. Thirdly, the King cautioned that Israeli unilateral actions can never serve the cause of a comprehensive and just peace settlement. Fourthly, Hamas should recognize the Arab Peace Initiative, and, finally, both Israel and the Palestinians should renew their commitment to the Road Map.³⁰

3. The Position of Syria

Syria welcomed the victory of Hamas in the legislative elections, which it viewed as a victory to its own policy towards the Palestinian issue, particularly so as Hamas leaders in the diaspora stay in Syria. President Bashar al-Assad hailed the victory of Hamas as the first step to relax the isolation and pressure on his country. In an address before the conference of Arab parties, conveyed under the slogan of support to Syria and Lebanon, and attended by 300 Arab personalities who

represented more than 110 political parties and 15 Arab states, President al-Assad openly said that “the victory of Hamas in the legislative elections will relax the pressure on Syria.” Conversely, the relations between Syria and the PA under the leadership of Fatah had been increasingly tense during the last few years.³¹

During the Khartoum Summit, President al-Assad asked President ‘Abbas to make use of the position of Hamas and its new government to strengthen the Palestinian negotiating position with Israel, raise the ceiling of the Palestinian demands and help the Palestinian government to deal with the international community. President al-Assad admitted his country’s political support to Hamas because the Palestinians have the right to establish an independent state, restore their land and ask for the full implementation of the decisions of the Security Council. He added, “We encourage Hamas to adhere to the Palestinian political rights that include the rights of the refugees. For we have half a million Palestinian refugees in Syria.”³²

Syria was amongst the first Arab countries that received a delegation of the Hamas government, and Damascus was the first station of the Arab tour of Mahmud al-Zahhar, the Palestinian minister of foreign affairs. During this visit, Syria promised to provide logistic, financial and political support to the Palestinian government, elevate the diplomatic representation between the two countries, and to allow Palestinians who carry passports issued by the PA to enter Syria, and to open telecommunication services between the two countries. During his meeting with the Syrian president and other top officials, al-Zahhar commended the Syrian leadership that have continuously and persistently supported the Palestinian cause.

Musa Abu Marzuq, the deputy president of Hamas’ Political Bureau, who stays in Damascus, declared that the objectives of al-Zahhar’s tour were to explain to the Arab states the developments of the Palestinian issue, and to enlist their support to the Palestinian people and their steadfastness. He added that al-Zahhar had been enthusiastically welcomed and supported in Syria.

In continuation of al-Zahhar’s visit, the minister of interior, Sa’id Siyam, visited Syria on 21/5/2006 to settle some issues related to the PA and the refugees. He declared that Damascus agreed to train Palestinian police officers and the civil cadre of his ministry. He added that his meeting with the Syrian president, his deputy and the minister of interior focused on the Syrian role in the Palestinian issue, specifically to receive the stranded Palestinians along the Iraqi-Jordanian

borders, support the Palestinian government and accept the Palestinian passport.³³ As a gesture of good intention, Syria allowed 400 stranded Palestinians, who had been denied entry to Jordan, to enter the country.

Syria tried to persuade Hamas to accept the Beirut Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 that have been unanimously accepted by all Arab states. The Syrian president emphasized the importance of Palestinian unity, and declared that his country's relationship with both Hamas and Fatah is balanced, and do not favor one side at the expense of the other. Syria criticized the statement of John Bolton, the former American permanent representative to the UN, that described Khalid Mish'al as a "terrorist" and asked Syria to arrest him and hand him to the relevant international authority. It accused Bolton of enmity to the Arabs and Muslims, and of prejudice and unconditional support to the Israeli policies.

Notwithstanding the mounting pressure on Damascus to use its good offices with Hamas to release the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, Syria adamantly refused to do so unless and until Israel stops its aggression on GS. The Syrian president had, furthermore, declared his country's full support to the Palestinian people in their struggle against the brutal Israeli aggression.³⁴

Syria had also played a major role to stop the intra-conflicts between Hamas and Fatah, and to bridge the gap between the two organizations on the issue of the national Palestinian government. It performed this intermediary role through the many visits that Palestinian officials and representatives of Fatah and other factions paid to Damascus. One such visit was by the Palestinian former Premier Ahmad Quray', who appealed to Syria to put pressure on Hamas to accept the Arab Peace Initiative as well as some controversial clauses of the joint political program of the national government. The last top Palestinian official received in Damascus in the year 2006 was the Palestinian Premier Isma'il Haniyah, who discussed with President al-Assad the efforts to form a national government, Syria's support to the Palestinian unity and its role in breaking the blockade imposed on the Palestinian people. During this visit, Syria reiterated its support to the efforts to establish an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, secure the return of the Palestinian refugees, end the blockade and consolidate the Palestinian unity. Syria had also agreed to accept the Palestinian passport and to resume human and other traffic with the Palestinian territories. The negotiations also touched on the issue of some of the supporters of the late President 'Arafat imprisoned in Syrian jails.

