

The Palestinian Strategic Report 2007



Edited By
Dr. Mohsen M. Saleh



Al-Zaytouna Centre For Studies & Consultations

Chapter Three

The Palestinian Issue and the Arab World

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Introduction

We have sufficient evidence to consider 2007 as the year which revealed all the accumulated Arab practices, or rather malpractices, towards the Palestinian issue. This was particularly reflected in the Arab methodology of administering and resolving the conflict with Israel, which drifted towards submission to the American version of the repercussions of the 1991 Gulf war to liberate Kuwait. Hence were Madrid peace conference, the marginalization of the United Nations and the acceptance of a new legitimacy, namely “the balance of power-based strategy of negotiations,” that had ultimately lead to Oslo Accords and Wadi ‘Arbah Treaty of Peace between the State of Israel and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

This negative position engendered during the course of the year 2007 an almost total Arab negligence of what used to be their prime and central concern, namely the Palestinian issue, which has increasingly become a Palestinian–Israeli conflict rather than an Arab–Israeli conflict. The new trend had first expressed itself in some implicit responses to a call, uttered by the American President George Bush during his January 2008 tour of the region, that asked the Arabs to establish partnership with Israel against what he called “the Iranian enemy.”¹ In effect, George Bush had by this call firmly supported an earlier suggestion, voiced by his Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in the midst of the summer 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon, to establish a new Middle East. Taking advantage of the explosive Shi‘ite–Sunni conflict, Rice called for a new regional equation based on the hypothesis of a “moderate axis,” composed of the pro-American states in the region, versus an alleged “evil axis” that includes Iran, Syria, Hizbullah in Lebanon and the Palestinian movements Hamas and PIJ. Hence, the Arab–Israeli conflict would automatically be transferred into an Arab–Iranian conflict, whereby the Arabs would view and deal with Israel as a partner and Iran as an enemy.²

The Arabs had given up at an early stage the option of inflicting a devastating defeat on Israel in favor of concluding a peace deal with it. But the terms and conditions that they accepted for such a deal would not guarantee by any means the achievement of peace or justice; on the contrary they were bound to lead to the Arab total surrender to Israel, and the loss of the Palestinian rights.



An analysis of the Arab position during the year 2007 towards the developments in Palestine and the siege of Gaza reveals, inter alia, three most important developments. First, is the increasing weakness of the Arab street, and its inability to have a tangible impact on the positions and policies of the Arab governments. Second, the weakness of the official Arab position, represented by the Arab League, which had been confined to futile rhetoric and meaningless lip service to the Palestinian cause. Third, while most of the Arab states had remained alarmingly passive, some betted that the crisis would lead to the collapse of Hamas, and the supremacy of Abu Mazin in Gaza, with all its dangerous aftermath. Since the failure of this bet would place those Arab states in an awkward position, they expressed unequivocal support to the 2005 agreement on the crossings, and totally endorsed the position of the PA that adhered to it, though none of them, including Egypt, was a partner in this agreement.

The danger of the above three sweeping developments lies in the consequences that they may lead to. Specifically, is the possibility of a recurring Israeli military option to impose the undertakings given by the PA in Annapolis conference, which was, however, solely based on the Road Map to the neglect of all other peace initiatives, including the Arab peace initiative that had been re-emphasized in the Riyadh Summit in March 2007.

The year 2007 had revealed the serious and accumulated concessions surrendered by the Arabs via their peace project. Hence, the developments that took place during the year were not only surprising, but also shocking and catastrophic. Indeed this is extremely sad and alarming, but it is a logical outcome of the deteriorating Arab performance and roles over long years, particularly since 1979, under the guise of quest for peace.

Nonetheless, the devastating sequence of events during the year 2007 requires a sober critical analysis based on a comparative methodology within three Arab levels, namely:

1. The performance of the official Arab regime (the Arab League and the Arab Summit).
2. The performance of the Arab states.
3. The performance of the public Arab street.

An analytical study along these three levels towards the basic Palestinian concerns, specifically the peace project, inter-Palestinian conflicts, the effort to

support the Palestinian steadfastness, and relations with Israel, would give answers to several pending questions that would not only explain what had happened, but also helps in understanding what may occur in future.

First: The Performance and Positions of the Official Arab Regime

An analysis of the performance of the official Arab regime, i.e., the Arab League and its institutions, particularly the Council of Foreign Ministers, the Council of the League and the institution of the Arab Summit, would give an overall picture of the Arab positions and trends towards the Palestinian issue and its developments. From this critique, we will be able to detect the general progress or regression of the Arab position towards the issue. However, this approach does not pinpoint the actual position of each and every Arab state, hence it would not alone help us to know who is supporting and who is hindering and striving towards surrender. Thus, it is essential to complete the picture by comparing the collective Arab performance with that of the position of each individual Arab state.

Besides comparing the collective official Arab position with that of each state and with the public Arab position, this discourse will also give a comparative analysis of the positions towards the four most important Palestinian concerns: the peace settlement project and the developments of the so-called “peace process,” the inter-Palestinian conflicts, the support to the Palestinian steadfastness, and, finally, the various forms of calls for normalization with Israel.

1. The Position towards the Developments of the Peace Process

The official Arab regime gave an almost complete priority to the peace process at the expense of all other considerations. This indicates its drive and persistence to achieve a settlement that would relieve it of the predicaments and aftermath of the Palestinian issue, in particular its negative impact on the relations between the United States and the Arab nations, the regional complexities of either partnership with Israel or conflict with Iran. Moreover, the continuation of the Palestinian conflict constitutes an embarrassing obstacle towards involvement in the American project of a new Middle East, and it would lead to political instability within the Arab states that opt to join this project.

Of all the efforts related to the Palestinian issue, the Arab official regime focused on activating and promoting the peace process. Hence were two most important developments, namely, the Riyadh Arab Summit which endorsed the reactivation of the Arab Peace Initiative and the decision of the Council of Arab Foreign Ministers to participate in George Bush–patronized “Annapolis meeting,” also known as the “Autumn Peace Conference.”

A focused study on these two developments would provide a comprehensive survey of the position of the Arab official regime towards the peace process, and, more importantly, the overall Palestinian issue.

a. The Riyadh Summit and the Reactivation of the Arab Peace Initiative

The Arab peace initiative was given priority in the agenda of the Riyadh Summit of 28–29/3/2007. Interestingly, this move was a direct response to a new American drive towards the peace process; namely the imposition of polarization between what Washington called the “axis of moderation” (the states of The Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) plus Egypt and Jordan) versus the “axis of evil” (Iran, Syria, Hizbullah, Hamas and PIJ). The crux of these efforts was related to the American strive to secure support for its project in Iraq from one side and for its hostile policy towards Iran from another side. However, to secure progress in these two directions, America was obliged to give attention, even nominally, to the peace process between the Arabs and Israel, and to try to secure some progress in the resolution of the Palestinian–related problems.

This may explain the sudden attention given to the so-called “reactivation” of the Arab peace process, which had been practically frozen since 2002. The new move was, in fact, instigated by America and Israel, rather than being an Arab initiative per se. For the idea had been crystallized over four months, and after four successive tours in the region undertaken by Condoleezza Rice. According to her declarations, uttered after a meeting with Ehud Olmert, and further emphasized after a follow up meeting on the same day with Mahmud ‘Abbas, Rice asserted that the Arab peace initiative provides “a useful basis for implementation,” and that she never asked for its amendment. Subsequently, Tzipi Livni declared in Washington that the initiative “contains positive elements,” which clearly indicated that Israel was in favor of a move towards its revitalization. However, Livni did not neglect to mention the Israeli reservations that lead to its earlier rejection, though she summed them in a brief and general way by saying that the initiative “embodies

some elements that contradict the principle of two states,” in reference to the initiative’s special item on the right of return to the Palestinian refugees.³

The first Arab response came after a meeting held in the Jordanian capital Amman on 13/3/2007, which was presided by King ‘Abdullah II and attended by the foreign ministers of Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. A declaration by the Jordanian Royal Council reported that King ‘Abdullah II said, “The Arab states should collectively work towards a unified position with regard to the reactivation of the Arab peace initiative, which the Arabs had adhered to in Beirut Summit.”⁴

The call for the revival or reactivation of the Arab peace initiative, which had been associated with a related suggestion on the topic that had been presented by Rice during her fourth Middle East trip in four months, on 23/3/2004. She wanted to coax the Israelis into giving the Palestinians what she calls a “political horizon”—the glimmerings of a Palestinian state. But, at the same time, she wanted the Arabs to also sketch a “political horizon” for the Israelis—the beginnings of recognition to give the Israeli government more room to strike a deal.

Rice discussed this plan with what she innovatively called “The Arab Quartet,” i.e., Egypt, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Jordan and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The Americans handpicked those four states on the presumption that they play an important role in the promotion of the peace process, e.g., training of the Palestinian security forces, and having a pivotal role in the Arab League.⁵

Interestingly, this nomenclature “The Arab Quartet” was coined just before the Riyadh Arab Summit, but it disappeared forever after the end of the summit, and new mechanism for the reactivation of the initiative, which had already been re-emphasized by the summit, was formed.

The most important, probably the sole, action undertaken by this Arab Quartet was arranging for Rice to have two meetings in the Egyptian town Aswan: the first with the foreign ministers of the four states, and the second with the directors of their intelligence agencies.⁶ In the former meeting, the ministers had reportedly presented to Rice the Arab initiative as the fundamental basis for the resolution of the Arab–Israeli conflict, as it “embodies Arab fundamentals and is based on international resolutions.” It was further reported that this Arab Quartet will not submit to the Riyadh Summit a written report on its negotiations with Rice, but just verbally communicate to the leaders the gist of these deliberations.⁷



Though, in a subsequent round of negotiations with the leaders of Israel, Rice failed to secure their support to the American plan, and Ehud Olmert publicly refused the Arab initiative, even suggested instead to meet King ‘Abdullah Bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz to normalize relations with his Kingdom, the Arab Summit did not retreat from its position of reactivating the initiative. The only angry Arab response to Rice’s failure in Israel came from King ‘Abdullah who mentioned the Arab solidarity with “the occupied Iraq,” which provoked an angry, but seemingly artificial, American response that was voiced by the spokesmen of the State Department and the White House, and which was, however, eventually contained by Rice.⁸ It is ironic that the King’s remark provoked such a violent reaction at a time when an American initiated resolution of the Security Council had described Iraq as an occupied country. However, the importance of this presumably deceitful anger lies in the frustration of the American government by the failure of Rice’s deal, though this was squarely due to Israel’s stubbornness and defiance.⁹

Monitoring the Saudi position during that period, specifically a few days after the Aswan meeting between Rice and the Arab Quartet and till the end of the Riyadh Summit, reveals two interesting developments. First, a categorical denial by a spokesman of the Saudi foreign minister, Sa‘ud al-Faisal, of any intention to amend the Arab peace initiative, and, second, the utter refusal of any connection between Rice’s meeting with the Arab Quartet in Aswan and the Arab Summit. In this respect, al-Faisal angrily said, “No modification or amendment of the peace initiative. I emphasized this 20 times and this is the last time that I do so.”¹⁰

This decisive response reveals the confusing rumors that accompanied the summit, particularly an alleged intention to amend the initiative to have the blessing of Israel. The summit’s resolutions emphasized adherence to the initiative as approved in Beirut Summit of 2002, and which is based on the decisions of the international community to end the Arab–Israeli dispute (note that they used the word dispute and not conflict); and the establishment of a comprehensive and just peace settlement that provides security to all the states of the region, and enable the Palestinian people to establish their own state, including Jerusalem. The summit had, furthermore, assigned the initiative’s Arab ministerial committee to continue its efforts and form working teams to conduct the necessary contacts with the secretary–general of the United Nations, state–members of the Security Council, the Quartet and the other concerned parties to resume the peace process.

It should also rally support for this initiative and start serious negotiations on the basis of the terms of reference represented in relevant UN resolutions, and the principles of giving land for peace and the illegitimacy of annexing land by force. The summit had also delegated the Council of the Arab League on the ministerial level to follow up and evaluate the effectiveness of the current peace effort and to decide on the basis of this evaluation the next steps to be pursued.¹¹

The ministerial committee for the reactivation of the Arab peace initiative held on 18/4/2007 its first meeting at the Arab League's headquarter in Cairo, in which 13 states participated, namely Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Bahrain, Qatar, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Yemen and the Sudan.¹² Meanwhile, the Arab League drafted a dual-purpose action plan to be discussed by the initiative's committee. The first, the political dimension, stipulated that an Arab delegate should approach the American administration and the congress to explain the initiative, and to travel on similar missions to the European Union and Russia. The second purpose of the plan suggested a media campaign in the USA and Europe to acquaint the mass media there—which should include influential T.V. stations, mainstream newspapers and journalists—with the components of the Arab initiative. A machinery should also be formed to fund this Arab drive. Some diplomatic sources had, furthermore, reported a Palestinian suggestion to advertise the initiative within the Israeli society via contacts with influential Israeli personalities, and the translation of the initiative to Hebrew and its wide distribution among all the components of the Israeli media.¹³

Following this meeting, Reuters news agency reported that several Arab states, who participated in the committee of the Arab peace initiative, were ready to contact Israel if it accepted some very modest demands amongst which were the stoppage of the Separation Wall in the WB and the withdrawal of Israeli troops to their positions before the *Intifadah*. As for the Arab League, it issued a communiqué after the meeting of the initiative's committee saying that “it delegated Egypt and Jordan to explain the initiative to Israel.” In a comment on the conditions of such contacts, ‘Amr Musa, the secretary-general of the Arab League, had reportedly said, “The time for free concessions is over,” and added that the letter and spirit of the initiative “is based on the prior Israeli withdrawal from all the lands that it occupied on June 5, 1967, and then the Arab normalization would come.”¹⁴

‘Amr Musa’s declaration had been issued to correct a previous presumption that the above demands were not prior conditions for normalization, rather they were conditions for the contacts. Four weeks later, in an interview with the BBC, ‘Amr Musa dismissed as “sheer nonsense that should not be heeded to” the claim by the Israeli President Shimon Peres to the effect that “Israel is ready to conduct serious negotiations with the Arab states on their peace initiative if they presented serious proposals.” ‘Amr Musa had furthermore accused Israel of “deliberately and continuously dragging on and of viciously revolving around the core issue (i.e., readiness to achieve peace with its Arab neighbors) without directly addressing it.”¹⁵ ‘Amr Musa also refused a call by Ehud Olmert to meet the Arab leaders to discuss with them the Arab peace initiative, which Musa described as nothing but a “ploy.”¹⁶

Meanwhile, after much talk about the ambiguity of the mission of the Egyptian and Jordanian foreign ministers to Israel to deliberate on the Arab peace initiative, specifically whether this visit was in the name of all the member states of the initiative’s committee or in the name of Egypt and Jordan only. Hence, some Arab governments had reportedly asked ‘Amr Musa to issue a communiqué that clears out the decisions of the Arab summit and the committee of reactivating the initiative on this issue, which state that the two ministers were not delegated to negotiate, but only to contact Israel in their own capacity as representatives of two Arab countries that have diplomatic relations with Israel. The governments of Syria, Libya, Algeria and Yemen had, on their part, emphasized that originally there was not yet anything to negotiate.¹⁷ Subsequently, ‘Amr Musa declared that neither the Arab League nor any state would negotiate on behalf of another state, and that Palestine would be the one to negotiate with Israel, as is also the case with Lebanon and Syria.¹⁸

On the same issue, Hisham Yusuf, director of Arab League secretary general’s office, said, “In this respect, the Arab League is governed by the decision taken in the last meeting of the Arab foreign ministers in Cairo. Hence was the delegation of Egypt and Jordan specifically to perform this mission on behalf of the Arabs because they have diplomatic relations with Israel.” In response to what some had dismissively described as a free and non-reciprocating move, i.e., the Arab League presumed initiation of negotiation with Israel without the latter’s recognition of the Arab peace initiative, Yusuf responded by saying, “With all due respect to this

point of view, but we should know that contacts between the Arabs and Israel were not non-existing for them to ask for a reciprocation to resume them.”¹⁹

Finally, however, nothing came out of the mission of the Arab delegation, as its visit to Israel was nothing but a publicity stunt. No wonder as the government of Ehud Olmert had then no vision or a political program to achieve peace with the Palestinians or the Arabs. Particularly so because Olmert had not originally recognized the initiative, but he merely aspired to render it void of content, as he had more than once sarcastically described it as the “Saudi initiative.”²⁰

Practically the Arab League achieved nothing from its drive to reactivate the Arab initiative, as Washington had once more frozen it either willingly or under Israeli pressure. As for the Arab states, they gave up the futile effort of “reactivating the initiative,” particularly so after the bloody Gaza incidents between the presidency of the PA and Hamas. The call for peace with Israel had thus been sidelined in favor of a more urgent and crucial task, namely inter-Palestinian peace.

b. The Arab Participation in Annapolis Meeting

Immediately after Bush declaration of his initiative to convene the Annapolis conference, the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Welch indicated the participation of Arab states that “have no relations with Israel.” Since Welch’s priority was to induce some Arab states that do not recognize Israel to sit with it on the same negotiation table, he strove to persuade them to do so in Annapolis by giving the following pretexts, “The crux of the Arab peace initiative is based on the desire to sit on the table to discuss peace with Israel, and when talking of the implementation of the initiative, the Arabs themselves had suggested an international conference.”²¹ Besides evading thus far talking about the agenda, venue and time of this conference, Welch had evasively responded to a question on Syria’s possible participation by saying, “We have not yet decided who will and who will not participate, but the address of President Bush gives the broad criteria for this participation, viz. rejection of violence and the acceptance of the existence of Israel are key elements for the acceptance of the outcome of any negotiations.” In effect this means Arab normalization with Israel and refusal of violence, i.e., normalization with Israel and the discard of the option of resistance or support to it once and for all were the fundamental conditions for participation,²² indeed they were the underlying objectives behind the call for the conference itself.