A significant development in the Syrian position on the Palestinian issue was revealed in an interview that President al-Assad had with a correspondent of the German magazine *Der Spiegel*. Al-Assad had reportedly said that he does not call for the eradication of Israel from the world map, and denied discussing this issue with the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, at any time. He also expressed his country's willingness to conclude peace with Israel, and to normalize relations with the USA without which the crisis in the Middle East cannot at all be resolved, and added that when the force of peace is in full swing everything will change. When his labeling of Israel as the "enemy" was questioned, al-Assad responded by saying that since Israel has been occupying Syrian territories, it is natural that it be considered and called an enemy of Syria. However, al-Assad said that he does not believe in the viability of wars, but accepts the principle of deterrence.³⁵

In another interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the Syrian president said that his country aspires for a peaceful settlement of the Middle Eastern conflict, accepts the other side and is willing to live side by side with Israel. But he doubted that the current Israeli government is strong enough to indulge on such an exercise.³⁶

However, Israel refused the Syrian offer for negotiations under the guise that the time is not opportune, and the Israeli premier accused Syria of supporting "terrorism." Similarly, Syria rejected the invitation that the Israeli deputy premier, Shimon Peres, extended to President Bashar al-Assad to visit Jerusalem, saying that peace cannot be achieved by such unacceptable protocol visits.³⁷

Another important development in the Syrian position in the course of the year 2006 was the country's hint that it may revert to armed resistance to liberate the occupied Golan Heights which are an inseparable part of Syrian territories. In this respect, the official communiqué said that Syria will, if possible, liberate them by peaceful means, otherwise it will revert to other means of which the most prominent is armed resistance.³⁸

Subsequently, the Syrian president reiterated this orientation in an interview with the Spanish newspaper *ABC*. He told the correspondent that resistance is not a government decision per se. For when the people realize that the words on peace are futile and meaningless, they have the right to opt for the defense of themselves. Thus, if the Syrian people decided to go into armed resistance, the government will not deny them the right of having weapons. The president said that he would

have loved to be positive, but he could not be so as no indicators in the region demonstrate that peace is on the horizon.³⁹

4. The Position of Lebanon

Lebanon dealt with the Palestinian issue during the course of the year 2006 through the Palestinian presence in Lebanon, the outcome of the Palestinian legislative elections and the Israeli aggression on Lebanon coupled with the steadfastness of Hizbullah in this war.

On the Palestinian camps in Lebanon, Ambassador Khalil Makkawi, the president of the Lebanese committee in charge of this issue, announced that negotiations with the Palestinians are pursued in different directions, and that they are all satisfactorily progressing, and that Lebanon is in contact with the donor countries to secure the necessary funds to implement some needed services as well as health and infrastructure projects in the camps. On armament in these camps, Ambassador Khalil said that there will be no compromise, as there is a Lebanese popular and official consensus on the issue that there is no excuse at all for the existence of these weapons. But he emphasized that Lebanon will not opt for conflict with the Palestinians on the subject, but depends on their understanding of the urgency of disarmament.⁴⁰

Amongst the developments in the Lebanese position on the Palestinian issue during the year was the consent of the cabinet on 5/1/2006 to establish Palestinian diplomatic representation in Lebanon, but through an office not an embassy. The Lebanese Premier Fu'ad al-Sanyurah also declared Lebanon's approval to reopen the office of the PLO in Lebanon in order to settle all the problems related to the camps. However, the premier insisted that all the arms in the camps should be disciplined and placed under control.

On 15/5/2006, 'Abbas Zaki resumed his duties as the representative of the PLO in Lebanon, submitted his credentials to the minister of foreign affairs, Fawzi Sallukh, and emphasized that he will do all that is needed to facilitate and develop the Palestinian-Lebanese relations in the future. Though no official Lebanese communiqué had been released on the issue of the victory of Hamas in the Palestinian legislative elections, the incident was duly attended to by the government and popularly welcomed by the masses. Al-Sanyurah congratulated Khalid Mish'al over the phone saying that this development reflects the vitality of

the Palestinian people, and will have a major impact in consolidating the democratic system in the territories under the PA, hoping that it will be an advanced step towards the support of the Palestinian rights. On his part, Fawzi Sallukh called the international community to respect the options of the Palestinian people that had been reflected in the outcome of the legislative elections, and support the formation of a national Palestinian government, representing all sectors of the community, to be under the service of the peoples. Salim al-Huss said that the Palestinian people had said their word, and the world should respect their decision and will.