What attracts attention here is that just a few days after Bush's declaration and Welch's explanations and conditions, the Council of Arab Foreign Ministers held an emergency meeting in the Arab League's headquarters. It was then and there, where they declared their support for holding a meeting or international conference in the presence of all parties concerned with the peace process that aims to the initiation of negotiations on all fronts on the agreed terms of reference. The ministers had, moreover, declared their keen desire to enter directly in peace negotiations on all the issues of the Arab Israeli conflict and within a specific timeframe to establish the Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital.²³ The ministers' declaration contained further Arab conditions, but it welcomed what it called the positive elements in Bush's address that can provide a reliable basis for the negotiations, particularly adherence to the two-states solution, and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. The Arab declaration also called for the stoppage of the settlements, end of the occupation of the WB and GS, the conclusion of a settlement on the final issues, including Jerusalem and the refugees, the transfer of the revenue collected by Israel in lieu of Palestinian taxes, which was frozen by Israel, to the PA, and to provide financial and economic support to the Palestinian people in Gaza.²⁴

In its 128th meeting, held on 5/9/2007 at the foreign ministers' level, the council of the Arab League issued a declaration which emphasized that the proposed international conference should end the Israeli occupation of the Arab lands within a specific timeframe, and in a way to achieve security and stability for all. The ministers had, furthermore, warned against attempts by Israel to void Bush's call out of its basic substance.²⁵

Meanwhile, 'Amr Musa said that the aim of the conference should be resumption of the peace process and to address the core issues within a specific time schedule. Moreover, the obligations of each party should be clarified in accordance with the previous agreements, and had to be build upon in the expected negotiations. Moreover, the Quartet and the Security Council should be given a role to supervise and follow these negotiations. In return for the implementation of this path, 'Amr Musa promised "good relations and the recognition of Israel." However, he cautioned that this meeting should not be allowed to be a mere political demonstration without content or outcome, as this may have serious repercussions on Arab interests and on the region at large.²⁶

However, all these Arab conditions had eventually fallen apart versus the Israeli stubbornness and the American bias. Faced with all kinds of American pressure and incentives, the Arab states were finally compelled to hold on 22/11/2007 a meeting of their foreign ministers, which declared their consent to participate in the “meeting.” They very well knew that it was a “mere meeting, and not a conference per se,” and they knew that there was a wide gulf between what they and the Palestinians called for on one side and what the Israeli had actually, and with American consent, accepted.

Once assured of the participation of 16 Arab states in the conference and only three days before its start the Israelis imposed new conditions. Thus, while welcoming Arab presence, Tzipi Livni cautioned, “These states (Arab) should not participate in the scheduled bilateral negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians,” and added, “It should not be assumed that the Arab states would decide the conditions of the negotiations or to participate in them.”²⁷ Shortly afterwards, Ehud Olmert imposed another condition, namely that any further post-Annapolis negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians “would depend on the Palestinian recognition of Israel as a state of the Jewish people.”²⁸ This means that Israel would be a full fledged Jewish state; hence the right of return would have gone with the wind, as with such an official Palestinian recognition no Palestinian would have the right to return to such a Jewish state.

Notwithstanding these alarming developments, a meeting of the Arab foreign ministers, held in the Arab League’s headquarter in Cairo, decided to accept the invitation that America extended for 16 Arab countries to participate in Annapolis conference, namely Jordan, the UAE, Bahrain, Tunisia, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco, Mauritania and Yemen. ‘Amr Musa said that the Arab states agreed to participate within the framework of the “Arab initiative,” that this participation does not mean the acceptance of anything, and that the conference objective is not to conclude a new treaty, but to resume once more the negotiations on the basis of certain principles that are derived from the Arab initiative.²⁹ The pretext that Musa gave for this participation was to ascertain the seriousness of the Arab position to conclude a just and comprehensive peace on all the fronts. He added that the Arabs will participate in the meeting for the sake of negotiations not normalization.³⁰

After initial talks between the Palestinian and Israeli delegations that were more of a wrangle than negotiations, the meeting was held on Tuesday 27/11/2007 at Annapolis city, Maryland. Reading from a text, the American president opened the meeting by claiming that the Palestinian and the Israelis agreed to immediately launch negotiations to conclude a peace treaty that would end decades of violence. In the text that Bush was reading, which was allegedly to be a joint Palestinian–Israeli declaration, he said that they have agreed to exert all efforts to conclude an agreement before the end of 2008, and to settle all the pending issues, including the major ones, without any exception.³¹

The meeting ended with an Arab–Palestinian retreat on all the conditions that had been declared earlier. After much hesitation, Mahmud ‘Abbas, the president of the PA, was compelled to sign a “Memorandum of Understanding” that the conference reached to, though it did not satisfy the Palestinian and Arab demands, and had not even mentioned the Arab peace initiative, which the Arab states had earlier insisted on, as the condition for their participation in the conference.

Hence, Annapolis conference had resulted in two major Arab concessions. First, is the recognition of the Road Map as the fundamental basis of the negotiations, which supersedes all other bases particularly the resolutions of the United Nations, and which also bets any progress of the negotiations on the Palestinian state on the end of resistance. The second retreat was to patronize Bush’s document of 2002, which called for two states, an Israeli (full fledged Jewish) and a Palestinian that have the content of statehood in name only. For it should either be a state that is liable for continuation, or one that totally ignores the issues of sovereignty, frontiers, right of return and Jerusalem; hence it will be a state that aborts the Palestinian dream of restoring the usurped rights.

This is the outcome of the Arab haste to participate in Annapolis meeting, in addition to the circulation of deceitful pretexts and conditions that nobody respected, though they carried the signatures of the Arab ministers of foreign affairs.

2. The Position towards the Palestinian Schisms and Conflicts

In view of the difficult circumstances that surround the national Palestinian struggle and within the Arab, regional and international environment, it was inevitable that there be competition, differences and divisions among the various Palestinian groups and resistance movements. However, being keen to maintain

and sustain the unity of the Palestinian factions, the Arab stand had always rejected these divisions and insisted on a united Palestinian front. However, for two main reasons, this position has noticeably changed since the sizable victory of Hamas in the Palestinian legislative elections. First, there are political feuds in many Arab countries resulting from the rise of the Islamic forces as a strong competitor for the capture of political power in those countries. This was particularly so with regard to the Muslim Brothers in Egypt, whose noticeable performance in the elections of the Peoples' Assembly had coincided with that of Hamas, who is viewed as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. Moreover, some radical Islamic movements were involved in violent actions against the governing regimes in some Arab states. Hence was the distinction in the Arab positions towards the inter-Palestinian conflicts, which was based on the degree of the danger of the Islamic factor on the internal political equation. Thus the countries which were more exposed to the so-called "Islamic danger" opposed Hamas and supported the PA under the presidency of Mahmud 'Abbas. Conversely, the states that were less exposed to this presumed danger were inclined to be more balanced vis-à-vis the Palestinian disputes. Second, was the American-Israeli pressure against some Arab countries to compel them to adopt hostile positions towards Hamas and the totality of the resistance movements that wage different kind of resistance against Israel, and to encourage them to support the PA not out of admiration and support to its policies but as a means to liquidate all the resistance movements that have been accused of "terrorism."

Hence, despite the flexibility that Hamas exhibited during the drive to form a national unity government, the USA kept pressing the Arab states to deal with it as part and parcel of an international fundamentalist movement (Muslim Brotherhood), and not an extension of the Palestinian national movement that is firmly linked with the national Arab security.

a. The Arab Position towards the Divisions that Synchronized with the Effort to Form a Government of National Unity

Prior to the formation of a government of national unity, there were internal skirmishes between the security forces of the PA and Hamas. This violence was about to end Mecca Agreement that had been achieved through Saudi mediation in which King 'Abdullah Bin 'Abdul 'Aziz was personally involved, and which was an unpleasant surprise to the Americans and Israelis who betted on their support to the president of the Authority to abort it.



In these circumstances, the Arab role was confined to calls to end the killing and maintain Mecca Agreement. Thus, the Arab League conducted consultations and contacts with a number of Arab capitals and with Arab foreign ministers to formulate the action plan to deal with this crisis.³² ‘Amr Musa volunteered to send a League’s high powered delegation to all Palestinian territories to meet all the Palestinian parties concerned to end the political tension, and to stop the internal Palestinian killing and counter killing. However, ‘Amr Musa had desperately posed a viable question, i.e., what would the delegation say in those chaotic circumstances, where everyone knows well what is required.³³

The above helpless question reveals the paralysis of the Arab League, which is attributed to some fundamental differences among the Arabs countries towards the conflicting Palestinian parties. While some had been reluctant throughout the year 2006 to mediate between the Palestinians, others supported the Presidency against the government either politically, financially or militarily by supplying weapons or training troops. This support, undertaken on behalf of other parties, had its negative impact, as it aggravated the gulf between Fatah and Hamas. It also encouraged some of Fatah leaders to assume that they had behind them an Arab ally, besides the known international parties; hence was their adamant extremism and stubborn refusal to engage with Hamas.³⁴ However, this impasse was superseded by Mecca Agreement, but only temporarily, as the Agreement had eventually collapsed, largely because most of the Arab states had cautiously and hesitantly dealt with it. This was instrumental in the resumption of the bloody feuds between the disputing Palestinian parties, and the consequential downfall of the national unity government, which took place after huge and bitter fighting between Fatah and Hamas.

Following the formation of the government of national unity, ‘Amr Musa welcomed in the name of the Arab League this development, which he viewed as a crucial step to end the political tension and its different repercussions in a way that allows the Palestinians to concentrate on their primary concern, namely establishing the Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital.³⁵

The secretary-general criticized the boycott of some states, particularly Britain, to Hamas ministers in the government of national unity, which he described as “very negative,” and added, “I believe there is no rationale for the international siege, starvation or the punishment imposed on the Palestinians.” ‘Amr Musa also

protested against the refusal of the Israelis to recognize the government of national unity, by saying, “We protest against the Israeli position, which strongly favors the continuation and sustainability of schism between the Palestinians.”³⁶

The final communiqué of the Riyadh Summit stressed, in what appeared to be in the main a message to Hamas, the necessity that the Palestinian government of national unity adheres to the decisions of the Arab summits, which emphasized that peace is the strategic option of the Arab states in accordance with the Arab peace initiative. Then the communiqué emphasized support to Mecca Agreement, the PA and the unity government.³⁷ This deliberate sequence reveals the core of the Arab position, i.e., the priority should first and foremost be the adherence of the Palestinian unity government (viz Hamas) to the peace project as a strategic option, which in effect means refusal of the option of resistance, and obliges Hamas to follow this line, then comes support to the PA, and thirdly, and lastly, support to the unity government.

b. The Arab Position towards the Bloody Disputes and the Dissolution of the Government of National Unity

The Arabs had remained too paralyzed to play an effective role to stop the Palestinian blood path. However, a move in this direction appeared only after two developments. First was the success of Hamas to completely expel Fatah and the PA institutions from Gaza and to impose its control over the GS. Second, there was the proclamation by Mahmud ‘Abbas, the president of the PA, of his three famous decrees.

The former development meant a pro-Hamas transformation in the balance of power that was unacceptable to the official Arab regime. The case would have certainly been radically different had Fatah and the institutions of the Authority controlled Gaza Strip. The second development, viz President ‘Abbas’ virtual constitutional coup on the legitimacy, was no less dangerous than what Hamas did in Gaza. However, the Arab official regime supported ‘Abbas and even described his decrees as legitimate.

Initially, the Arab League’s support was rather reserved, and was drafted in such a careful manner to give the impression that it was associated with the legitimacy, thus the secretary-general said, “We do not have reservations on ‘Abbas’ decisions that are within the scope of the constitution.” In an attempt to exhibit neutrality ‘Amr Musa said, “We support ‘Abbas and the elected legislative council.” After

a six-hour meeting to discuss the Palestinian situation, the Arab foreign ministers demanded the status quo ante in Gaza, and called upon all parties to resolve their differences through dialogue. The ministers formed an investigation committee, composed of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Tunisia and the secretariat-general of the Arab League, that was directed to submit its report within a month, and asked all Palestinian parties to facilitate its mission. Furthermore, the ministers condemned “the late criminal acts in Gaza,” without, however, shouldering the responsibility of the bloodshed to a specific party.³⁸

Following the first meeting of the investigation committee, which was at the level of the permanent members of the League and presided by the secretary-general, ‘Amr Musa declared that the meeting focused on the action plan of the committee, and emphasized three themes: the necessity to respect the legitimacy as represented by Mahmud ‘Abbas and the legislative institutions, the return of the status quo ante in Gaza, and the rejection of the separation of GS from the WB or the existence of two Palestinian entities. Musa admitted that some had what he called “misgivings towards the investigation committee,” but “there is no Palestinian rejection per se of this committee.”³⁹ The director of Arab League secretary general’s office, Hisham Yusuf, had explained the background of these apprehensions by saying, “The objective of the committee is only to explore the understanding of each side to what had happened. Any vision presented by any of the parties will be studied, and a report will be submitted to the meeting of the ministers of foreign affairs.”⁴⁰

However, surprisingly what was mentioned of differences around the investigation committee was not confined to the Palestinian parties, but extended to the members of the committee itself, particularly on the methodology of its work. Coupled with the scarcity of information on the incidents in Gaza, these widespread differences had further complicated the performance of the committee. Quoting one of its members, the United Press International (UPI) reported that the sharp differences between the members of the committee dragged and delayed its work, and added, “Nobody provides us with authentic facts, all that we hear are rumors and counter rumors,” UPI had further quoted another committee member saying that the members do not seem enthusiastic to end the investigation and present concrete recommendations. The two quoted members agreed that the committee may by the end of the day be compelled to take a non-committal stand that do not necessarily condemn either of the conflicting parties, particularly so as

it did not undertake a fact finding journey to the Palestinian territories, but only received reports from both the PA and Hamas that reflect their own points of views on the issue.⁴¹

Not only that, but some Egyptian and Palestinian media sources revealed that the differences between Fatah and Hamas were reflected on the joint Arab effort, and had been behind the failure of the Arab ministers to arrive at a consensus. Indeed, they were divided into two groups. First, a group that had been shackled with regional and international commitments, hence, it advocated pressure on Hamas until it submits to the peace conditions, namely the acceptance of the dictates of the Quartet and recognition of Israel. The position of this group of ministers had seemingly superseded that of the neutral side, which advocated that a consensus solution that does not antagonize either of the parties is the only exit from this stubborn impasse. Naturally, this was unacceptable to the President of the Authority Mahmud ‘Abbas and his ilk among the Arab foreign ministers, who insisted on an outright condemnation of Hamas.⁴²

However, the recommendations of the final draft of the investigation committee concentrated on the necessity of bridging the Palestinian rift, and to enable the conflicting Palestinian parties to resume negotiations, as well as to explore a role for the Arab League in this respect. Furthermore, the report repeatedly refused inter-Palestinian fighting, and demanded that Fatah and Hamas immediately and totally stop the bloodshed. The report condemned the unfair blockade imposed on the Palestinian people, and outlined its serious negative repercussions. The committee had, moreover, patronized a series of steps and contacts with the relevant Palestinian and Arab parties to achieve national reconciliation, and to return the situation in GS to the legal stand that abides by the Palestinian constitutional principles.⁴³ However, none of these recommendations was implemented, particularly so because the accelerating Arab paralysis failed to contain the conflict and the rift between Fatah and Hamas. This was clearly demonstrated towards the end of the year when the Israeli tightening of the siege on Gaza and the suspension of the supply of electricity and petrol had ignited the issue of the Palestinian crossings.

3. The Position towards the Support of the Palestinian Steadfastness

Since the imposition of the Quartet’s siege on the Palestinian people that followed Hamas victory in the legislative elections, and which was undertaken under the guise of the movement’s failure to recognize Israel, the Arab regime

was unable to take a strong and decisive position against this blockade. It did not even publicly declare its non-committal to it, or campaigned against it on the international level, rather it was keen not to provoke the Americans and Europeans and to win their consent. Hence, the official Arab response did not go beyond extending limited financial support, and in calling upon the Quartet to lift the siege on the Palestinian people. But the Arab helpless position towards the frequent Israeli incursions and arrests of the activists that was extended to include ministers and members of the parliament (MPs) had been just confined to condemnations and continuous, but futile, appeals to the United Nation's interference. Indeed, it is a foregone conclusion that the United States will block any resolution from the Security Council that condemns the Israeli crimes against the Palestinian people.

Any observer of the Palestinian situation during the year would be able to clearly distinguish between two phases of the Israeli siege on the Palestinian people, particularly Gaza. The first, pursued most of the 2007, took the shape of bombardment, assassinations and incursions, and the second was what happened during the last weeks of December 2007 and January 2008. However, the Arab weak and submissive response, even conniving as exhibited during the December 2007–January 2008 Gaza crisis, remained basically the same during the two phases.

a. The First Phase

The Arab contribution during this phase never went beyond continuing to call upon the Quartet and the international community to interfere, and to extend financial subsidies to the PA. On the other hand, nothing was given to Gaza after the expulsion of the PA from there, following the bloody clashes between Fatah and Hamas, though GS has remained the main victim of the blockade, and in desperate need for such aid.