In a telephone call, Muhammad Husain Fadlullah congratulated Khalid Mish'al for the victory of Hamas in the elections, and commended Mish'al own reformative initiatives and success in organizing the resistance against the Israelis. Fadlullah urged the Palestinians to engage themselves in a constructive dialogue and never allow internal unrest and conflicts, and appealed to Arab and Islamic countries to support the Palestinian people. Similarly, and in another telephone call, the secretary-general of Hizbullah congratulated Mish'al for the resounding victory, and hoped future success to Mish'al and the leadership of Hamas. The secretary-general of the Lebanese Communist Party, Khalid Hedadeh, also congratulated Mish'al for the victory, and for his able and responsible leadership of Hamas, hoping that serious steps be taken to unite the various Palestinian factions to extract the Palestinian rights, particularly the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, and the recognition of the refugees' right to return to their own land. Hizbullah told the world in general, and the western powers in particular, that they have no option except to accept and orient themselves with the victory of Hamas, and to be ready and open minded for other successes by the Islamic resistance movement that is flourishing rapidly in the entire Middle East.⁴¹

Meanwhile, the conference of Lebanese dialogue reached to an understanding or a mechanism to compile the arms and armaments outside the camps on the basis of effective dialogue between the Lebanese government and the Palestinian factions. The conferees agreed on 6/3/2006 to continue the dialogue for a six months grace period after which would start the collection of arms outside the camps and their control within the camps. This mission will be undertaken by the joint effort of the government and a special committee formed by the conference, in which each party would be represented by two of its top leaders, whose responsibility would be to contact the Palestinian factions and to submit to the government a

monthly report on its activities. The conferees also agreed to give the Palestinian rights due attention, and to review Lebanese laws to create more jobs for the Palestinians. The Lebanese premier emphasized the importance of collecting the arms through dialogue and not by confronting the Palestinian factions by force, hoping that they will willingly accept the decision of the cabinet and cooperate in its implementation. The premier also urged for a rapid move by the Arab states to put pressure on the international community, represented by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), to improve the quality of the health, educational and other services that they offer to the Palestinians in the camps, and never to compromise on this humanitarian mission or reduce its budget.⁴²

On 26/3/2006, Ambassador Khalil Makkawi, the advisor of the Lebanese premier for the affairs of the camps and the chairman of the committee of the Lebanese-Palestinian dialogue, reported that his government studied the difficulties and predicaments in the camps, and started to implement a comprehensive plan to diffuse the tension within them, and to improve the living conditions of the Palestinians living in them. According to Ambassador Makkawi, this plan has two distinct phases: First, which had already started, to ask the ministers of service to visit the camps and see by themselves the conditions there. Secondly, to call for an international conference for all the Palestinian donor countries, western powers and some Arab countries to formulate and fund a plan to develop the Palestinian camps in Lebanon, which is expected to cost millions of dollars. The ambassador added that the Lebanese government is currently engaged in taking the necessary measures to allow the Palestinians in the camps to occupy posts and practice professions in Lebanon that they were not allowed to do before, such as engineering, medicine and law... etc.⁴³

The Lebanese Premier Fu'ad al-Sanyurah emphasized that his government distinguishes between the political aspects and the fundamental socio-humanitarian needs of the Palestinians residing in Lebanon. It did its best within its means to extend help to them, and will continue to look after their welfare as dear brothers and temporary guests until they return to their homes. He emphasized that the ministers' working tour to the camps will not be the only one, and that the government will do what it can to urge international organizations to undertake their duties and commitments towards the Palestinian refugees.

The chairman of the committee of the Lebanese-Palestinian dialogue, Khalil Makkawi, declared that the next step will be to study the cases of a number of Palestinians in the camps accused of committing violations against the law, but claim to be innocent, in order to determine their final legal status. He added, "After the last ministerial visit to the camps, we are in the process of undertaking a visit to the camp of 'Ain al- Hilweh..., and we will fulfill our promise that this will not be the last visit but the first one."⁴⁴

Hizbullah suggested that the issue of the Palestinians in Lebanon be addressed on the basis of four main principles:

- a. The issue has humanitarian, political and security dimensions, and it is unbecoming to deal with it from a security point of view only.
- b. The necessity of formulating the required fundamentals and basis to organize the Lebanese-Palestinian relations.
- c. The necessity of organizing the Palestinian presence in Lebanon.
- d. The only correct and useful manner for dealing with this issue is through a serious and constructive Lebanese-Palestinian dialogue.