While defending the position of the Arab League vis-à-vis the imposed blockade on the Palestinian people, Muhammad Sobeih, the Arab League assistant secretary-general for Palestinian affairs, said that the sources of all the funds to the Arab League are well known, and that they are smoothly transferred according to the resolutions of the Arab summits. As for the provisions in kind, they are distributed, in cooperation with international organizations, to the institutions and organizations inside the occupied lands. Sobeih further added that the confiscated funds, which were caught with Isma'il Haniyyah while crossing Rafah crossing, were transferred to the account of the PA, and, by virtue of an official memorandum

from the PA to the League, they were deposited in an account opened by the League in an Egyptian bank.⁴⁴

The concluding session of the ministerial committee to implement the resolutions of the 18th summit, held in Khartoum, emphasized the necessity of providing full support to the government of national unity at the global level, and its assistance to break the financial and economic siege imposed on the Palestinian people. The organization revealed that it received \$380 million out of the \$660 million Arab aid decided in Khartoum summit.⁴⁵ After the Riyadh Summit, the Arab League urged the Arab states to meet their financial obligations, and Muhammad Sobeih revealed that the Arab efforts to reactivate the Arab peace initiative will focus, after Riyadh Summit, on the lift of the siege on the Palestinian people.⁴⁶

Short of this, no Arab support to the steadfastness of the Palestinian people could be detected, except some isolated measures like the donation of one million Egyptian pounds to the stranded Palestinians on the Egyptian–Palestinian borders at the Rafah crossing,⁴⁷ contacts with the Iraqi government to stop violence against the Palestinian refugees in Iraq,⁴⁸ and the demand to free the detained MPs in Israeli prisons.⁴⁹ However, as reported by Ambassador Ahmad al-Qatan, the Saudi permanent representative to the Arab League, and after a meeting held in Riyadh by the Arab League Follow-Up Committee, there were intentions to convene a special Arab conference to support the institutions of the PA after Gaza's bloody incidents. Despite the fact that Ambassador Ahmed bin Hili, the assistant secretary-general for political affairs, had even said that preliminary steps were taken in coordination with some businessmen to organize this conference,⁵⁰ but to no avail.

b. The Second Phase

The Israeli objectives behind the tightening of the siege on Gaza, December 2007–January 2008, and the total cut off of electricity and fuel had been glaringly revealed to everybody, namely either to force the Gaza inhabitants to stop supporting Hamas,⁵¹ or to transfer the responsibilities in the GS to Egypt, thus relieving Israel of all its legal duties towards the occupied lands and their people, as advocated by the minister of war and his deputy, Ehud Barak and Matan Vilnai, respectively.⁵² Nonetheless, the official Arab position remained ridiculously weak and hesitant, even impotent, which appeared to have been in harmony with the old and continuous desire to disavow from the Arab responsibility towards the Palestinian people.

Indeed, ‘Amr Musa’s passionate appeal to the Arabs to loudly protest against the catastrophe in Gaza was seemingly a reflection of this paralysis. Following his departure from Cairo, and while heading a delegation to Beirut to try to resolve the Lebanese crisis, the secretary–general appealed to the Arabs to “at least loudly call for the stoppage of the siege imposed on GS, and to supply it with all the funds, medicine and food that they can afford, particularly as it is under total siege and daily aggression, a development that should not be allowed to pass without an Arab stand.”⁵³

However, Musa had helplessly failed to show how these funds, food and medicine could reach GS while the crossings are closed. Equally paralyzed was the communiqué issued on the same subject by the Council of Arab Foreign Ministers. After commending the Egyptian efforts to reduce the sufferings in Gaza, the communiqué called upon the Arab states to provide more help, and demanded that Israel, who should be held fully responsible for the deteriorating conditions in GS and the WB, ends the siege. The Council of Arab Foreign Ministers also demanded that the Security Council shoulder its responsibility, and called upon the concerned parties to resume the agreed and internationally recognized measures that guarantee the reopening of the crossings, including Rafah.⁵⁴

These appeals were all that the Arab League did, but without shouldering its responsibility by asking for the imposition of a new and fair treaty that guarantees the opening of the crossings, which, however, should not by any means be under the mercy of the Israelis. Besides, the Arab League did not think of providing an alternative strategic option that ends the existing situation which puts the GS under the Israeli will. For how come that the GS remains fully dependent on Israel, and, at the same time, the Palestinians are told that they will have their independence. The Arab ministers never entertained the provision of an alternative supply of electricity and petrol to the GS, seemingly because this dependence on Israel is a necessity to force the GS to submit to the Arabs core position that opted for peace as their strategic option.

4. The Relation with Israel and the Prospect of Normalization

The official Arab regime adhered to its position that refused any progress on the issue of normalization with Israel, and to the conditions spelled out in the Arab peace initiative. This was reiterated on two occasions, first within the plan to

reactivate, after the Riyadh Summit, the Arab peace initiative, and second, when agreeing to collectively participate in Annapolis meeting.

Just before the Arab summit, there were repeated Arab and international calls to the Palestinian unity government to recognize Israel. But ‘Amr Musa refused these demands, and declared, after a meeting that he had with the Croatian Foreign Minister Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović: “Recognition should not be unilateral, by one side only, but has to be reciprocal from both sides, Hamas and Israel.”⁵⁵

After Riyadh Summit, ‘Amr Musa refused any normalization with Israel before the achievement of peace, and emphasized, “It is impossible to do this whatever the circumstances may be; as this means that they want normalization free of charge.”⁵⁶ Moreover, Hisham Yusuf, director of Arab League secretary general’s office, refused the approaches of the Israeli premier, Ehud Olmert, to have contacts with the Arab League on the peace initiative, saying that the required is that Israel define its position vis-à-vis the Arab–Israeli conflict. He further emphasized that Israel is manipulating and playing delaying tactics in order to delay any progress in the peace path, and to have concessions with nothing in return. But the positions of the Arabs and their League are crystal clear, and had been clarified further through the initiative, namely, no free concessions.⁵⁷

Following rumors that the foreign ministers of Egypt and Jordan, respectively Ahmad Abu al-Ghait and Abdel Ilah Al Khatib, had undertaken their above mentioned visit to Israel as representatives of the Arab League to further promote the Arab initiative,⁵⁸ Abu al-Ghait declared that he “represented Egypt only and not the Arab League.” He added that he and his Jordanian counterpart were delegated by the concerned ministerial committee to pursue the peace initiative of the Riyadh Summit, but “certainly they do not represent the Arab League.”⁵⁹

The Arab refusal of “free normalization” was further reiterated immediately after the decision of Arab participation in Annapolis meeting. In a press interview before the meeting, the Palestinian President Mahmud ‘Abbas said, “no concessions in the conference,” and that the presence of some Arab–Islamic countries that have no relations with Israel, like the KSA, does not mean normalization. For these countries do attend in the presence of Israel the meetings of the United Nations, but this act has not been viewed as a tacit normalization with Israel.



Later, this position was further emphasized by Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Prince Sa'ud al-Faisal, who said, "No to normalization before the conclusion of a peace accord with the Palestinians."⁶⁰ A position 'Amr Musa also emphasized after a meeting of the Arab League Follow-Up Committee, which was held two days before Annapolis meeting, he said, "The decision of participation in Annapolis conference does not mean normalization with Israel, but it is a move towards peace, and to emphasize the necessity of raising the issue of negotiations after a long freeze."⁶¹

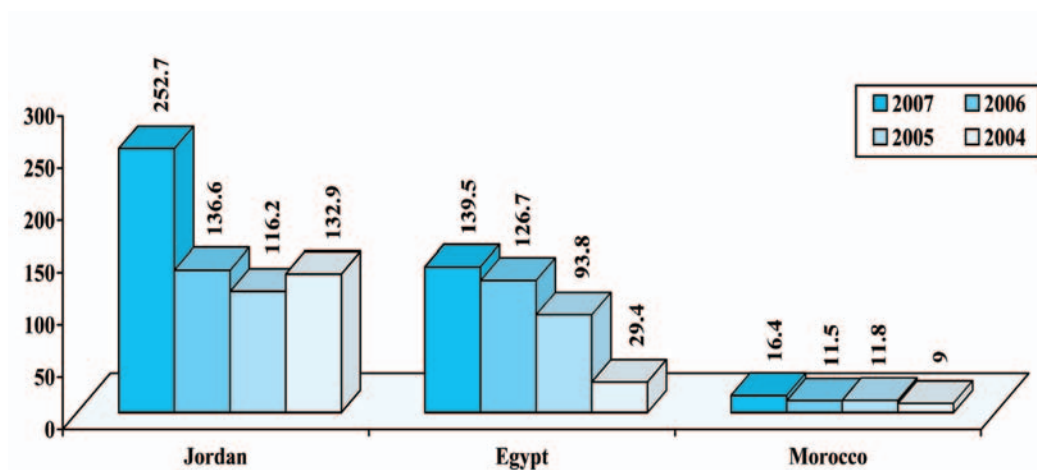
The overall Arab positions towards the peace process, inter-Palestinian conflicts, support to the steadfastness of the Palestinian people or on the issue of normalization reveal a basic fact that 'Amr Musa could not deny, namely the inability to resolve all Arab crises, not only the Palestinian issue. For, as 'Amr had indicated, these crises, i.e., in Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan and Somalia, remain absolutely dormant and without any progress in the horizon, which means that the Arab regime and its regional organization were in a real stalemate, whose major symptom is inability to do the fundamental tasks. This serious development requires immediate reconsideration, otherwise the dangers of the American-Israeli projects to reorganize the regional order, redraw the maps and to impose regional polarization and conflicting axes would become realities. Such a fait accompli may also encourage the American President George Bush to impose upon the Arab world, during his forthcoming January 2008 visit to the region, not only to recognize Israel and conclude peace treaties with it, but also to establish a partnership with it. This partnership is to confront what he called the "Iranian enemy," the first culprit, in his view, of supporting "terrorism," which automatically extends to include all the Arab resistance movements and organizations.

In another vein, the economic relations between Israel and some Arab countries had significantly flourished during the year 2007 compared with 2006. Israeli export to Jordan had witnessed 85% increase in 2007, from \$136.6 million to \$252.7 million, while its imports from Jordan increased by 41.9%, from \$38.2 million to \$54.2 million. Meanwhile, the 2007 Israeli exports and imports to both Egypt and Morocco had also increased, though with less percentages and funds as explained in the following table.

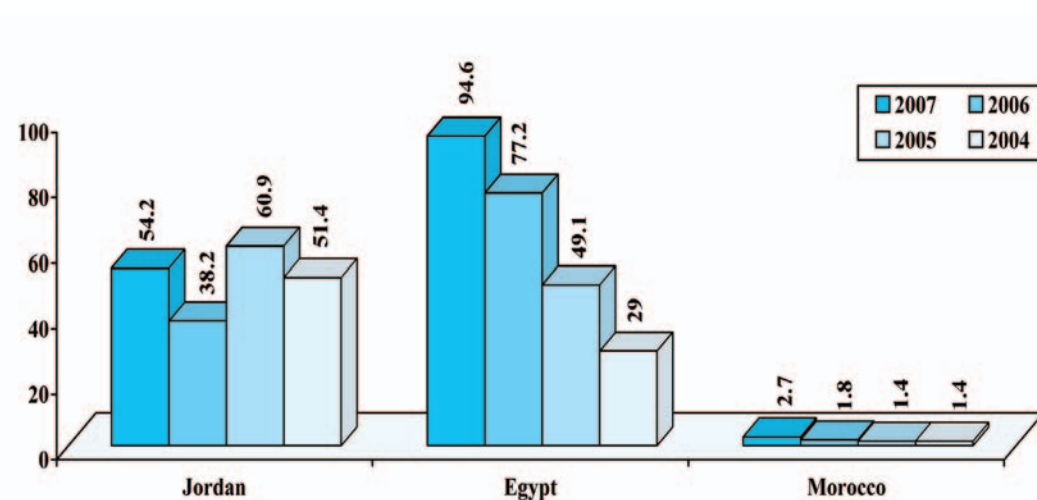
Table 1/3: Israeli Exports and Imports with Some Arab Countries 2004–2007
(\$million)⁶²

Countries	Israeli exports to:				Israeli imports from:			
	2007	2006	2005	2004	2007	2006	2005	2004
Jordan	252.7	136.6	116.2	132.9	54.2	38.2	60.9	51.4
Egypt	139.5	126.7	93.8	29.4	94.6	77.2	49.1	29
Morocco	16.4	11.5	11.8	9	2.7	1.8	1.4	1.4

Israeli Exports to Some Arab Countries 2004–2007 (\$million)



Israeli Imports from Some Arab Countries 2004–2007 (\$million)



Second: The Performance and Positions of the Arab States towards the Palestinian Issue

A study of the various positions of the Arab states towards the central Arab concern, namely the Palestinian issue, demonstrate that there are some distinctions and differences between them. Moreover, these diversified stands are closely associated with the degree of commitment of each and every state to this issue, and to the concepts of the Arab nation and Arab nationalism, as well as to the extent of their drive to oppose the American and Israeli projects which focus on the fragmentation of the Arab nations into sectarian and ethnic entities. The diversity is also reflected in the degree of friendship or alliance with the United States or Israel, and with the position of each state towards the regional and international alliances. What we are trying to explore here is the extent of the reactions of each state to the Palestinian issue and its developments, and the degree of adherence to, and defiance of, the Palestinian national rights. This will be done through an analysis of the four elements that we focused on in the above study on the performance and positions of the official Arab regime towards the same issue. For the sake of this analysis, we may categorize the Arab states into four subsidiary regions: the Arab Orient (the confrontational states with the exception of Iraq that is experiencing special circumstances), the Gulf region, Sudan and the Horn of Africa, and, the states of the Arab West.

1. The Confrontational States (the Arab Orient)

The nomenclature “the confrontational states” is taken to mean those states that are more committed and involved in the Palestinian issue. But this assumption is conditioned on the existence of confrontation per se, or the commitment of these states to confront Israel. However, with their signatures of peace treaties with this entity, both Egypt and Jordan have become more committed to the peaceful resolution of the conflict with Israel, and more enthusiastic to prevent the outbreak of wars and confrontations because they will place them in an awkward position with their own people and with the Arab masses. Notwithstanding their geographical location that dictates extensive reactions on their part to the Palestinian issue, Egypt and Jordan had, however, practically foregone their previous strong commitment to the Palestinian rights, though they continuously claim that their keenness on the peaceful resolution is in itself a reflection of their commitment to these rights. This applies to Egypt and Jordan, but not, to the same extent, to Syria and Lebanon.

a. Egypt

i. The Egyptian Stand Vis-à-Vis the Peace Process

Egypt had, indeed, the greatest national interest in the peaceful settlement of the Arab Israeli conflict, as this will ascertain the credibility and seriousness of the peace strategy that it had pursued at an early time. The year 2007 witnessed an extensive Egyptian drive to activate the negotiations, secure the success of the initiatives and to support the conferences and meetings related to the peace process between the Palestinians and the Israelis. This may be detected through three distinct phases. First, through an Egyptian alternative plan to the stumbled Road Map, this continued throughout the months of January and February 2007. The second phase was related to the preparations, participation and then the follow-up of the recommendations of the March 2007 Arab summit. The third phase, that extended from June to the end of the year 2007, synchronized with the acceptance and support for the call of the American President George Bush to convene a peace conference in autumn, which first carried the nomenclature “the autumn conference,” and finally became popularly known as “Annapolis meeting,” which, anyhow was held towards the end of 2007. During this last phase, the Egyptian government actively pursued the revival of the Palestinian–Israeli negotiations in accordance with the “Annapolis’ understandings.”

1. The Egyptian Attempt to Present and Sell an Alternative Initiative to the Road Map

This initiative was initiated by an Egyptian proposal to convene a quadrilateral Egyptian–Jordanian–Palestinian–Israeli summit to revive the peace process, and to resume the Palestinian–Israeli negotiations on the final settlement.⁶³ In an interview with the Egyptian magazine *Rose al-Yousuf*, the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said that Egypt has a specific vision for the establishment of a comprehensive peace based on the international legitimacy, and is of the opinion that a deal on the swapping of prisoners between Israel and the Palestinians would be instrumental in preparing the ground for the resumption of negotiations between the two sides.⁶⁴ In the interview, the Egyptian president revealed an initiative presented by Cairo in consultation with some Arab countries, and added that an Egyptian delegation will visit Washington in February 2007 to explain this initiative. The president asserted that this initiative is based on the Arab peace initiative, and contains some ideas to ascertain the possibility of Palestinian–Israeli co-existence, on condition that Israel

stops its practices against the people of GS and the WB, and to start to put the Palestinian political house in order. However, according to some reliable sources, this initiative included the discard of Hamas, and an emphasis on the Presidency as the legitimate representative of the Palestinians.⁶⁵

The Egyptian president submitted this initiative to Condoleezza Rice, during a meeting that he had with her in Luxor city, and to a number of Arab states, including the KSA. A senior Egyptian source denied that the proposed initiative contradicts the Arab peace initiative, and added that Saudi Arabia had accepted and supported it.⁶⁶

Ahmad Abu al-Ghait discussed this initiative with Rice and senior American officials in Washington, where he said that the Egyptian vision is to agree on two stages that will ultimately lead to the final settlement of establishing of the Palestinian state within the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital. He emphasized that Egypt totally rules out the notion of a temporary state, and that the first stage aspires to achieve stability in the relations between the Palestinian and Israeli sides through a number of reciprocal measures, notably swapping of prisoners, return to the “understandings of Sharm al-Sheikh” and strict observance of a ceasefire in order to build bridges between the two sides. As for the second stage, it is represented by the resumption of the final negotiations, which may be conducted in any form, including confidentiality.⁶⁷

The most important aspect of this initiative is its focus on the final objective of the probable negotiations. For, as the Egyptian minister of foreign affairs, Ahmad Abu al-Ghait, said, the former negotiations failed because their prior objective was not spelled out in advance.⁶⁸ However, the new initiative was also unsuccessful to break the deadlock probably because of the emergence of a new variable, namely the call for the reactivation of the Arab peace initiative, and the American–Israeli ambition of amendment to some of its terms, which they hoped to be endorsed by the forthcoming Riyadh Summit.

2. Egypt, the Arab Summit and the Reactivation of the Arab Peace Initiative

Egypt actively and favorably responded to the call for the reactivation of the Arab peace initiative through arranging for Condoleezza Rice to have two meetings in Aswan city in the south of Egypt, the first with the so-called “Arab Quartet,” and the second with the intelligence chiefs of four countries (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the UAE). Moreover, Egypt was also an active and

direct partner in the so-called “Rice deal,” which was, however, aborted by the Israeli refusal of the Arab initiative. Additionally, Egypt patronized the Riyadh Summit in order to reactivate the initiative, and it publicly denied any intention to amend it in accordance with the American–Israeli demands. Moreover, Egypt participated in the concerned committee to pursue the initiative, which took the name of the committee of the Arab peace initiative, and Ahmad Abu al-Ghait discussed it, together with his Jordanian counterpart, with the officials of Israel. Before departing to Israel, the Egyptian minister of foreign affairs denied that the initiative’s committee is delegated to negotiate with Israel, and emphasized that such negotiations is a special concern of each party that have problem with Israel, be it the Palestinians, Syrians or Lebanese.⁶⁹

Egypt continued its efforts to reactivate the peace initiative through several meetings and conferences. Amongst these was a trio-meeting in Sharm al-Sheikh between the ministers of foreign affairs of Egypt, Jordan and Israel, which triggered differences between the Arab and Israeli sides because of the attitude of Tzipi Livni towards the Arab initiative. The Egyptian minister of foreign affairs said that the meeting addressed many of the Arab concepts of peace and their Israeli counterparts. He added that the two Arab ministers asked Livni to strictly respect the territories under the PA, stop the policy of assassinations and all other military acts against the Palestinians, and to forthwith take measures that cultivate confidence with the Palestinian side.⁷⁰

After her meeting with the two ministers, Livni met the Egyptian president, and discussed with him the means to revive the peace process, and the probable Israeli interaction with the Arab initiative.⁷¹

However, the most important Egyptian move in this direction was a quadrilateral Egyptian–Jordanian–Palestinian–Israeli summit in Sharm al-Sheikh, which, according to a declaration by the Egyptian minister of foreign affairs, aimed at supporting the Palestinian President Mahmud ‘Abbas, revival of the peace process and to give a push to the Palestinian–Israeli relations.⁷²

In his opening speech of Sharm al-Sheikh Summit, President Mubarak called for a joint action to stop the bloodshed on both sides, end violence and to prepare the ground for the resumption of negotiations in accordance with a clear “political horizon” that culminates in the discussion of the issues of the final settlement, and not to unilateral actions and temporary settlements. The ultimate aim,



Mubarak added, is to achieve a just peace based on the position and principles of the international community, and the aspirations of the Palestinian people in an independent state. Addressing Ehud Olmert, Mubarak explained, “If you had fully implemented the understandings that ‘Abbas concluded in Sharm al-Sheikh in February 2005 with the former Israeli premier Ariel Sharon, the situation would not have deteriorated to the extent that it reached today.”⁷³

On the next day, the Egyptian president briefed the Saudi King ‘Abdullah Bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz on the quadrilateral summit. They also discussed the means of containing the grave confrontation between Fatah and Hamas, unite the Palestinian house and persuade the two movements to the negotiation table.⁷⁴

3. Egypt and the Annapolis Meeting

A couple of hours after the call of the American President George Bush to convene “in autumn” an international conference on the peace process, Egypt welcomed the proposal. Ahmad Abu al-Ghait declared that the move has some positive elements that the Arabs should adhere to and build upon. He, moreover, expressed his support to the indications mentioned in Bush declaration on the subject, namely the necessity to end the occupation and to establish an effective and viable Palestinian state.⁷⁵

Since that time and until the Annapolis meeting of 29/11/2007, the Egyptian government expressed keenness, and took steps too, to provide good preparations for the conference in order to achieve its desired objectives. Hence, Egypt undertook a number of activities towards that goal, including meetings and conferences as well as declarations by the Egyptian president and his minister of foreign affairs. President Mubarak called for an agreement on principles around the Palestinian state prior to the “peace conference,”⁷⁶ while his minister of foreign affairs said, in reference to the possibility that America fails to extend an invitation to Syria, that his country does not place any conditions for participation. In this respect, he said, “We ascertain the invitation of all Arab parties that are willing to participate in this meeting, but we do not associate this with specific conditions for Egypt’s participation or non-participation.”⁷⁷

Moreover, Egypt organized in Alexandria on 4/9/2007 a meeting between the Egyptian president and the Jordanian King ‘Abdullah II, and a trio Egyptian–Jordanian–Palestinian summit in Sharm al-Sheikh on 22/11/2007. In the former Alexandria summit, the Egyptian and Jordanian sides emphasized the importance

of Arab coordination before participation in the conference, the necessarily that the conference comes out with positive outcome, and that the Arab peace initiative constitutes the basis for the Arab vision on the conference.⁷⁸ As for the trio-summit, the Egyptian president renewed the call of good preparations, and to have clear agenda and basis by saying, “By the end of the day, the most important goal is to achieve tangible results that push forward the peace process along the Palestinians–Israeli path, and in a way that opens the gate for similar progress along the other paths.”⁷⁹

ii. The Egyptian Position Versus the Inter-Palestinian Conflicts

Throughout the year Egypt had given priority to contain the differences that accelerated to bloody conflicts between the PA and Fatah from one side and Hamas movement on the otherside. Egypt adopted various means to contain these differences, amongst which were bipartite and tripartite dialogues, then the dispatch of a high ranking security delegation, headed by Major–General Burhan Hammad and under the supervision of the Egyptian intelligence chief Omar Sulaiman, the arrangement of bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral summits, and adopting this stance in the meetings of the Arab foreign ministers. But this attitude had changed after Gaza’s bloody and drastic incidents, as Egypt withdrew its security delegation and ordered its return to Cairo, which was an obvious indication of its rejection of the bloody means to settle the conflict between Fatah and Hamas. Subsequently, it temporarily sided with the PA, but shortly afterwards reverted to a balanced position between the two movements. However, finally, the Egyptian regime exhibited support to President ‘Abbas’ confrontational position versus Hamas.

In the beginning of 2007, and after a summit between the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and the Jordanian King ‘Abdullah II Ibn al-Hussein, Egypt and Jordan called for the stoppage of the Palestinian killing, and the conclusion of a deal between Fatah and Hamas to form either a national unity or technocratic government.⁸⁰ Egypt also called upon the Palestinian factions to join Mecca Agreement, and denied any retreat from its supportive position to the inter-Palestinian dialogue after Fatah and Hamas co-signed this agreement. It, furthermore, emphasized that the implementation of this agreement had been undertaken through coordination and consultation between Cairo and Riyadh, and that since several months ago the Egyptian security delegation has been continuing in performing its duty.⁸¹

Through its Gaza-stationed security delegation, under Major-General Burhan Hammad, Egypt succeeded to halt renewed cycle of bloodshed through a fifth ceasefire agreement between Fatah and Hamas.⁸² Hence, it started a new round of dialogue, with the participation of several Palestinian factions that was modeled on the previous 2005 Cairo dialogue.⁸³ But these dialogues were not completed because of Hamas' reversion to the policy of military decisiveness in the GS.

Just before this decisive military action, Israel casted doubt on the intentions of Egypt. The Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* claimed that the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said, "Egypt does not accept Hamas to be in the government, especially because of its increasingly strong relations with the Muslim Brotherhood movement." But Major-General Burhan Hammad denied this assertion,⁸⁴ and continued his role to contain the crisis between Hamas and Fatah. In fact, at a time, and before Hamas' successful and decisive military action, Major-General Hammad was the sole intermediary between the two movements.⁸⁵ By then, he ascertained that satanic hands, which had become professional in igniting fighting between the brothers, are pursuing their evil acts in the Palestinian arena.⁸⁶ He warned that he will join the Palestinian masses to stop the bloody killing in the streets, and called for an urgent meeting in his office in Gaza to stop this bloodshed.⁸⁷ Meanwhile, the Egyptian minister of foreign affairs refused the notion of sending international forces to the Palestinian territories unless and until four conditions are accepted and implemented: total stoppage of inter-Palestinian fighting, the conclusion of a ceasefire, the stoppage of all Israeli acts of aggression against the Palestinian people, and, finally, the ultimate objective should be a clear cut final settlement.⁸⁸

These developments convinced the Egyptian authorities that a "mischievous group" is fishing in troubled waters in the Palestinian arena, and that it is employed by some external forces to achieve certain scenarios, of which the most important is to foment chaos in the Palestinian territories in order to remove Hamas from power. *Al-Hayat* newspaper reported that some reliable Egyptian sources said that President Mahmud 'Abbas "knows the sequence of events, and the personalities behind the fighting. He has all the information, but he did not take any action against them, they were not arrested."⁸⁹ Subsequently, quoting a high ranking source in the Egyptian security delegation in Gaza, the Cairo newspaper *al-Masry al-Youm* reported that Muhammad Dahlan and his ilk in the security forces of the PA are responsible for igniting the conflict between Fatah and Hamas. The report

added that this group has secret contacts with Israel and the United States, and that its objective is to capture power and control the political leadership, hence concluding treaties with Israel on the latter's terms.⁹⁰

The reality of these assumptions and accusations was subsequently revealed in an article published by the American Journalist David Rose in the American magazine *Vanity Fair*. Depending on some documents, the article reported that, following Hamas' victory in the legislative elections, the American administration planned and strove to overthrow its government politically and militarily by igniting a civil war in the GS. The article added that General Keith Dayton allocated to Muhammad Dahlan this task, and that a secret plan, endorsed by the American president, the secretary of state and the Deputy National Security Advisor for Global Democracy Strategy, Elliott Abrams, was drawn to implement this mission. David Rose continued to say that Rice approached the leaders of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE to support Fatah in cash to purchase arms and to train the security forces of the PA. With the approval of the Israeli government, four Egyptian trucks loaded with light arms crossed to Gaza in December 2006. The article had even reported that the Israeli Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer explained that the armament will enable Mahmud 'Abbas to deal with the organizations that are trying to destroy everything.⁹¹

The accuracy of the information of David Rose's article was established by a report in the Lebanese newspaper *al-Akhbar*, which by quoting informed Palestinian sources, said that Hamas handed to the Egyptian authorities supportive documents of a conspiracy that Hamas found in the security headquarters, and that Egypt had consequently changed its hostile attitude towards the movement. Amongst these documents was a video tape showing some of Dahlan's reliable security agents discussing the means to place some sensitive cameras near the Egyptian borders with Gaza, and that the Israelis wanted this to surveil the movements of the Egyptian soldiers stationed there. These cameras were supposed to be connected with the Israeli security headquarters in Karam Abu Salem crossing, east of the Rafah crossing. Furthermore, these evidences included a map, signed by the former director of the Palestinian internal security Brigadier-General Rashid Abu Shbak, showing the coordinates of the Egyptian security headquarters in Gaza. While another document signed also by Abu Shbak shows the mechanism of the surveillance cameras surrounding the headquarters and information on the non-official visits by the Palestinian factions to the place.⁹²

These documents did restore balance to the Egyptian position towards the conflicting parties, but only for a short time, as Hamas' control of Gaza led to a completely different Egyptian attitude, which expressed itself in the withdrawal of the Egyptian security delegation and the closure of its headquarter in Gaza.⁹³ Hence, to guard against Palestinian migration, Egypt declared the state of emergency along Gaza borders.⁹⁴ It also welcomed Salam Fayad's government as an alternative to that of Hamas,⁹⁵ refused the separation between GS and the WB, and indicated that Hamas would be isolated. *Al-Hayat* newspaper quoted a reliable Egyptian source saying that Cairo "does not recognize the new illegitimate status" in GS, and that there is a call for an Arab gathering to emphasize the legitimacy of President Abu Mazin, and to refuse any contacts with an independent state in Gaza headed by Hamas, with the possibility of isolating it regionally.⁹⁶

In pursuit of this orientation, Egypt organized a quadrilateral summit, that included Egypt, Jordan, Palestine and Israel, to support President 'Abbas and try to end the Palestinian differences. But Olmert took an extremist position on the resumption of the peace process, threatened to retreat from the few undertakings that he gave to Mahmud 'Abbas if he opted to reopen dialogue with Hamas, as demanded by President Mubarak, and was even inclined, with the support of the Israeli media, to the military option against Hamas.⁹⁷

However, this summit demonstrated a clear and sudden contradiction between the position of Egypt on one side and the other three partners. While Olmert, 'Abbas, and King 'Abdullah II saw eye to eye on the issue of strengthening 'Abbas at the expense of Hamas, Egypt had become glaringly cautious not to fall in an Israeli trap that harbors the siege and isolation of Hamas, hence losing an opportunity to revive the peace negotiations. Such a course may also, in Egypt's view, lead in future to the "West Bank first" option and the consequential further partition of the Palestinian issue.⁹⁸ Hence, Egypt concentrated in this summit on calling upon the Palestinians to end their differences,⁹⁹ and president Mubarak had once more emphasized that Egypt will in due course resume its intercession between Fatah and Hamas.¹⁰⁰ Some Egyptian sources denied rumors that Egypt will suspend supplies to GS, instead they confirmed that it initiated contacts with the Israeli side to guarantee that the GS will not be exposed to a humanitarian crisis with regard to the basic supplies of gas, water, electricity, food and medical provisions. These sources added that Egypt's desire to emphasize and support

'Abbas' legitimacy is confronted with the concept of restoring and guaranteeing Palestinian unity, and the sources also pointed out that Cairo has grave concerns regarding the deteriorating conditions of GS. In this respect, a diplomatic source had reportedly said, "Egypt is impatiently looking for the outcome of the events in the region, and that it will not strive to isolate Hamas internationally." The source added that once calm prevails, Cairo will summon the factions for negotiations on the existing conditions, and it also emphasized the Egyptian refusal of the notion to send international forces to GS.¹⁰¹

Egypt had, furthermore, played a major role in calling the Council of Arab Foreign Ministers for a meeting to discuss the inter-Palestinian conflict, and to form an investigation committee, representing Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Qatar, to explore the vision of each side on what had happened and why it happened, and to suggest the appropriate means that guarantee contacts and the resumption of the inter-Palestinian dialogue.¹⁰² Though the mission of this committee had stumbled, Egypt continued its effort to resume this dialogue, and to contain the conflicts, particularly between Hamas and Fatah. During the course of the first week of September 2007, it invited two delegations, representing Hamas and Fatah, to Cairo to explore the possibility of the resumption of dialogue between them. Furthermore, Egypt prepared various versions for reconciliation and rapprochement, amongst which one provided for a declaration by Hamas to evacuate the security buildings of the PA, or to declare its readiness to forgo the status that resulted from its military action, without, however, spelling out the steps to do so.¹⁰³ But this step did not achieve the desired objectives, and the estrangement between the two sides continued.

However, the subsequent events of January 2008 Gaza crossings revealed President 'Abbas' intransigent conditions on the prospect of dialogue with Hamas.

iii. The Egyptian Position towards the Support to the Palestinian People and the Imposed Siege on Them

The overall Egyptian attitude towards the Palestinian issue continued to be governed by two considerations: adherence to both the Arab national security and the Egyptian national security, and to prevent Palestine, especially the GS, from being transferred into a threat to Egyptian security. Egypt (as a regime) was obliged to continue its support to the Palestinian people, but within the limits that do not adversely affect its relations with Israel, and, at the same time, do not allow

the internal catastrophe of the Palestinian people to be a source of threat to internal political stability (due to probable popular reactions), and national security (i.e., the borders and relations with Israel).

Hence, Egypt never hesitated to support the Palestinian people, though it clearly and totally refused Hamas' decisive military action in GS. It initiated extensive contacts with the Israeli side to avoid a humanitarian crisis in GS with regard to food, petrol, gas, electricity, water and medical supplies. A senior Egyptian official declared that though his country adamantly rejects the formation of a "religious emirate" on its borders, it "will not under any circumstances allow further hardship to be inflicted on the Palestinian people in Gaza." He added that Egypt "informed Israel of this position, which it had seemingly understood."¹⁰⁴ However, concurrently, some Egyptian security and border sources said, "There is no coordination between the Egyptian and Palestinian sides on the movement of the thousands of the stranded Palestinians along the borders between Egypt and Gaza." The sources added, "After Hamas' control of Rafah border crossing, contacts between the officials on both sides had almost stopped."¹⁰⁵ But subsequently, another Egyptian official source emphasized that Egypt "will never take punitive measures against the Palestinian people, factions or leaders."¹⁰⁶

These and other positions triggered some leaders of Israel to accuse Egypt of tolerance and facilitation on the issue of smuggling weapons by Palestinians into GS via the tunnels along the Egyptian side in Sinai; which had considerably strained the Israeli–Egyptian relations. Soon Israel became a partner on the "tunnels issue," and both Tzipi Livni¹⁰⁷ and Ehud Barak issued declarations on the issue that were considered by Egypt as "insulting" and to have crossed the red lines. These angry Egyptian reactions were particularly furious after hints by some American officials, like Senator Arlen Specter, that linked American aid to Egypt with the smuggling of weapons via the tunnels to GS.¹⁰⁸

These accusations were extended to include the Egyptian position towards the stranded Palestinians along the borders, particularly the pilgrims. For the tension along the borders had obstructed the passage via Rafah crossing to and from Gaza, particularly after Hamas absolute control of the GS. However, Egypt tried to reduce this tension at that sensitive time when deliberations and contacts were ongoing to reactivate the understandings of Annapolis meeting, and Egypt was trying to maintain a form of working relations with the PA and its leader Mahmud 'Abbas.

The victim of these considerations were some 2,170 Palestinian pilgrims who remained stranded along the borders, and of whom some remained for sometime on board in two boats near the Egyptian port of Nuweiba.¹⁰⁹ Finally, however, an Egyptian decree ignored an Israeli decision to keep them stranded, and they were allowed to cross.