As for the elements of resolving this issue, the party fixed them in the following:

- a. The realization of a national and comprehensive Lebanese-Palestinian dialogue that adheres to the right of return and refuses the settlement.
- b. To give the Palestinians their human and social rights and to provide for them the suitable humanitarian environment.
- c. To end the presence of arms outside the camps.
- d. To organize and supervise the arms inside the camps.

It is interesting to note that Hizbullah's vision on the subject was identical with that concluded by the conference of the Lebanese national dialogue.⁴⁵

The Palestinians in Lebanon are unanimous in their rejection of naturalization and the settlement, insist on their humanitarian and social rights, and demand that the Lebanese government guarantees their absolute safety before it takes any measures to organize and compile their weapons, particularly in the camps where they had previously been subjected to many massacres. Thus, they advocate that their issue should be addressed from a political and not a security point of view.

However, the issue of the compilation of Palestinian arms had been sidelined during the second half of the year 2006 because of the Lebanese and the world engagement in the Israeli aggression on Lebanon, and in the domestic Lebanese crisis.

Fourth: The Position of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is one of the effective and politically important countries in the Arab world, as well as one of the few countries that affects and be affected by the Palestinian issue without being among the confrontational countries with Israel. Hence is the importance of surveying its relationship and interaction with the Palestinians issue.

Saudi Arabia considered the worldwide anxiety on the victory of Hamas to be unjustified, and its ambassador in the USA, Turki al-Faysal, said the following in this respect, “The victory of Hamas should not provoke worry in any Arab or other capital as long as the international community adheres to its commitments to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the basis of two countries living side by side.” The minister of foreign affairs, Sa‘ud al-Faysal warned against the “catastrophic consequences” of stopping the aid to the PA. He added that Hamas was a movement, but now is a government that will behave responsibly as a government. What the international community should be looking for is what will this government do, and not to pass judgment on Hamas based on the language that it had then used as a movement.⁴⁶

The Saudi government refused to stop its financial aid to the PA after the victory of Hamas. The Saudi minister of foreign affairs openly declared that his country will continue its aid to the PA even if Hamas controls the government, and added that his country will encourage Hamas to accept the principle of two states, a Palestinian and an Israeli one. Saudi Arabia invited Khalid Mish‘al to visit the country well before the Khartoum Summit, and it assured Hamas that it will continue to support the Palestinian people and their leadership politically and financially. On its part, Hamas delegation declared its commitment to the truce in spite of the Israeli repeated attacks, and that it will not oppose the Arab line of policy.

Mahmud al-Zahhar had also visited the Kingdom, where he was assured that Saudi Arabia will pay its due share of aid to the PA as decided by the Arab League, totaling \$92.4 million for the period that extends from mid October 2005 to mid October 2006.

During his joint summit with Husni Mubarak, the Egyptian president, in Sharm el-Sheikh, the Saudi King ‘Abdullah affirmed the necessity of respecting the options of the Palestinian people, and the two leaders urged Hamas to recognize the Arab Peace Initiative that the Beirut Summit had endorsed in 2002, and which implicitly recognize Israel.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia renewed its Initiative, which the Arab kings and presidents had endorsed in their Beirut Summit of 2002, for a peaceful settlement in the region, arguing that its is the appropriate and only means to achieve this goal. The Saudi foreign minister called upon the Palestinians to unify their political stand towards Israel, and to specify their position towards the Arab Initiative by saying, “I hope for clarity of vision within this context, as the international community is unanimously determined to resume the peace process, and there is a likelihood of speaking to the peoples seriously and responsibly on this issue.”⁴⁷

Sa‘ud al-Faysal explained his country’s position on the issue of the peaceful settlement. He called for the revival of the peace process, which requires serious cooperation to achieve within a reasonable period the two-states solution, particularly as the latest events had confirmed the impossibility of maintaining the security and interests of all the parties concerned through military actions. We need to draw lessons from the previous abortive negotiations that had failed because of their concentration on procedures and temporary security arrangements that had given the “enemies of peace” the opportunity to abrogate the entire process. No doubt, the minister added, the key solution to all the crises of the region lies in the revival of the peace process to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that adversely affects all efforts to reach to effective settlements of the other crises. He emphasized that the Israeli occupation of Palestine represents a flagrant defiance of the international law, a clear violation of the principle that prohibits the seizure of other peoples land by force, and a shameful and recklessness disregard of the decisions of the international community. Al-Faysal stressed that the situation in the Middle East had reached such a dangerous turn that cannot tolerate further delays, procrastination and failure. The international community in general and

the major powers in particular should bear their responsibilities, and immediately implement a just and permanent peaceful settlement along the internationally accepted two-states principle that is compatible with the Arab Peace Initiative that the Arab states had unanimously endorsed in the Beirut Summit. What is urgently needed, the minister concluded, is to accompany this vision with a clear program of action in a specific time frame.⁴⁸