These relatively firm Egyptian positions were extended to the crossings' crisis, which erupted in January 2008 due to the arrogance and intransigence of Israel. For it closed all the crossings with GS, imposed comprehensive blockade, which extended to petrol and electricity, and launched extensive attacks on the GS, which made it and its inhabitants virtual hostages, and exposed them to what looked like genocide. The Egyptian position towards this growing crisis was sympathetic to say the least. It started with contacts with Israel to stop the aggression and lift the siege, and developed to a favorable response to the angry reaction of the Palestinian people who penetrated Rafah crossing. In response, President Mubarak declared that he "will not allow the starvation of the Palestinian people."¹¹⁰ Hence, more than half of Gazans crossed to the Egyptian territories to get all kind of provisions, as the GS was virtually void of all things. However, the Egyptian government gradually retreated in reaction to Israeli hints to revive the Egyptian alternative, which meant the transfer of the responsibility of the GS to Egypt. Moreover, was the refusal of Mahmud 'Abbas, the president of the PA, to any compromise with Hamas, including some new arrangements on the crossings, that Egypt, in the words of its foreign minister, intended to deliberate with the PA and Hamas. Consequently, after a warning that gave the Gazans a grace period to return to the GS, the Egyptian government restored its authority on Rafah crossing, and started to maintain and rebuild the border steel fence, which had earlier been destroyed by the so-called "The Popular Resistance Committees" in Gaza.¹¹¹

The Egyptian relaxed policy towards the Palestinian travelers to Sinai, which transferred the frontiers to the so-called "soft borders,"¹¹² infuriated the Israelis and the Americans, and was probably a reason for instigating "the Egyptian option"¹¹³ by the Israeli deputy minister of defence and other Israeli officials. The influx of tens of thousands of Palestinians into Sinai led to an Israeli warning to Egypt, when the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared that it has asked the Egyptian government to do what it should do "by virtue of the peace treaty."¹¹⁴ Moreover, Condoleezza Rice called upon Egypt to shoulder its responsibilities to defend "the



international borders.”¹¹⁵ Hence was the Egyptian transfer towards firmness on the issue of the borders, the appearance in the Egyptian official media of the so-called “violation of national sovereignty,” and the accusation of Hamas that it intends to establish an “Islamic Emirate.”¹¹⁶ Further successive steps followed the closure of the borders. Notably was the strong response of President Mubarak that Egypt “will not allow Israel to disavow from its responsibilities in Gaza”¹¹⁷ and Egypt’s drive for reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, and finding a joint solution for the administration of the crossings.¹¹⁸ The latter proposal had, anyhow, failed because of the refusal of President ‘Abbas and senior ministers in his government to allow Hamas to have any role in the administration of the crossings,¹¹⁹ and their insistence to adhere to the 2005 treaty on the issue.¹²⁰

iv. The Egyptian Position towards Normalization

Egypt’s normalization with Israel was not isolated from the totality of the previous interactions. For the issue of peace depends, to a large extent, on the Israeli–Palestinian relations, which may be divided into two types, namely confrontational and cooperative. While the former reflects various degrees of tension and differences, the latter expresses a degree of the Egyptian enthusiasm to maintain a measure of reconciliation that may be used in the interest of the Palestinian issue.

Amongst the disputable or differential issues was the Egyptian borders issue with GS, and Egypt’s refusal to accept the Israeli accusations of leniency in the supervision of these borders by allegedly turning a blind eye to the smuggling of arms into Gaza.¹²¹ Besides are the differences over the refusal of Israel to accept the Arab Peace Initiative,¹²² on the firm official position that refuses to allow the passage or infiltration of Sudanese into Israel,¹²³ on the Israeli nuclear capabilities,¹²⁴ and the refusal of Egypt to accept the Israeli reservations on its nuclear project.¹²⁵

As for the cooperative interactions or relations, they were limited to bilateral meetings between prominent Egyptian and Israeli personalities, or to participation in trilateral or quadrilateral summits in which the two parties as well as Jordan and Palestine may be involved to promote the peace project and the Palestinian–Israeli negotiations.¹²⁶ Moreover, Egypt drove to resolve the issue of the Israeli detainee with Hamas through a deal of swapping prisoners that satisfies both the Israeli and Palestinian sides.¹²⁷

Within this proposed framework, we may be able to suggest that normalization between Egypt and Israel is strictly confined to a limited area that can not be expanded because of the extremist Israeli policies, and the ongoing manipulation of the Israeli government about the peace settlement.

b. Syria

Within the multiplicity of the Syrian positions on the four subjects of analysis, we may notice that they concentrate on the Palestinian–Israeli and the Syrian–Israeli settlement issues, and the alternatives of war and peace that are associated with them.

i. The Syrian Position towards the Palestinian–Israeli Peace Settlement

The developments in the Syrian position towards Annapolis meeting was governed by developments in the American position on the question of Syria's participation in the meeting. Thus, when America had initially failed, after three months of deliberations, to officially extend an invitation to the Syrian government, the latter's Minister of Foreign Affairs Walid al-Mu'alleem responded to this American deliberate neglect by expressing his country's concern that George W. Bush may view this conference as an alternative to the Arab peace initiative,¹²⁸ and a Syrian diplomat dismissed it by saying "It is a clear attempt to sell the indecisive American and Israeli policies," and that Syria "is directly concerned with the issue of the Palestinian refugees, as it hosts more than half a million of them in its territories."¹²⁹ However, the most important comment on the conference was by president Bashar al-Assad himself, who said, "Syria has not received an invitation to the autumn conference. Even if it does, it will not participate in a conference that lacks opportunities of success, unless and until there will be clear elements of seriousness, of which the most important is to include the occupied Golan in its agenda."¹³⁰

Based on this position, Syria gave the Palestinian resistance movements the green light to organize a counter popular conference to that of Annapolis in which popular Arab delegations were scheduled to participate. This tantamounted to a Syrian message of protest against the American policies and the autumn conference itself. However, some Arab parties, particularly the PA, interfered to persuade the Syrian leadership to cancel or at least postpone this conference to a time after Annapolis meeting.¹³¹ Al-Tayyib 'Abd al-Rahim, the secretary-general of the Palestinian presidency, announced that President 'Abbas will send a delegation

to Damascus to ask the Syrian leadership not to allow a conference which some factions in the PLO, Hamas, al-PJ and some Palestinian personalities had called for to reject the autumn meeting (Annapolis). ‘Abd al-Rahim emphasized that “Abu Mazin considers a permission to convene this conference tantamounts to a permission of establishing a new PLO, as it will lead to a schism in the present PLO.”¹³²

However, in the words of Muhsen Bilal, the Syrian minister of information, following an American invitation to Damascus, and after some contacts that President Bashar al-Assad had with international and Arab officials, “The Syrian leadership met and discussed the invitation to attend the conference. Taken into consideration the consensus of the Arab ministers of foreign affairs in their meeting in Cairo which was attended by 17 ministers, it accepted the invitation.” He added, “The acceptance of this invitation is in effect resumption of the negotiations to restore the Golan.”¹³³

After this acceptance and practical participation in the conference, Syria had to face the music regarding two developments. First, to mend its resulting strained relations with Iran that was caused by some bitter Iranian criticism to a couple of top Syrian officials, and widespread popular demonstrations that condemned Annapolis meeting, which was viewed as sell out of the rights of the Palestinian people, and the countries that participated in it. The second was the failure of the conference to achieve the aspirations that the parties, especially Syria, hoped for, particularly on the Golan. For the meeting ended with vague understandings on the resumption of the Palestinian–Israeli negotiations in the hope that this it will lead by the end of 2008 to the establishment of a Palestinian state, as promised by the American president.

To contain the strain in the relations with Iran, the Syrian minister of foreign affairs took the initiative to meet the Iranian ambassador in Damascus. He explained to him the reasons that led Syria to participate, focusing on what he called, “the national priority to the Golan.” He added, “It is unbecoming for an international conference to convene without the Golan, whether there is a possibility for its success to initiate serious negotiations or just to be a forum to explain a point of view.”¹³⁴ This diplomatic move was followed by another, namely sending Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal al-Miqdad, at the head of a high level Syrian delegation to Tehran to deliver a message from the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to his

Iranian counterpart President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, and to explain to the Iranian officials with whom he will meet the outcome of the Syrian participation in Annapolis.¹³⁵

With regard to the second aftermath, namely the practical failure of Annapolis, the Israeli Premier Ehud Olmert denied that his government and that of the USA had deceived Syria on the issue of the Golan. He further claimed that the Syrian issue was scheduled to be “casual,” and indicated that negotiations with Syria on the Golan “are still premature,” and that “Syria knows our conditions for this.”¹³⁶ This comment was hailed by the Israeli press, which came to the conclusion that “the trio-Bush, Olmert and Abu Mazin were the real winners, though to varying degrees” and that Syria “is the biggest loser.” Besides, the press reiterated, “nobody in Israel will seriously view the possibility of concluding a settlement within the specified timeframe, i.e., during 2008.”¹³⁷

ii. The Syrian Position towards the Inter-Palestinian Dispute

Historically, Syria had not seen eye to eye with the leadership of the PA on many issues, specifically on the latter’s administration of the domestic Palestinian affairs, and with regard to its conduct of the peace project. Hence, Syria was more inclined to accept the Palestinian opposition and to open the country to its activities, which has frequently clashed with the vision of Fatah and the PLO. Hence, following Gaza’s bloody incidents Syria’s position was initially rather cautious and hesitant, but it soon transferred in the second phase to call for national unity and to avoid escalation to the extent of total estrangement that serves nobody except Israel.¹³⁸ This position was basically different from an almost total Arab consensus, lead by the “moderate axis,” or some of its states, that supported the PA and its President Mahmud ‘Abbas.

Before these incidents, and in a meeting between President Bashar al-Assad and Khalid Mish‘al, the head of Hamas political bureau, Syria vividly demonstrated its support to Mecca Agreement.¹³⁹ However, side by side with this support, Syria exhibited special interest and treatment to both Hizbullah and Hamas. Thus, in his opening speech of the meetings of the central committee of the ruling Ba‘th Party, President Bashar al-Assad undertook the continuation of support to Hizbullah and Hamas.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, the president of the Syrian delegation withdrew from the meeting of the Arab foreign ministers convened in the Arab League’s headquarter to resolve the conflict between Fatah and Hamas, which was interpreted by some

observers as a Syrian opposition to the dominant pro-Abu Mazin tendency that focused on pressing Hamas to yield to the so-called “requirements of peace,” i.e., recognition of the conditions of the Quartet and of Israel.¹⁴¹

This stance was a continuation of a previous position taken by Youssef al- Ahmed, Syria’s ambassador to the Arab League and to Egypt. During a meeting of the Arab ministers of information, the ambassador objected to what he considered the disregard of the general secretariat of the Arab League to the “Palestinian legislative council,” which was dominated by Hamas.¹⁴²

Meanwhile, Walid al-Mu‘allem had demonstrated the Syrian position towards Gaza incidents and their repercussions by emphasizing that the priority should not be given to negotiations with Israel, but rather to the achievement of reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas. He, moreover, warned that the imposed siege on Gaza will lead to further instability.¹⁴³ Following president ‘Abbas’ declaration that dissolved Hamas’ government and formed that of Salam Fayyad, al- Mu‘allem declared, “Syria recognizes the legitimacy of President ‘Abbas and his legitimate right to dissolve the government, but at the same time ascertains the existence of a legitimately elected government and a legitimate parliament.”¹⁴⁴ Subsequently, Syrian Vice-President Farouq al-Shara‘, supported this position, and warned that what is going on is “unprecedented confusion of issues, particularly in Palestine.” He added, “The general interest requires that we support the Palestinian people, and to be with all the factions that express the aspirations of these determined people. We will not be with one side against the other; especially as such a behavior will be destructive.” Whoever stands with one party against the other “destroys the Palestinian cause, essentially there will be no peace if there is a dangerous schism in the Palestinian arena.”¹⁴⁵ By these and other declarations, Syria meant to warn against any bias towards the PA and its President Mahmud ‘Abbas against Hamas, a bias that has, in fact, dominated the policies of the Arab countries, particularly those of the so-called “moderate axis.”

iii. The Syrian Position towards Supporting the Palestinian People

Syria expressed its support to the Palestinian people through defending their rights in Arab and international forums, and practically by hosting hundreds of thousands of them in its territories. Besides, the leadership and headquarters of “the rejectionist organizations” and the Palestinian resistance are housed in Syria, which provoked constant American and Israeli accusations that it supports

“terrorism.” Terrorism is, in fact, the official American designation of all resistance and resistance movements, especially those of the Arabs.

Thus, it was only logical that Syria condemns the imposed Israeli siege, bombardment, infiltration and assassinations in GS. It, furthermore, demanded that a mini Arab summit be convened to discuss the catastrophic situation in GS, and asked, through contacts with the secretary-general of the Arab League, that the resolution of the Arab ministers of foreign affairs to end the siege on Gaza be activated.¹⁴⁶

iv. The Syrian Position on the Relations with Israel

The year 2007 was the most obscure year on the prospect of the achievement of a Syrian–Israeli peace deal, and on the possibility of war, which was not, anyhow, farfetched at any time. This obscurity was more Israeli than Syrian. For Israel had verbally given clear indications of its desire to resume the peace negotiations with Syria, but at the same time it practically committed acts of aggression and defiance that do not reflect any intentions for peace.

A study by the Israeli Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) sums up this Israeli position. It warns against the possibility of the outbreak of war between Israel and Syria, and indicates that the two countries confront a security dilemma that accelerates tension between them. It recommends that the Israeli policy makers manipulate between sending to Syria messages of deterrent actions and those of peace and calm, in order to prevent deterioration in the relations between the two countries that may lead to the outbreak of a sudden and unplanned war. The study advised Tel Aviv to maintain a dubious position with regard to its future intentions towards Damascus and never to give it a feeling of full comfort.¹⁴⁷

Though the general Israeli temperament was in favor of this dubious policy, it was more inclined towards weakening Syria and to dismantle its alliances in order to compel it to accept peace on Israeli terms. The institute’s memorandum, entitled “The Campaign to Weaken Hizbullah,” fixed its objective in the following: “The necessity of minimizing the threat that Hizbullah poses to the security of Israel and the stability in the region, through eroding its power and to transfer it into a marginal player that has no role in the regional alliances.” This should be undertaken by various means that start by damaging the party’s relation with both Iran and Syria, and extends to weakening its leadership, properties, abilities and funds through “a secret battle that targets its leaders in assassination operations,

particularly its secretary-general who plays the leading role in promoting the party's image through his charismatic character and superb organizational abilities." For the liquidation of Hassan Nasrallah "will decisively shaken the party and gives Israel a first class moral boost."¹⁴⁸ All this shows that Syria has become the prime target, to such an extent that some have felt that the question is no longer whether there will be a war or not, but in which month of 2008 will it take place. This is because Syria in its present shape constitutes the primary linkage of the axis of Iran-Syria-the Resistance, the axis of evil as the United States calls it.¹⁴⁹ During the last few months of 2007, Syria had become an American-Israeli target. The weakening of the close relations between Damascus and France, which was reflected in the accusations of the French President Nicolas Sarkozy and his American counterpart George W. Bush that Syria bears the full responsibility for the failure of the efforts to elect a new Lebanese president, was only one example of the evil intentions towards the country. However, an item of INSS above memorandum talked of the opportunities of changes in the relations between Syria and Hizbullah that may weaken the latter. The memorandum noted that a change in Syria's relations with Hizbullah may be achieved through one of the following scenarios: First, the collapse, or to cause the collapse, of the existing regime and the establishment of a new one that departs from the present policies towards Hizbullah by concluding a peace treaty with Israel; second, as part of a bundle of regional arrangements; third, through intensification of international pressure on Syria; and fourth to provoke a schism or crisis in the relations between Damascus and Tehran. However, the priority of the memorandum is given to the first scenario, which could not be achieved except through a surgical operation, of which war will certainly be the first phase. But another tendency in Israel, favored by some Arab states, argues the necessity of containing Syria by dismantling its relations with Iran, as this will achieve twofold objectives. First, to weaken of Syria to such an extent that it will be compelled to accept a peace deal on the Israeli terms; second, to erode its relations with Hizbullah, by implementing an Israeli project that revives or restores the "Syrian alternative" to the forefront of Israel's diplomacy.

Some Israeli newspapers quoted senior officials saying that an agreement with Syria is achievable without negotiations while the one with the Palestinians will not materialize in spite of the negotiations. Most of the betting focuses on Ehud Barak, the minister of defense, and the most, or one of the most, important

strategists who advocates the necessity of an agreement with Syria even at the expense of the Golan. It is reported that Barak have cultivated relations with some American and Canadian Jewish investors who believed that Syria provides the best opportunities for regional investment. Besides, the price for peace with Syria is much less painful for Israel and the Israelis than that with the Palestinians, as the latter requires that Israel surrenders the West Bank.¹⁵⁰

The American supported Israeli attack on an alleged Syrian nuclear site was nothing but an extension of this orientation¹⁵¹ which, according to some observers, aimed at “restoring Israel’s deterrent capability that had been lost in the 2006 war on Lebanon.”¹⁵² Being aware of this Israeli tendency, Syria’s reaction was, as usual in such circumstances, cautious and calm. In his condemnation of the act that violated Syrian sovereignty, Walid al-Mu‘allem emphasized that:

The penetration of the Israeli planes in Syrian territories come only hours after a verbal message that I received from the Israeli Premier Olmert through the European Union’s High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Javier Solana, to the effect that Israel will start reducing its forces in the occupied Golan Heights.

This double talk shows that Israel had communicated this message at a time in which it was actually preparing for the aggression.¹⁵³

However, by this calculated reaction, Syria hoped to attain two objectives, namely not to be dragged into a war that the country was not ready for, and to keep up the momentum of the numerous Israeli initiatives to open up dialogue or peace negotiations.¹⁵⁴ Some had even reported indirect Syrian–Israeli dialogue, as well as mediation between the two sides, of which the most prominent were the Turkish and Russian intercessions.¹⁵⁵

Within this frame, Syria’s reserved response and hesitation between the options of war and peace may be understood. Though the Vice-President Farouq al-Shara‘ had at one time casted doubt on the opportunities for peace with Israel by saying “There is no prospect for negotiations between Syria and Israel without a clear cut American consent,” and added, “Peace with Israel is linked to all that happens in the region.”¹⁵⁶ A few months later he reiterated, “We do not want war with Israel but we feel that Israel is ready for it.”¹⁵⁷ But Walid al-Mu‘allem was much more blunt in this respect by saying that Syria “is more than ready to resume peace negotiations with Israel without prior conditions from both parties,” and added,

“If the Israelis decide to resume negotiations, they will find a ready partner.” The Syrian keenness to attend Annapolis meeting had therefore further ascertained this Syrian orientation.¹⁵⁸

c. Jordan

With noticeable coordination with the United States and Israel on one side and Egypt on the other side, Jordan gave a clear priority to the peace process. However, this was in the order of things as Jordan and Egypt were the pioneers in concluding peace treaties with Israel, and have direct neighborhood with GS and the WB. There are, moreover, the pressures and responsibilities that press the two countries to strive to conclude a settlement along the Palestinian path, which is of direct national interest for both of them. Besides, the inter-Palestinian dispute constituted the second priority of the Jordanian government within the four issues under analysis.

i. Jordan and the Peace Project

The Jordanian concern for a Palestinian–Israeli settlement expressed itself along two paths. The first path is by encouraging negotiations between the two sides, and trying to remove obstacles on their way and providing an environment conducive to their success. The second path is by resuming deliberations on the notion of a Jordanian–Palestinian confederation, but indirectly and unofficially, across some Jordanian and Palestinian quarters to avoid violent reactions rejecting this drive.

1. With regard to the first path, Jordan strove to promote the peace process through direct efforts with both Israel and the USA, and through bilateral coordination with both Egypt and the president of the PA. Hence were trilateral and quadrilateral summits with the participation of Ehud Olmert, the Israeli premier. Besides, with authorization from the Riyadh Arab Summit and in coordination with Egypt, Jordan undertook noticeable efforts to reactivate the Arab peace initiative. Moreover, it promptly and enthusiastically accepted the call of the American president for the Annapolis meeting, and did its utmost best to coordinate the Arab positions within the platform of the Council of Arab Foreign Ministers, or bilaterally with Egypt.

King ‘Abdullah II of Jordan had expressed this tendency at an early time in an interview with the American Journalist of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) Charlie Rose. Within his criticism of the passive American role vis-à-vis the

settlement project, the King mentioned that Washington's hesitation to address the core concern in the region, i.e., the Palestinian issue, will lead to the regression of the American credibility.¹⁵⁹

Abdel Ilah Al Khatib and his Egyptian counterpart Ahmad Abu al-Ghait met in Cairo Tzipi Livni, a meeting that provoked differences between the two Arab ministers on one side and the Israeli minister on the other, because of the latter's rejection of the Arab peace initiative. In this meeting, the Jordanian minister emphasized the importance that Israel respects the territories under the PA, and to stop the policy of assassinations as well as all other forms of escalation against the Palestinians.¹⁶⁰

During the quadrilateral summit, which followed Gaza's bloody incidents, and in which the king of Jordan, President Mubarak, Mahmud 'Abbas and Ehud Olmert participated, King 'Abdullah II called for the initiation of political negotiations that should be based on the decisions of the international community and the principles of the Arab peace initiative. He emphasized the importance of fixing the agenda and timeframe for these negotiations that should lead to the establishment of the Palestinian state. The King added that the bloody developments in Gaza "do not serve the Palestinian people and their just cause."¹⁶¹

After the stumbling of the Arab peace initiative, the Jordanian focus shifted to Annapolis meeting. Hence, ahead of the meeting, King 'Abdullah II met President Hosni Mubarak in Alexandria to coordinate the Arab positions, which was a prerequisite for a possible positive outcome of the gathering.¹⁶² Prior to Annapolis, King 'Abdullah II also participated with President Mubarak and President Mahmud 'Abbas, in a trilateral summit in Sharm al-Sheikh that aimed at exploring ways and means for a coordinated Arab position. Moreover, the three leaders acquainted each other with the results of contacts that they had with some regional and international parties. According to the Egyptian presidential spokesman, the leaders were in full agreement on the issues discussed, and that the outcome of their deliberations opens the way for further optimism.¹⁶³

2. To pursue the second path of federation or confederation, the same method was followed, namely to explore common Arab understandings on the Palestinian rights that should be reconcilable with the Israeli interests. News circulated on meetings in the town of Jericho in the WB and the Jordanian town of Aqaba, to study the means of developing a successful Jordanian–Palestinian federation project.

Several prominent personalities were reportedly involved in these and other similar meetings. They included some of Fatah leaders like the PLO Executive Committee Secretary Yasir ‘Abd Rabbuh, Jibril Rajoub, the former Jordanian Prime Minister Abdel Salam al-Majali, at least 50 Palestinian public personalities–businessmen, university professors, journalists, etc., and over 50 prominent Jordanians.¹⁶⁴

Under the banner of talking directly with the leaders of the Israeli and Palestinian societies, some Jordanian quarters aired the notion of a federation between Jordan and the WB, which had reportedly attracted the attention of some Israeli leaders. Ehud Olmert sent a representative of the Kadima Party, Otniel Schneller, to study and be acquainted with the details of the project. It was also submitted to the Palestinian president, who expressed reservations on the proposal.¹⁶⁵

However, the notion does not appear to have matured, and it was not sufficiently and enthusiastically welcomed by both the Jordanians and the Palestinians. In a meeting with the ambassadors of the European Union, held in the house of the German ambassador in Amman, King ‘Abdullah II had himself reportedly said, “The concept of a Jordanian–Palestinian confederation or federation is not in our dictionary, and we will not accept to explore it at the present time,” adding, “Jordan may accept this project in future, but after the establishment of the independent Palestinian state, and on condition that it will then be fully accepted and endorsed by the Jordanian and Palestinian peoples.”¹⁶⁶

Subsequently, the Jordanian Government Spokesman Nasir Judah announced that the circulated reports of political approaches towards some Palestinian personalities to know their positions towards the confederation “do not by any means reflect the official Jordanian stand.”¹⁶⁷ In a further dialogue with the Jordanian *Alghad* newspaper, King ‘Abdullah II rejected the notion of a Jordanian–Palestinian confederation, known also as “responsibility sharing,” which he viewed as “a conspiracy against the Palestinian cause in which Jordan will not be involved,” adding, “Jordan has political, strategic and security interest in the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, and we reject the proposal of federation and confederation.”¹⁶⁸

ii. Jordan and the Inter-Palestinian Conflict

Jordan had exhibited noticeable attention to contain the bloody battles between the pro-Fatah and pro-Hamas elements, which were, however, linked to its calls of respect to Mecca Agreement, and the formation of a government of national unity.

King ‘Abdullah II had himself expressed these concerns in the two summits that he had with the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, in January–February 2007.¹⁶⁹

The direct factor for Jordan’s drive to stop the killings between Fatah and Hamas was its negative internal (security) and external impact on the country. In a meeting with a group of Jordanian dignitaries with Palestinian origin, in October 2006, King ‘Abdullah II voiced these dangers by saying, “Jordan can tolerate a war in Iraq or Lebanon for a very long period, but it can not afford a similar war in Palestine for more than one or two months.”¹⁷⁰

As expressed by both the Palace and the government, the repercussions of the regional conflicts have alarmingly increased the Iranian role in the region, with its serious sectarian Shi‘ite threat to Jordan especially from the neighboring Iraq and Lebanon. Moreover, the Iranian–Syrian alliance, and Iran’s relations with the Hamas and PIJ had represented another grave danger to the Jordanian national interests. Within its definition of national priorities and after the conclusion of Camp David accords and Wadi ‘Arbah Treaty of Peace between the State of Israel and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the Jordanian government started to pursue the policy of “political and social divorce” with the Jordanian and Palestinian Islamic movements, which constituted a heavy burden on the country’s agenda that are based on the peace project.¹⁷¹ Thus, within this understanding, Jordan negatively views any Palestinian military confrontation that ends with the supremacy of Hamas. For these very reasons, Jordan was keen to avoid military confrontation between Fatah and Hamas in order not to avoid any opportunity for the latter to achieve a military victory against the PA. The same reasons were also behind the Jordanian support to the PA and its President Mahmud ‘Abbas after the Gaza events, which were viewed as a threat to the country’s national and regional interests.

Jordan focused on two objectives, namely to stop the killing and to support and protect the PA and its President Mahmud ‘Abbas. King ‘Abdullah II had repeatedly stressed this position in many regional forums, be it bilateral meetings with the Egyptian or Palestinian presidents, trio Jordanian–Egyptian–Palestinian summits or in the Sharm al-Sheikh’s quadrilateral summit, in which Ehud Olmert participated, that was especially called to support the PA and resume the Palestinian–Israeli negotiations.



Immediately after the bloody fighting in GS, King ‘Abdullah II called the Palestinian president to take all steps to stop the shedding of the Palestinian blood, end the chaos and to pursue the language of dialogue; besides calling for the protection of the PA and to prevent the collapse of its institutions.¹⁷² The same message was voiced by the Jordanian Premier Ma‘rouf al-Bakhit in a meeting that he had with the Palestinian Deputy Prime Minister ‘Azzam al-Ahmad; where he emphasized Jordan’s categorical rejection of the fighting, support to the Palestinian national legitimacy represented by the PLO, and respect to the constitutional institutions of the PA.¹⁷³

After Hamas’ imposition of its total control on GS, Jordan started to complain of Iranian intervention. The Jordanian premier claimed that the escalation in GS is artificial and had been engineered by some regional parties to divert attention from other much important regional issues.¹⁷⁴ He also talked of an agreement between Hamas and Iran by which the latter will train and supply arms to some elements of the former.¹⁷⁵ But what had been later revealed by the American Journalist David Rose in the American *Vanity Fair* magazine contradicts this version. For he mentioned that the Jordanian government was a partner of a coup plot, led by Muhammad Dahlan, to topple the government of Hamas,¹⁷⁶ and that what Hamas did was a preemptive strike that led to the failure of this conspiracy.

Jordan was among the first parties who supported the resolution of the Palestinian President Mahmud ‘Abbas that deposed the government of Hamas under Isma‘il Haniyyah and formed the new government of Salam Fayyad. This support was conveyed in a message of congratulations to the new government of Premier Ma‘rouf al-Bakhit.¹⁷⁷

In the quadrilateral summit of Sharm al-Sheikh, in which Ehud Olmert participated, Jordan’s position was in line with that of the Egyptians and Israelis in supporting the PA at the expense of Hamas.¹⁷⁸ In his address before this summit, King ‘Abdullah II recorded that “the late developments in Gaza would not serve the Palestinian people and their just cause.” He emphasized the necessity of “Jordan’s support to the Palestinian legitimacy, and that the international community and Israel should deal with Gaza Strip as an integral part of the Palestinian territories under the authority of the Palestinian Authority.”¹⁷⁹

iii. Jordan and the Support of the Palestinian People

Jordan was keen to exhibit sympathy with the Palestinian people of GS during the Israeli aggression and crimes against the GS during the period from late 2007 and throughout January 2008. This was particularly so during what became known as the “crossings’ crisis” when Israel stopped the electricity supply and prevented the passage of trucks across the crossings, which were, in fact, closed. King ‘Abdullah II approached President Hosni Mubarak, and the two agreed to intensify their joint effort with Israel and the international community to lift the siege on Gaza. According to a communiqué issued by the Jordanian palace, King ‘Abdullah II “considered the continuation of the Israeli aggression and its blockade of Gaza to be unsatisfactory.” Moreover, the King contacted the Palestinian President Mahmud ‘Abbas to once more emphasize Jordan’s rejection and condemnation of the aggression and the collective punishment that Israel imposed on GS.¹⁸⁰

Jordan’s reaction was not limited to condemnation and intercession with Israel to lift the siege, but it extended to include 16 trucks of food and medical supplies that it sent to GS. However, a controversy erupted over the seizure by Hamas’ (deposed) government of aid sent to the Palestinian Red Crescent. In defense of this step, Ziad Zaza, the minister of social affairs of the deposed government, said in a press conference that the Palestinian Red Crescent used to steal the aid to secretly distribute it to the security forces. In this respect, he said that throughout the past years aid had “reached the Red Crescent, which in turn, handed it to the security forces or the provisional governors who, on their part, gave it to a specific organization and specific individuals. It never reached the Palestinian people, not even once.”¹⁸¹

iv. Jordan, Normalization and Relations with Israel

Neither the normalized relations, nor the relations between Jordan and Israel, had witnessed drastic changes towards progress or regression, but they remained within the set limits of living together and reciprocating with each other. However, Jordan made use of this relationship to play a major role with the Israeli authorities to support the PA under the Presidency of Mahmud ‘Abbas, and its tendency of negotiations with the Israeli government, and to reduce the Israeli restrictions and attacks against the Palestinian people, be them in GS or the WB, but particularly in and around *al-Aqsa* Mosque.



In response to the attacks of Jewish extremists against the sacred mosque, the Jordanian government contacted the Israeli authorities to expel these Israeli extremists from the courtyard of *al-Aqsa*, and, on its part, it intensified the security of the mosque by increasing the numbers of the Jordanian security guards.¹⁸²

Jordan refused the Israeli decision which regarded GS as a “hostile entity” on the grounds that it “does not help to create the required conducive environment to effect the desired progress in the peace process.” The Jordanian Government Spokesman Nasir Judah called for the abrogation of this decision, and to adhere to international law in all matters related to the status of GS and its inhabitants.¹⁸³

d. Lebanon

Though the Lebanese front was the most important and active Arab front in the confrontation with Israel, the country of Lebanon was consumed during the year 2007 by its internal crisis. The Lebanese preoccupation had intensified with the eruption of the crisis of the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp, which provoked many questions on the future of the Palestinians and their camps in Lebanon: their civil rights, the complicated issue of disarming them and the nationalization issue.

Like Iraq that has been engaged in its internal catastrophe, Lebanon has been preoccupied with its internal conflicts. This raises the important question of why and who is behind these disputes in the Arab world. Are they within the American plan to re-divide into sectarian and ethnic states what had earlier been divided into crippled nation-states? That division obstructed the realization of the desired Arab world development project? Or have these ethnic and sectarian divisions been motivated only by the desire to distract and to make the limited statehood concerns supersede the overall Arab national issues?

However, Lebanon reacted in a limited manner to some of the crucial developments that took place in the Palestinian arena during the year 2007. Most of the Lebanese leadership and political groups had welcomed then Mecca Agreement after it was signed in February 2007. The Lebanese President Émile Lahoud saw in it a positive development that stops the shedding of the Palestinian blood and nib the civil war in the bud. He, furthermore, viewed the option for dialogue as the best means to abort the Israeli conspiracy, and concluded that the betting on national unity in Palestine, as well as in Lebanon, should be stronger than all other bettings.¹⁸⁴ Fu’ad al-Sanyurah, the Lebanese premier, contacted King

‘Abdullah Bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz and his foreign minister Sa‘ud al-Faisal to thank them for the pioneering role of the Kingdom in achieving this agreement between the Palestinians.¹⁸⁵

Though preoccupied with the crisis of Nahr al-Bared (May 2007), Lebanon exhibited concern on the developments of the Palestinian issue, or, to be exact, some aspects of it. Though Lebanon was not actively engaged in the June 2007 Gaza conflicts between Hamas and Fatah, the Lebanese government rejected the American decision to increase its aid to Israel, which, in its view, will aggravate the Arab and Lebanese frustration.¹⁸⁶ On the Israeli tightening of their siege of Gaza, and at the peak of the “crossings’ crisis,” the Lebanese Premier Fu‘ad al-Sanyurah called European Union’s High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Javier Solana to convey to him the condemnation of his government of the Israeli acts against the Palestinians, and to demand that the EU interferes to stop these atrocities.¹⁸⁷

The Catastrophe of Nahr al-Bared

The formation on 27/11/2006 of the organization Fatah al-Islam, which seceded from Fatah al-Intifadah, and its control of the latter’s basis in the Nahr al-Bared constituted a new phase for the Palestinian refugees in this camp. Apparently the organization was compelled to announce itself earlier than scheduled, because a group of its individuals in al-Beddawi refugee camp was identified and then arrested, by the security force, one day before the announcement, and after that was handed over to the Lebanese authorities.

Those who seceded from Fatah al-Intifadah were lead by Shakir al-‘Abssi, and estimated to be about 80 individuals.¹⁸⁸ By the beginning of the battle in the refugee camp in May 2007, some Lebanese security sources estimated the number of Fatah al-Islam fighters as 150, while a leader of the organization, known as Abu Hurayrah, gave their number as 500.¹⁸⁹ Apparently this Islamic and Jihadist oriented organization attracted some locals as well as a group of Islamists from different Arab and Muslim countries.

The crisis of Nahr al-Bared started with the accusations of the Lebanese authorities to a group of members of Fatah al-Islam for allegedly attacking on 19/5/2007 a branch of BankMed in the district of al-Kourah, north Lebanon. Hence the internal security forces penetrated a flat that belonged to the organization in the city of Tripoli. In retaliation, a group of Fatah al-Islam

fighters attacked the barricades of the Lebanese army on the two exits of Nahr al-Bared camp, and killed 23 soldiers.¹⁹⁰ Concurrently, a military patrol in the district of al-Qalamoun, south of Tripoli, was subjected to an armed attack by some elements of Fatah al-Islam.

Using heavy artillery and machine guns, the Lebanese army started in the morning of 20/5/2007 bombarding Nahr al-Bared refugee camp, and asked the fighters of Fatah al-Islam to surrender, but they refused and fought a bitter and bloody battle that continued for three days. The outcome was the killing of 27 civilians and 30 soldiers of the Lebanese army. Through some intermediaries a truce was declared during which thousands of the inhabitants of the refugee camp migrated under difficult humanitarian conditions to other areas.¹⁹¹ Meanwhile, the Lebanese army completed its reinforcements around the camp. It is worth mentioning here that the ammunitions of the army had dried out during the first few days, which compelled the United States and some Arab countries to reinforce it with supplies of ammunition and new arms.¹⁹²

The withdrawal of the civilians from the refugee camp gave the army a much needed opportunity to intensify its attacks and to tighten the grip on the besieged fighters, using bombs and heavy artillery that caused almost total destruction of the camp. Meanwhile, commenting on the departure of many Palestinians from the camp, the Lebanese Premier Fu'ad al-Sanyurah said, "Their absence is temporary, and their return is certain. We guarantee to rebuild what had been destroyed."¹⁹³

The battle between Fatah al-Islam and the Lebanese army ended after an attempt by some elements of the organization to flee from the camp on 2/9/2007. Thus, after four months of fighting, the Lebanese minister of defense announced the death of 222 of Fatah al-Islam fighters and the arrest of 202, while the army's casualties were 163 dead and 400–500 wounded, in addition to 33 civilians dead.¹⁹⁴ A large part of the camp was destroyed and about 40 thousands of its Palestinian refugees were compelled to migrate. The cost of rehabilitation of the camp plus providing food and other supplies was estimated as \$382.5 million.¹⁹⁵

As is the case in other aspects of Lebanese life, the battle of Nahr al-Bared was politicized. Hizbullah viewed the attacks on the army, the Lebanese civilians and the Palestinians in the camp of Nahr al-Bared as a red line, and demanded that the crisis be dealt within "a political, security and judicial manner that maintains the integrity of the army but does not lead to a new camps' war."¹⁹⁶ Conversely,

General Michel Aoun emphasized that the army should not negotiate with “Fatah al-Islam’s terrorists, but rather arrest them and bring them to Justice,”¹⁹⁷ and the Lebanese government “vowed to uproot this terrorist gang, and never negotiate with it under any circumstances.”¹⁹⁸ Immediately after the army’s control of the camp, the Lebanese Premier Fu’ad al-Sanyurah emphasized that it will be “under the sole authority of the Lebanese state.”¹⁹⁹ Meanwhile Amine Gemayel, the leader of Lebanese Kataeb Party, called for the end of self-security, the implementation of the experiment of Nahr al-Bared elsewhere, and to impose the authority of the Lebanese state on all the Palestinian camps.²⁰⁰

Though the Palestinian factions had widely disagreed on the best solution of the problem of Fatah al-Islam, the Islamic forces and the national factions condemned Fatah al-Islam’s targeting of the Lebanese army. However, at the same time, Hamas condemned the security solution of the problem, and demanded that it must be basically political and humanitarian in order to avoid further hardship to the Lebanese and the Palestinians, and to maintain the image and authority of the Lebanese army.²⁰¹ Meanwhile, Sultan Abu al-‘Aynayn announced that his organization was ready to crush Fatah al-Islam. He added that “this quagmire of evil should be surgically removed; we do not want the Palestinian refugee camps to be the gateway to the Lebanese war.”²⁰²

The catastrophe of Nahr al-Bared had inflicted tremendous hardship on the innocent Palestinian refugees, who should not be held responsible for the actions of a group that entered Lebanon with the knowledge of its government. Even after the end of the war, this misery continued in various forms, either because of forced migration, destruction of property and means of livelihood, or harsh security measures. Besides was the growing hostility towards the refugees that was instigated by some quarters while the real reasons for the crisis were ignored.