By the end of the year, the Saudi King described the gravity of the situation in the Arab region as a reservoir of gunpowder awaiting a spark to explode, and drew attention to the dangerous situation in Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine. The King viewed the Palestinian issue as the central concern of the Arab Nation and warned against internal Palestinian dissension. He concluded, “Our primary preoccupation is dear Palestine that still suffers from a repugnant, shameless and defiant occupation, an impotent international community that is just watching the bloody tragedy, and, most dangerously, a conflict between the brothers.”⁴⁹

Fifth: Developments in the Area of Normalization with Israel

The year 2006 witnessed important developments in the area of normalization between the Arab countries and Israel. The latter achieved some breakthroughs in official economic normalization with Arab states, but not at the peoples’ level, that concentrated on the increase of the volume of trade between the two sides and exchange of official visits. The USA played a major role in this development, as it exercised tremendous pressure on the Arab countries to establish these relationships.

By the beginning of the year, Bahrain concluded a free trade agreement with the USA, which effectively led to the end of Bahrain’s boycott of Israeli commodities. Bahrain was the first Gulf state in the GCC to do so, and the third among the Arab states, after Jordan and Morocco.

Against a wave of popular protest, Yacov Hadas Handelsman, deputy director general for Middle East and the Peace Process in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, visited on 13/3/2006 Mauritania, the third Arab state that recognized Israel. He discussed enhancing the relation and cooperation between the two countries. The Mauritanian political elite and popular forces rejected the declarations of their

minister of foreign affairs, Ahmad Wild Sayyid Ahmad, in which he said that his presence in the transitional government is an evidence of the strong relations of his country with Israel. The prominent politician, Muhammad Jamil Mansur, dismissed these claims by saying, “The minister had repeated the weak and meaningless pretexts for establishing relations with the Zionist entity. The man seems to have viewed this development as such a personal matter that made his participation in the government an evidence of the maintenance of this relationship.” He added, “I never assumed that this role would be a source of pride, rather it should be a reason for shame, sorrow, disgust and nausea.” *Al-Sawab* (literally “The Correct”) Party, an important political group in the country, condemned the visit of the Israeli official, and asked the government to terminate relations with Israel which is, in his words, “the murderous predatory entity.”⁵⁰

The percentage of the companies that participated in the Qualified Industrial Zone Agreement (QIZ Agreement) between Egypt and Israel in the province of Alexandria rose by the end of May 2006 to 25.7% of the total Egyptian companies. A report by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry indicated an increase in Israeli-Egyptian cooperation under the umbrella of QIZ Agreement, through including food production companies. The total number of the Egyptian participant companies in this agreement totaled 606, and the number of Israeli exporters multiplied to reach 257, while Israeli exports to Egypt increased by 148.5% during the first quarter of the year 2006.⁵¹

Nonetheless, under intensive popular pressure, the Egyptian minister of tourism, Zuheir Jaranah, suspended all negotiations between his ministry and its Israeli counterparts that aimed at the promotion of joint tourism because of the Israeli aggression on Lebanon in the summer of 2006. Egypt also suspended the negotiations with Israel on the implementation of the second phase of QIZ Agreement that was scheduled to allow the export of other Egyptian commodities, besides textiles, to the American market. This step was taken within the context of what had been named penalty measures undertaken by the Egyptian government against Israel to compel it to stop its aggression on Lebanon, and to accept settling the crisis of the two Israeli soldiers captured by Hizbullah. However, Egypt continued to sell natural gas to Israel, which volume reached to a two billion cubic meters sold at low prices. Israel declared that it plans to progressively increase its consumption of gas until it reaches six billion cubic meters by 2020.⁵²

On the invitation of the Israeli International Institute of the Histadrut, 18 Jordanians paid a 20 day visit to Israel. They were mostly university teachers in the private sector and representatives of the Lawyers' Trade Union, the Royal Scientific Society, the Broadcasting and Television Corporation, cooperate organizations, proprietors and publishers of weekly magazines, NGOs and poets. The visit synchronized with the annual celebration of the usurpation of Palestine and the establishment of Israel. The program included items on normalization with Israel, visits to government institutions in occupied Jerusalem and to the Knesset as well as an explanation of the "Jewish holocaust," visits to the grave of Yitzhak Rabin and to the Supreme Court in Jerusalem, and meetings with university lecturers and administrators.⁵³

The Second World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies (WOCMES-2), organized by the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies (RIIFS) in Amman during 11-16/6/2006, was attended by more than 1,500 participants from different parts of the world, notably from Israel, Iran and Jordan. The conferees were lectured by some American military and civil personalities from the War College of the American Army, and on topics like tolerance, Islamic threats, war on terrorism and comparative religion. The participants included representatives of some Arab countries that do not recognize Israel, like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, while some British academic institutions boycotted the conference in protest of the participation of Israeli academicians.

Year 2006 witnessed more talks about executing the project of the channel between the Red Sea and the Dead Sea "Two Seas Canal." At the end of this year, normalization meetings were held in the Dead Sea among Jordanians, Israelis, Palestinians and foreign countries in order to discuss the project of the channel. The concerned parties agreed upon launching a \$15 million feasibility study, funded by the World Bank.

Meanwhile, the Jordanian Committee for Resisting Normalization with Israel declared that it will publish a list of the personalities and companies responsible for the export and circulation of Israeli goods in the Jordanian markets. According to the chairman of this committee, Badi al-Rafay'ah, a study on normalization had been conducted, and the names will be published in response to pressures and contacts from various quarters, e.g., citizens and trade unions, who wanted to know the names of these commodities and their exporters so that they can boycott them. Moreover,

the chairman of the Union of Agricultural Engineers, ‘Abd al-Hadi al-Falahat, called upon preventing Israel from infiltrating the Arab societies, and the committee issued a declaration that called upon the Jordanians to identify the origin of all the goods in the Jordanian market before they purchase them.⁵⁴

Some Jordanian activists called for a national conference to confront the growing normalization with Israel, and the Israeli infiltrations in the country. Meanwhile, Gulf investors protested against the activities of a group of Jordanian businessmen who passed Israeli goods to the Gulf markets, like Saudi Arabia, under the guise of being Jordanian or exported by Jordanian traders from Europe.⁵⁵

Another aspect of normalization was the participation of an Israeli parliamentary delegation, which included two Knesset members, Majalli Whbee and Amira Dotan, of the ruling Kadima Party, in a meeting with Arab parliamentarians from Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Algeria and Tunis as well as Fatah members of the PLC.⁵⁶

Furthermore, the Jordanian King ‘Abdullah and Shimon Peres agreed on the urgency of implementing three joint projects, in addition to an international airport in ‘Aqaba that serves both countries. In return Israel should close down its airport in Eilat, construct a canal that connects the Red Sea with the Dead Sea, and be engaged in a joint project to excavate copper on the Jordanian side of the frontiers. Peres brought with him to his meeting with the King several studies and working papers prepared by Israeli experts and the relevant ministries.⁵⁷

The director of the Israeli Ministry of Industry, Trade and Labor, Gabriel Maimon, signed with his Jordanian counterpart an agreement to supervise the adherence to the conditions of the QIZ Agreement.

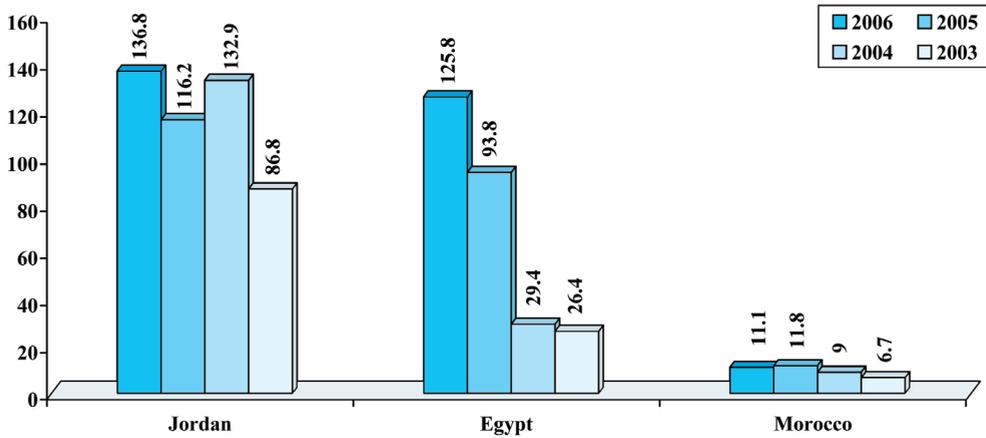
The major Israeli exports to Egypt were textiles, clothes and chemicals. The number of the Israeli exporters working in Egypt in the year 2006 totaled 257 and in Jordan 1,325 while those in Iraq were 27. The latter have been engaged in the export of primary food stuff, especially to the American forces.⁵⁸