2. The Gulf States and the Arabian Peninsula

The overall intensive reactions of the Gulf States and the Arabian peninsula (the states of GCC plus Yemen) towards the Palestinian issue during the year 2007 was glaringly noticeable, and came next to that of the confrontational states. The numerous interactions of the KSA to the developments of the issue during this year had even brought it on par with the confrontational states. This may be because the Kingdom happened to be the rotating president of the Arab summit during the year, or because of its increasing role at the national and regional levels. Thus,



when discussing below the positions of the Gulf States and the Arabian Peninsula, we will distinguish between the Saudi position, the Yemeni position and the stand of the other five members of GCC.

a. Saudi Arabia

The Saudi performance was characterized by a great deal of distinction in its interaction with the Palestinian issue, and that in two main areas: the first is the Arabic forceful intervention in the inter-Palestinian conflict which manifested itself in the reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas movements, known as the Mecca Agreement; second, the peace process which was endorsed by the Saudi call for the reactivation of the Arab peace initiative, and by supporting the idea of convening an international conference under an American sponsorship, although it did not announce its participation until the last few moments, in order to enhance the conditions of the conference, which was known later as the Annapolis meeting. In addition, the Saudi Kingdom sought to ease the Israeli siege of the GS.

i. The Saudi Position towards the Inter-Palestinian Conflict

The Arab peace initiative, which had been re-ascertained in subsequent Arab summits of which the last was the Riyadh Summit of March 2007, constituted the solid basis of the Saudi policy towards the Palestinian issue in general and the comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace in particular. For, in the view of the Kingdom, such peace could not be achieved without reciprocal undertakings between Israel and the Arabs.

This vision was formulated on the inherent assumption, which was thus far taken for granted, of an undisputed and legitimate united Palestinian leadership that is accepted by the Palestinians and supported by the Arabs and the region at large. But this assumption was exposed after the victory of Hamas in the legislative elections to the danger of an all around collapse. For the victory had drastically changed the thus far fundamentals of the Palestinian order that was based on Oslo treaties and a dominant political force, i.e., Fatah and its political, military and security institutions, which lead this order that believed in the fundamentals of Oslo and adhered to the Arab peace initiative. Subsequently, the Palestinian destiny largely depended on the open dispute between Fatah and Hamas, be it within or outside the political institutions formulated by Oslo. Moreover, Hamas control of Gaza constituted a quality development by all standards.

The Palestinian bloody fighting was a shock to the Palestinians themselves and to the Arabs, particularly those who were directly concerned with the Palestinian issue, amongst whom was the KSA. For they saw in the early 2007 developments in the Palestinian arena considerable harm not only to the Palestinian cause, but to the totality of the Arab drive to strike an Arab–Israeli peace deal.²⁰³

To supersede this gloomy Palestinian status, the Saudi King ‘Abdullah Bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz took advantage of his Kingdom’s huge moral and regional influence to summon the leaderships of Fatah and Hamas to a meeting in Mecca. The objective was to find an exit that ends the fighting, restore the solidarity of the Palestinian order, and helps to overcome the siege and the international isolation that was lead by the United States against Hamas government.

There are other interpretations of the underlying factors for this Saudi drive to reconcile Fatah and Hamas, amongst which was the increasing concern of the rising influence of Iran in the Arab world, particularly Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine.²⁰⁴

However, the direct Saudi objectives behind this move were twofold. First, to distant Hamas from the Iranian–Syrian axis, and, secondly, to maintain calm in the occupied territories, which was expected to help in the success of the American strive to push forward the Israeli–Palestinian negotiations, and to provide conducive environment for the forthcoming Riyadh Summit, scheduled to convene in less than two months.²⁰⁵ It is worth mentioning here that Saudi Arabia was favored and accepted by both Fatah and Hamas, and King ‘Abdullah Bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz was known for his strong pro-Palestine sentiments, and keenness to stop the shedding of the Palestinian blood.

Whatever the interpretations may be, Mecca Agreement achieved important steps towards the Palestinian unity, and to bypass the violent differences between Fatah and Hamas. More important, it took the Palestinian issue away from the Israeli–American betting, particularly the containment of Hamas and its expulsion from the political equation, while, concurrently, strongly supporting the PA, and strengthening it militarily, materially and morally.

Mecca Agreement provoked American–Israeli anger against President Mahmud ‘Abbas, whom Tzipi Livni had dared to accuse of deceiving Israel. Meanwhile Robert Satloff, the executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, argued that the Mecca Agreement had posed such formidable and dangerous predicaments to the USA that it should reconsider its pledges to support Mahmud

‘Abbas, freeze the allocated aid and stop the efforts to find a political horizon for the Israeli–Palestinian negotiations.²⁰⁶ This may have been behind Condoleezza Rice’s designation of Mecca Agreement as “an obstacle to the peace process.”²⁰⁷

This bitter American criticism coupled with the American–Israeli plot, led by Muhammad Dahlan, to topple the Palestinian government of national unity and to impose a new Palestinian political reality that reconciles with the wishes of America and Israel, contradicts the attempts of some quarters to hold Syria responsible for the failure of Mecca Agreement.²⁰⁸ Obviously, since its signature, the Mecca Agreement was targeted by the Americans and the Israelis. However, the Saudi–Syrian differences over Lebanon may have somehow been behind this failure. In any case, these developments seem to have negatively affected the Saudi position towards the bloody incidents of June 2007 between Fatah and Hamas, which had, anyhow, marked the formal death of Mecca Agreement, with all its inherent insult to the Saudi role.²⁰⁹

Following the eruption of Gaza’s bloody incidents and their consequential repercussions, i.e., the collapse of the national unity government and the formation of an emergency government that was transferred into a caretaker government, the Saudi government adopted what some have called “the diplomacy of positive silence.”²¹⁰ However, the Saudi reaction to these developments was violent and angry. For Sa‘ud al-Faisal had declared that after the failure of Mecca Agreement, the Kingdom will never ever mediate alone between the Palestinians. In a meeting in Paris with the editors of the Saudi newspapers, he stressed the necessity of conducting elections to democratically determine the Palestinian legitimacy, and consequently to conclusively settle the current differences between the Palestinians. Al-Faisal drew attention to the declaration of the Council of Arab Foreign Ministers, which asked the Palestinians to return to the agreement in order to end the bloody fighting between them, and added, “If they [Fatah and Hamas] opt for divorce, this is their business.” Al-Faisal continued to say:

The kingdom undertook its role at that time, and will never try again. Its work will be via the Arab League and in partnership with the Arab states. The responsibility should be shouldered by the Palestinians, who reached to the edge of the abyss; either they supersede their differences or totally fall in it... You can not be royal more than the King, if the Palestinians concluded an agreement in front of Gods House (Mecca), and staunchly vowed to respect it, but retracted from it, there is nothing that the Kingdom can do.²¹¹

The Saudi frustration by the Palestinian overthrow of Mecca Agreement did not only lead to the end of their unilateral mediation between Fatah and Hamas and the return to collective Arab diplomacy, but was also instrumental in the Saudi indifference to Gaza bloody events. During a meeting of the Council of Arab Foreign Ministers, Saudi Arabia was evidently keen to have a sort of a balanced position between Fatah and Hamas. Though it was inclined towards Fatah and the Palestinian President Mahmud ‘Abbas, this preference was not, in the words of Reuters news agency, “as strong as that of Egypt and Jordan.”²¹²

The Saudi Kingdom supported the emergency government formed by President ‘Abbas, but it did not accept the exclusion of Hamas. Sa‘ud al-Faisal explained this position by saying:

The Palestinian president is elected, and the formation of the previous government was his decision, thus he has the right to change this government. But the exclusion of Hamas is a domestic Palestinian concern that should be settled by the Palestinian constitutional institutions such as the parliament and the PLO. Without this there should be elections to conclusively determine the legitimacy in a democratic manner.²¹³

However, the Saudi government hoped that the two parties would once more abide by Mecca Agreement, as spelled out by Sa‘ud al-Faisal in the following words, “It is much better for our Palestinian brothers to return to the agreement of the blessed Mecca, which was concluded last February, and to religiously implement its articles.”²¹⁴

This position was once more stressed after Annapolis meeting, the renewal of the inter-Palestinian differences and the reversion of the Israelis to all kinds of brutal oppression and suppression against the Palestinian people in GS. Jointly with Egypt, the Kingdom tried to renew dialogue between Fatah and Hamas, but this attempt was aborted because of the intransigent position of the Palestinian President Mahmud ‘Abbas, notwithstanding the miserable conditions of the Palestinian people, and the agreement of Hamas to conduct this dialogue, as demonstrated by Khalid Mish‘al’s visit to both Riyadh and Cairo for this very purpose.²¹⁵

ii. The Saudi Stand towards the Peace Process

The KSA exhibited noticeable attention to activate the peace process, which was reflected in a number of activities. First, the reactivation of its Arab peace

initiative through a recommendation issued by the March 2007 Riyadh Arab Summit. Second, support to the invitation of the American president to convene an international peace conference in the autumn of 2007, though the Kingdom had soon made some reservations on its decision of participation because of the stumbling of the Palestinian–Israeli deliberations on the agenda of this conference, which, however, was eventually held under the nomenclature “Annapolis meeting.” The final Saudi decision on the issue of participation was linked to some conditions related to the seriousness of the conference, and its adherence to the Arab initiative and the international legitimacy.

With regard to the activation of the Arab peace initiative, there were repeated news of American–Israeli demands to introduce some changes on the text of the initiative, particularly on the right of return, and that Prince Bandar bin Sultan had reportedly submitted proposals in this respect.²¹⁶ But the categorical denial of the Saudi foreign minister, the recommendations of the Riyadh Summit, the Saudi pursuit of the activation of the initiative through the special ministerial committee formed by the summit for this purpose and the Saudi comments on the Israeli rejection of the initiative had all decisively negated these rumors of amendment. Just before the announcement of the Israeli negative position towards the initiative, Sa‘ud al-Faisal said, “If Israel rejected the initiative, this means that it does not want peace, opted to leave everything to destiny, and that they [the Israelis] place their future not on the peace makers but on the war lords.”²¹⁷ Two days later, al-Faisal warned the Israelis of neglecting what he called “the peaceful–pragmatic–logical Arabism,” which will expose “Israel to unprecedented serious dangers.”²¹⁸ These comments were tantamount to a “requiem” of the project known as “activation of the Arab peace initiative,” which Saudi Arabia enthusiastically supported just before the Riyadh Summit, and had won considerable attention in Arab political and media quarters.

Saudi Arabia welcomed the address of the American president, in which he introduced the notion of the autumn conference because it saw in it some positive elements, including his call to end the occupation and form a viable Palestinian state. A declaration by a Saudi official recorded, “We hope that this will be within the framework of serious international effort that settles the core issues of the conflict in a balanced, responsible and just manner, which leads to the dismantling of the settlements not just to stop the settlement activities in future.”²¹⁹ In the same day, King ‘Abdullah Bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz contacted the American President George W. Bush to

convey the same message, and to impress upon the president the absolute necessity that the Palestinian people have their national rights and united territories.²²⁰ After a meeting with Condoleezza Rice in Jeddah, Sa'ud al-Faisal said that he listened to a detailed explanation from her on the particulars of Bush's initiative, and that his country is keen to attend the Autumn Peace Conference.²²¹

On realizing the Israeli procrastination in responding to the demand of a clear cut agenda to the conference, Sa'ud al-Faisal asked Israel to "demonstrate seriousness" before the conference, and casted doubt on the participation of his country.²²² Few days earlier, al-Faisal opined that the conference may not succeed unless and until it bases itself on the quest for a comprehensive solution, and that Israel demonstrates seriousness to resolve the conflict through strict adherence to some core items related to the 1967 frontiers, Jerusalem, and the return of the refugees. He added, "If the meeting does not discuss these issues, I doubt the Kingdom's participation."²²³

However, subsequently the Kingdom changed its hesitant position and accepted participation. Sa'ud al-Faisal justified this retreat from the previous conditional stand by saying that his country accepted participation in Annapolis conference because of its "keenness to support the Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese positions, and after the Arab countries had felt that the conference will seriously address the core issues of the Arab-Israeli conflict." He added that the Arab decision of participation is based on some basic elements of which the most important is comprehensiveness in dealing with the conflict in the Middle East along all its paths, and concentration on the fundamental issues within the principles and decisions of the international community, the Road Map and the Arab peace initiative. He further recorded, "We view the conference as a pivotal station in the history of the Middle East conflict."²²⁴ Earlier, when declaring the Saudi acceptance of participation in the conference, al-Faisal explained the background of this decision by saying, "I am not concealing any secrets on the Saudi stand, we were hesitant until today, had we not have the Arab consensus that we see today, we would not have decided to go."²²⁵ Generally, the Israelis and the Americans welcomed the Saudi decision, and Tzipi Livni said that "the Arab participation guarantees the success of the conference."

iii. The Saudi Position towards Supporting the Palestinians

Saudi Arabia is considered one of the major Arab countries that support the Palestinian people at both the official and popular levels. But this support is



governed by the restrictions resulting from the Kingdom's political position towards the Palestinian issue and its regional and international commitments. Like other states, the Kingdom abided by the international restrictions imposed against the Palestinian government, be it the government of national unity, the deposed Hamas government or that of the PA. Hence, the Saudi funding remained at specified limits and at the level of the Arab League. It totaled \$127.7 million in 2007 compared to \$83.7 million in 2006.

At one of the most critical moments for the Palestinians, i.e., after Gaza's bloody confrontations, Saudi Arabia called the international community to reconsider its decision of suspending aid to the Palestinian people, and declared its undertaken to "remove the hardship" on them under these critical circumstances that the Palestinian issue had experienced.²²⁶ When the Israeli authorities renewed, after Annapolis conference, their crimes by extending the building of the settlements in Jerusalem, the Kingdom condemned this act that "contradicts the fundamentals and principles of Annapolis conference." In a meeting with Tony Blair, the representative of the Quartet, the Saudi foreign minister ascertained his country's firm stands against what he described "the colonial practices that will void the peace process from its substance, and wrecks the sincere international efforts to initiate serious negotiations between the concerned parties." He also declared his country's participation in the meeting of the donor countries to the Palestinians, scheduled on 17/12/2007, in Paris.²²⁷

In response to Israel's intensified suppression of the Palestinian people in GS and its tightening of the siege on the GS, the Saudi cabinet issued a declaration that expressed the Kingdom's "extreme concern" for the Israeli violations and policy of collective punishment, and added that Saudi Arabia will start to "meet the living needs of the Palestinian people," and contact Tony Blair, the representative of the Quartet, to ask that his committee meets its responsibilities and obligations.²²⁸ After two weeks, the Saudi council of ministers renewed "its condemnation and denunciation of the continued Israeli crimes against the Palestinian people," and firmly demanded that the international community takes a firm action against what is happening in Palestine.²²⁹

b. Yemen

Yemen had given noticeable attention to the peace process through supporting the Arab peace initiative, submitting its own initiative to contain the inter-Palestinian conflict and rejecting the proposal of sending international

forces to the WB and GS. The Yemeni President ‘Ali ‘Abdullah Saleh urged the international community, particularly the United States and the permanent member states of the security council, to press Israel to accept the Arab peace initiative, which, in his words, “represents the minimum to achieve the just and permanent peace.”²³⁰ Moreover, the Yemeni president emphasized the importance of abiding by the decisions of the previous Arab summits, and to work for the success of the forthcoming Riyadh Summit, which should come out with resolutions that satisfy the aspirations of the Nation.²³¹

On the eruption of the bloody conflict in GS, the Yemeni president refused the idea of sending international forces to the WB and GS, as, in his words, “The presence of international forces under the prevailing occupation does not tally with the facts of the Palestinian reality and the interests of the Palestinian people.”²³² Meanwhile, the president submitted an alternative initiative to bridge the Palestinian schism that concentrated on the resumption of dialogue between the two movements on the basis of the 2005 Cairo and the 2007 Mecca Agreements. This proposed dialogue should lead to the bypassing of the differences, unity of the Palestinian people and the national authority, emphasis on the Palestinian legitimacy, respect of the Palestinian law, rebuilding of the security forces on national and professional bases, and national reconciliation to establish an able government of national unity. The initiative also proposed the formation of an Arab committee to supervise the implementation of Mecca and Cairo Agreements.²³³

Yemen had been particularly concerned to end the sufferings of the Palestinians resulting from the Israeli siege. However, its proposal for an Arab summit to address this and other concerns was not sufficiently responded to; hence it was reduced to a mere meeting of the Council of Arab Foreign Ministers.

c. Other Gulf States

The focus of this part of the study is on the other five states of the Gulf’s council, as the position of its sixth member, the KSA, had been elaborately addressed above. However, as expected, the collective position of the Council reflects the positions of its six members, including KSA.