Official Israeli statistics for the year 2006 indicate that Jordan was the largest Arab importing country of Israeli goods, to the value of \$136.8 million compared to \$116.2 million in 2005. Next was Egypt whose imports from Israel totaled \$125.8 million in 2006 compared to \$93.8 million in 2005, while it exported to Israel in 2006 commodities of the value of \$77.1 million compared to \$49.1 million in 2005. As for Jordan, its exports to Israel in 2006 valued \$38.3 million compared to \$60.9 million in 2005 (see table 1/4).

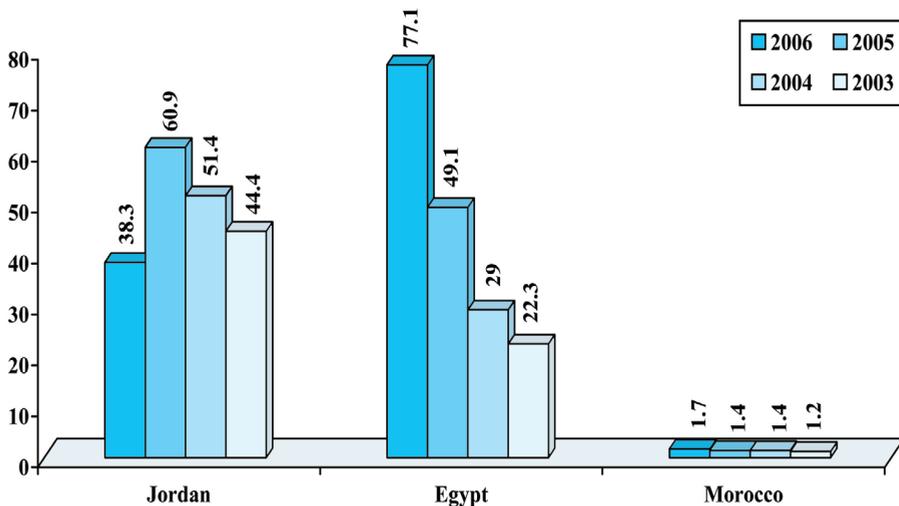
**Table 1/4: Israeli Exports and Imports with Some Arab Countries
2003-2006 (\$ million)⁵⁹**

Countries	Israeli exports to:				Israeli imports from:			
	2006	2005	2004	2003	2006	2005	2004	2003
Jordan	136.8	116.2	132.9	86.8	38.3	60.9	51.4	44.4
Egypt	125.8	93.8	29.4	26.4	77.1	49.1	29	22.3
Morocco	11.1	11.8	9	6.7	1.7	1.4	1.4	1.2

Israeli Exports to Some Arab Countries 2003-2006 (\$ million)



Israeli Imports from Some Arab Countries 2003-2006 (\$ million)



An Emirates delegation participated in the World Diamond Congress that was held in Tel Aviv on 26/6/2006. The diamond stock market of Dubai has become a chief competitor of its Israeli counterpart, whose headquarters is in Ramat Gan colony that is established in the middle of the Palestinian coastal plain. Israel did not object to the amalgamation of Dubai diamond stock market in the World Federation of Diamond Bourses (WFDB).⁶⁰

Meanwhile, an Israeli delegation, presided by a former Israeli ambassador and an expert in the affairs of the Horn of Africa, visited the Somali capital Mogadishu under the guise of fighting “terrorism.” The president of the Somali Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), al-Sheikh Sharif, protested against the visit of this delegation and the meetings and contacts that it had with several Somali officials. He also warned against the establishment of Israeli projects in Somalia.⁶¹

On 6/4/2006, the council of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the political executives of its members held a unique meeting in the Moroccan capital Rabat to examine the existing cooperation within the Mediterranean Dialogue, and to explore its future prospects. The participants in this meeting were 26 representatives of NATO Council and seven representatives of the states of the Mediterranean Dialogue, who came from Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunis, Egypt, Jordan and Israel. They discussed the management of the crises in the region, means of reinforcement of the military forces of both sides and future joint projects.⁶²

According to some analysts, the USA and western powers strive to establish a joint security vision and system that guarantees the collective security and interests of the Mediterranean states in the Southern Bank, which would ultimately lead to the establishment of relations between Israel and the Arab countries. Thus, the normalization of the military relations between Israel and the Arab countries that Oslo Accords has failed to achieve could now materialize by this different, intelligent and less provocative NATO move and arrangements.⁶³

During the period 8-13/9/2006, Israel and six Arab countries (Jordan, Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania and Tunis), as well as some NATO supervisors, undertook joint military training in the Greek Island Crete.⁶⁴

Moreover, five thousand Jews visited during the period 15-16/5/2006 the temple of *al-Ghureibah* in the Tunisian Island Djerba, where they organized a religious festival, and had the opportunity of meeting the Tunisian minister of tourism.⁶⁵

A delegation of three Israelis attended the Fourth Doha Conference on Religions Dialogue, held on 25/4/2006. The participants were 131 of whom 38 were Christians, 14 Jews and 79 Muslims.⁶⁶

Nonetheless, by and large, the Arab masses oppose normalization with Israel, and insist on the termination of relations with it, and to fully support the Palestinians. For example, the National Arab Conference, held in Casablanca during the period 5-8/5/2006, issued a declaration that urged the Palestinian resistance factions to be alerted to the numerous conspiracies that intrigue to drag them into the trap of internal fighting, and reminded them that “the Palestinian blood is forbidden and sacred.” In its final communiqué, the conference condemned the attempts of the American administration and its European allies to isolate the new Palestinian government, and to starve the Palestinian people just because of their democratic option. The communiqué demanded that the Arab and Muslim states honor their financial commitments towards the Palestinian people, even increase them as the prices of oil has been booming.⁶⁷

Most Arab countries witnessed massive demonstrations organized by the political parties, trade unions and professionals to protest against the Israeli aggression against the Lebanese and Palestinian people, and to collect donations to them.

An opinion poll in Egypt indicated that the Egyptians consider Israel, Denmark and the USA to be the most antagonistic states to Egypt. Notwithstanding the peace treaty between the two parties, the opinion poll showed that 92% of the Egyptians consider Israel as an enemy, while not more than 2% of them view it as a friendly state.⁶⁸

The secretary-general of Arab Parties Conference condemned the stand and the conspicuous silence of some Arab states towards the Israeli aggression on Lebanon, and called upon Arab governments to activate Arab solidarity in order to abort the dubious imperialist plans to partition the region and control the resources and wealth of the Arab Nation. Furthermore, it asked the Arab governments to resume the boycott of Americans goods, resist normalization with Israel, and strive to lift the Israeli blockade on the Lebanese and Palestinian people.⁶⁹

Conclusion

The Palestinian issue is still one of the primary concerns of the Arabs. Hence, the Arab states have demanded its resolution through an Israeli withdrawal from all the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967, and the establishment of a Palestinian state. They also emphasized on the Arab Peace Initiative that had been rejected by Israel. No doubt, the Arab confrontational states know more than the others that no security and stability will prevail in the region without the settlement of the Palestinian issue. Hence, is the official Arab interest in the establishment of a Palestinian state because this will serve their purpose and achieve stability in their own territories. The crucial victory of Hamas and its repercussions, as well as Hamas' new political discourse that insists on the fundamentals of the Palestinian issue, has delayed some of the American-Israeli imperialist plans in the region. The year 2006 came to its end without progress towards a settlement in the region because of the Israeli procrastination in withdrawal from the Palestinian and Arab occupied lands.

The Arab countries did not succeed in uplifting the tight blockade imposed on the Palestinian people. In fact, they did not exert serious effort to break it, and some of them have dealt with the government of Hamas cautiously, at times antagonistically. The Arab weakness and disintegration adversely reflects on the Palestinian situation, and provide a broader margin for Israel to impose its programs and visions. Although some Arab states have admittedly continued their political and economic ties with Israel, but the overwhelming majority of the Arab masses still reject and fight normalization. Though the bleeding wound in Iraq has caused further Arab disarray, the strong Iraqi resistance and the quagmire in which the Americans are trapped in Iraq has strengthened the hope of the Palestinian people that the American hegemony and plans in the region, which serve the Israeli project, will eventually be weakened and aborted.

Endnotes

- ¹ See the Arabic site of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 27/1/2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/arabic/middle_east_news/newsid_4649000/4649168.stm
- ² Site of Aljazeera.net, 27/1/2006, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/archive/archive?ArchiveId=309388>
- ³ *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 16/11/2006.
- ⁴ *Addustour*, 11/3/2006.
- ⁵ *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 26/4/2006.
- ⁶ Aljazeera.net, 27/1/2006, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/archive/archive?ArchiveId=309388>
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Albayan*, 26/3/2006.
- ⁹ *Al-Hayat*, 30/3/2006.
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ISBN 978-9953-500-66-9



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