The GCC and its six states had distinguished positions on the peace process, the inter-Palestinian conflict, and on the issue of supporting the endurance of the Palestinian people. For it had patronized at an early stage the call for reactivating the Arab peace initiative, and supported the proposal of the American president to

convene the peace conference, and rallied for Arab participation in it. Abdulrahman Bin Hamad al-Attiyah, the secretary-general of GCC, considered the formation by Rabat Summit of the Arab committee to be another evidence of the Arab seriousness to strive towards a comprehensive and just peace. In this respect he recorded, “After the formation of this committee, the Arabs had placed Israel in a real test; either it declares its readiness and drive to achieve peace in accordance with the principles of the Arab initiative, or pursue the policy of procrastination, stalling and marginalizing the Arab peace initiative.”²³⁴

The GCC patronized the call for the establishment of the independent Palestinian state. Addressing a reception organized by Christian Poncelet, the president of the French Senate, in honor of the Arab ambassadors, the Qatari Ambassador Mohamad Jiham al-Kawari said on behalf of his colleagues that reform in the Middle East should be based on the right of the Palestinian people to have, side by side with the state of Israel, their own state with Jerusalem as its capital, which will effectively guarantee the security of both Israel and the Palestinians. In his words, “The just and comprehensive solution of the Palestinian issue is the only basis for security and stability; it is the only means for the recognition of Israel by all the states in the region.”²³⁵

Immediately after the declaration of the US president of his proposal of a peace conference in autumn, the Secretariat General of the GCC expressed its hope that this call constitutes a new phase that seriously deals with the core cause of the chronic Arab-Israeli conflict. He emphasized the importance that the US plays a fair and balanced role to end the 1967 Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, and to establish an independent, connected and viable Palestinian state.²³⁶

Meanwhile, the UAE took the lead to congratulate the US President George W. Bush for his initiative to call for an international peace conference. Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the head of the state, recorded that the initiative “is on the right track.”²³⁷ In its meeting of 1/9/2007, the ministerial council of GCC expressed its support to the proposal of the American president to convene the international conference, and emphasized the position of the Council’s states that called for the achievement of comprehensive and just peace, and to end the Arab-Israeli conflict in line with the Arab peace initiative.²³⁸

With regard to the inter-Palestinian conflict, the GCC rejected the bloody confrontation in GS, but was biased toward the PA. The Gulf summit of 15/5/2007

called the Palestinian factions to abide by Mecca Agreement, and asked that the trouble makers be held accountable.²³⁹ Moreover, the Bahraini Council of Ministers expressed its support to the Palestinian legitimacy represented by Mahmud ‘Abbas, the president of the PA, and welcomed the formation of the caretaker Palestinian government.²⁴⁰

Subsequently, the council of the ministers of foreign affairs of the GCC demanded that GS should return to what it had been before the supremacy of Hamas. In its 103rd session, the council called all the Palestinian partners to return to the negotiation table to resolve their differences, restore the conditions in GS to what they had been before the bloody events, respect all the legitimate institutions, including the elected PLC, and unite to maintain the rights of the Palestinians.²⁴¹ On 1/9/2007, the GCC had once more emphasized the importance of cultivating a suitable environment for uniting the Palestinian front, to abide by Mecca Agreement that prohibits the shedding of the Palestinian blood, reject dissension and work for the unity of the Palestinian brothers.²⁴²

The GCC patronized the call for lifting the siege on the Palestinian people, and to support the Palestinian government of national unity. In its 102nd session, the council condemned the repeated and aggressive Israeli practices,²⁴³ and Kuwait had even went further by establishing a Kuwaiti office in Ramallah, and, as a gesture of support to the Palestinian people, took steps to reopen the Palestinian embassy in Kuwait.²⁴⁴

The GCC support to the besieged Palestinians had, however, remained within these limits, as its states were bound to abide by some restrictions, and to submit to international pressures. This was clearly reflected in the GCC position towards the “crossings’ crisis” that had erupted in January 2008. For all the Gulf States, like other Arab states, had to submit to the so-called “international pressure,” thus they were virtually compelled not to supersede the crossings’ treaty of 2005, which placed the crossings under Israeli control and sovereignty.

However, no concentrated steps were taken towards normalization with Israel; on the contrary, its wave had faded just like the peace process. While Qatar dared to break the siege, and, according to Israeli sources, granted Hamas \$50 million,²⁴⁵ Kuwait enacted a law that prohibited dealing with the Israelis, and imposed severe penalties on its violators.²⁴⁶ In a firm position, Sheikh Ahmad al-Fahad al-Sabah, minister of National Security, emphasized that Kuwait will be “the last to normalize with Israel,”

and said in his opening speech on the occasion of the festival “*Al-Aqsa Calls Us*,” “Occupation of land legalizes the Jihad.” He added that the destruction of *al-Aqsa* Mosque is not simply the demolition of a building, as the site “has a distinguished position in our religion that we will abide by and die for.”²⁴⁷ Meanwhile, within this increasing tendency of rejecting relations with Israel, there was a call in Bahrain to reopen the Arab Boycott of Israel Office.²⁴⁸

In line with this position, the Kuwaiti embassy in Beirut issued a communiqué that rejected what Dr. Sami al-Faraj, the head of the Kuwait Center for Strategic Studies, had reportedly said that Kuwait will protect itself against the Iranian nuclear threat by placing itself under the Israeli nuclear umbrella. The embassy communiqué ascertained that this individual, i.e., Dr. al-Faraj, “does not represent the government of the state of Kuwait, and has no consultative status whatsoever to both the prime minister and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.” The communiqué also denied that the subject of the Israeli nuclear umbrella had even been discussed in the meetings of the GCC.²⁴⁹

3. Other Arab Countries

The position of other Arab countries towards the Palestinian issue may generally be included in the Arab collective reaction as expressed by the Arab League, the Arab summits and the ministerial meetings. But this generalization will not do justice to some specific stances of these states on certain issues, which deserve attention and recording in this narrative.

Colonel Muammar Qaddafi, the Libyan president, had, for example, expressed reservations towards the Arab peace initiative, and reiterated his adherence to his idea of the state of “*Isratine*,” i.e., a state that houses both the Israelis and the Palestinians. Qaddafi attacked the Riyadh Arab Summit, saying that its agenda was “prepared in Washington,”²⁵⁰ and that the Arab initiative is “doomed to failure,” as the “Arab leaders who support it are desperate.”²⁵¹

While Morocco, Tunis and Algeria demanded an immediate stop of the Palestinian feud and respect to the constitutional institutions, Qaddafi underestimated the threat of the emergence of two states in GS and the WB as an outcome of this dispute, and demanded that Arab states end their intervention in the conflict between Hamas and Fatah.²⁵² Meanwhile, Algeria denied what it called “fabricated media reports”²⁵³ that it received Khalid Mish‘al, the head of Hamas Political Bureau.

Meanwhile, according to the prominent Fatah leader, ‘Azzam al-Ahmad, the Sudan, supported by both Egypt and Saudi Arabia, initiated an attempt to achieve reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas.²⁵⁴

In another vein, the Sudanese Minister of Interior, al-Zubair Bashir Taha, revealed a proposed American deal with his government to recognize Israel, and accused the American intelligence of smuggling weapons to Darfur.²⁵⁵ Meanwhile, Mauritania defended its relations with Israel, which it considered to be “in line with the stance of the Arab League.”²⁵⁶

Thus, the positions of the Arab states towards the Palestinian issue were clear and diversified in terms of both intensity and diversity. While the confrontational states and Saudi Arabia had intensively reacted to the events, the reactions of the rest of the Arab states were limited, and largely within the position of the Arab official regime. However, in totality, all Arab positions were within the complete reliance on the United States and the international community, with conspicuous absence of Arab decisions and determination to press other parties to move forward towards a just settlement. Suffice to mention in this respect the dangerous statement that ‘Amr Musa mentioned in reaction to Israel’s procrastination after Annapolis meeting, namely that it is nothing but a threat to withdraw from the peace process.²⁵⁷ This declaration clearly reveals the helpless position of both the official Arab regime and the Arab states towards the developments of the Palestinian issue.

Third: The Arab Public Stance on the Palestinian Issue

The official response of the Arab regime and its engagement in the peace process, as well as the totality of the other negative Arab developments, had seemingly hugely affected the ability and effectiveness of the Arab masses to change and improve the weak positions of their governments towards the Palestinian issue. Some of the public responses were even a justification or support to these policies, and the very few were substantially different but were not powerful enough to compel governments to reconsider their policies in accordance with the wishes of the Arab public opinion, as demonstrated below.

1. The Arab Public Stance on the Peace Process

The Arab public stance remained suspicious of the viability of the peace process because of three factors. First, the increasing escalation of the Israeli military suppression, second, the total and unconditional American support to Israel and the manipulation with all the peace initiatives that were designed to give Israel more time to achieve its aims and plans, and, third, the extreme impotence of the official Arab regime to confront the American–Israeli policies, and its rush not only to accept all American ideas and initiatives, but also to actively strive to sell them to the public.

The Arab public opinion did not exhibit any enthusiasm for the reactivation of the Arab peace initiative because it knew that it was a futile exercise as the Americans and Israelis were not prepared to compromise their fundamental policies, and the Arab regimes were too weak to suggest and impose the alternative. The Arab masses had, moreover, ignored the American invitation for Annapolis meeting, and remained silent on its failure. Moreover, they did not hold the Arab ministers accountable for their decision to participate, their actual participation or even for the failure of the conference itself. This apathy may have been triggered either by an increasing disinterest in the Palestinian issue and attraction to other more urgent issues, or by lack of trust in the peace process and the ability of the Arab states and the American administration to come out with a solution that satisfies the aspirations of the Palestinian people.

Nonetheless, there were some attempts of rejection to any surrender of the Palestinian rights by the Arab official regime under any cover or name that this may be. In a declaration on the 59th anniversary of the Catastrophe (1948 Arab–Israeli war), the Palestine committee of the Federation of Arab Engineers refused any initiatives that compromise the Palestinian rights, especially the right of return and the right of the Palestinian people to restore their lands that have been occupied since 1948. The committee called upon the Arab countries “to play a positive and comprehensive role to support the Palestinian people and to lift the siege imposed on them.”²⁵⁸ Being voiced at the peak of the drive of the official Arab regime to reactivate, on the recommendation of the Riyadh Summit, the Arab peace initiative, this position may be considered as a sarcastic comment on the Arab reliance on this initiative, and a doubt in the futility of engaging in its reactivation.

The public Arab refusal of this tendency was further demonstrated in a warning, by some Egyptian politicians and former ambassadors, against the danger of

accepting the strategy that President Bush had declared on the region, in general, and on Iraq, in particular. They considered that the participation in Riyadh Summit would effectively mean the participation in implementing a new American strategy; that aimed at distracting the attention on Israel and its aggressive practices and to focus on Iran.²⁵⁹

The General Arab Conference, composed of three important Arab Conferences, namely the Arab National Conference, the Islamic National Conference and Arab Parties Conference, condemned the call of the American president to convene an international meeting to resolve the Palestinian issue. For this call, which had been issued at the time of the anniversary of the victory of the resistance in the Summer of 2006 in Lebanon, was arguably nothing but a distraction from the outcome of this victory, a moral boost to Olmert, and a drive to intensify the Palestinian and inter-Arab feuds, or, possibly, a cover up to the preparations for a military aggression against Iran.²⁶⁰ When the Arab ministers agreed to the invitation of the American president, the three components of the General Arab Conference issued a joint declaration that condemned what it called “an unprecedented haste to normalize with the Zionist entity,” which “reveals the sizable defect in the official Arab position, notably its paralysis, weakness, short sightedness and haste to win the blessing of America, even if it turned the Arab countries upside down.”²⁶¹

2. The Arab Public Stance on the Inter-Palestinian Disputes

The reaction of the Arab masses towards the inter-Palestinian feuds took three forms. The first is the neutral form that confronted the divisions and called for the maintenance of national unity. The second form is either a partial or total support to the PA, which was, in effect, a condemnation of Hamas. The third is a support for Hamas, and the so-called “coup against the legitimacy.” However, generally, these disputes lead to a noticeable and progressive decrease in Arab Public support for the Palestinian issue, which reached the extent of total dismissal of the Palestinian organizations and leadership, which was glaringly reflected in a call by the Egyptian Syndicate of Lawyers to the Palestinian people to discard the leadership of both Hamas and Fatah, otherwise they will drag them into a civil war that achieves the objectives of Israel.²⁶² This call, which had been issued before the bloody conflict and the disastrous events of June 2007, is an indicator of the total refusal of the Arab masses to the inter-Palestinian fighting whoever may be responsible for it.



a. The Neutral Stance

This was the mainstream stance of the Arab masses, who were aware of the dangers of the shedding of the Palestinian blood that distorts the Palestinian struggle and its just cause. Its focus was to stop the fighting, to strive towards national reconciliation between Hamas, Fatah and all factions, to re-form a government of national unity, to be fully engaged in confronting Israel, and to uncompromisingly adhere to the Arab fundamentals.

The League of al-Sham's Palestinian Scholars urged all the Palestinian factions to resolve their differences and unite against their enemy and the enemy of the Nation.²⁶³ Moreover, the Jordanian syndicates called for the stoppage of the fighting,²⁶⁴ while the National Progressive Unionist Party held the Arabs responsible for the Palestinian catastrophe, and called for a sustainable political agreement based on a national program to be a national and democratic alternative to the current tragic situation.²⁶⁵ The Arab Transitional Parliament emphasized the sacredness of the Palestinian blood, while the Jordanian Democratic People's Party accused the leaderships of both Fatah and Hamas of "deliberately shedding the Palestinian blood," and called for the "exposure" of what it called the "advocates of sedition" among Fatah and Hamas leaders.²⁶⁶ But the national Jordanian parties called for adherence to the unity of the Palestinian people, and held squarely responsible "whoever pours oil on the fire," adding, "All should stick to the national fundamentals through total support to the struggle, and the unity of the Palestinian land and armament."²⁶⁷

b. The Pro-PA and Fatah Stance

With the aggravation of political differences and after Hamas' imposition of its complete authority on GS, a pro-PA and Fatah tendency among the Arab masses started to appear. The Egyptian the National Progressive Unionist Party, which maintained a neutral position towards the conflicting parties, declared after this development its support to Fatah. Taking advantage of a mass demonstration organized by *Kifayah* (Enough) movement and other political groups in front of the headquarters of the union of journalists that called for the stoppage of fighting and to end of the Palestinian deteriorating conditions, the party's activists distributed a declaration entitled "No to the Islamic Emirate in Gaza," which infuriated the demonstrators because of its bias for Fatah and attack against Hamas.²⁶⁸ Similarly, the Jordanian national parties changed their neutrality and became pro-PA and

Fatah. The Opposition Parties' Higher Coordination Committee in Jordan issued a proclamation which condemned Hamas military control of GS, and described it as a crime against the Palestinian struggle and sacrifices, a development that had, however, provoked the Islamic Labor Party.²⁶⁹ Meanwhile, the Jordanian opposition parties boycotted a mass gathering that the Muslim Brothers called for in order to declare an initiative to resolve the Palestinian crisis, on the grounds that the organization is not neutral but a supporter of Hamas and "the acts of killings and violence."²⁷⁰

Equally supportive to Fatah was a leader of the Moroccan United Socialist Party who declared his support by saying, "The Moroccan people renew their support to the Palestinian legitimate, democratic and constitutional Authority," which based itself on the decisions of the Palestinian Liberation Movement and the terms of the Basic Law of the PA.²⁷¹

c. The Pro-Hamas Stance

The Muslim Brotherhood in both Egypt and Jordan were the most prominent in supporting Hamas, though this was expressed after a period of fighting. Initially the Muslim Brotherhood adhered to neutrality and rejection of the fighting, a red line in the words of Egyptian Deputy Supreme Guide Muhammad Habib, though he added that the dissolution of the government of national unity was unjustified.²⁷² The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt also held all the Palestinian leaders the responsibility for shedding the blood of their citizens.²⁷³ But this neutrality had eventually changed into support to Hamas. For the Islamic movement in Jordan submitted that it is important to understand the factors behind Hamas' control of GS,²⁷⁴ and demanded a "neutral" Arab role to resolve the Palestinian differences, an indication of the Muslim Brotherhood's rejection to the growing support of the Arab regime, or some of its parties, to the PA.²⁷⁵ Moreover, Muhammad Mehdi 'Akef, the Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt said, "There is nothing stronger than the legitimacy of Haniyyah's government," and al-Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi criticized the Palestinian president for his intransigence and closure of the door of dialogue with Hamas.²⁷⁶

Other parties supported Hamas right from the beginning. The suspended Egyptian Labor Party had, for example, ascertained that the patriotic and national forces in the Arab world as well as the Islamic and liberal forces can not afford



neutrality in the Palestinian conflict, but have to support Hamas, “the legitimately elected group by the Palestinian people, which abide by the policy of resistance to achieve liberation.”²⁷⁷

These three divisive stances were more of an indication of the weakness rather than strength of the Arab stance on the Palestinian issue. These should have been unified and inclined only to the truth and the rejection of the fighting. More important, the Arabs should have a strategy and ability to stop the fighting, instead of these futile condemnations of the dispute and their support to this or the other party. But, regrettably, this was not the case.

3. The Arab Public Stance on the Support for the Palestinian People

The persistent oppression and siege of the Palestinian people by Israel had shocked the Arab public opinion twice. The first shock was the killing, destruction and the transfer of GS into a collective prison, while the second was the total disability of the Arab regime to lift the siege, and to submit the alternative that protects the Palestinian people. Thus, the Arab masses could not do more than organizing mass demonstrations and rallies of denunciation and condemnation to all parties; the Arab governments, Israel and the US, and to demand a positive action to protect the people and the holy sites in Palestine. But these were temporary protest movements that could not generate a sustainable strong movement to force the governments into an effective action.

There were several demonstrations in several Arab cities and capitals in solidarity with the Palestinian in GS, and many calls for the continuous opening of the GS borders with Egypt. In Cairo, thousands of Egyptians demonstrated to demand the lift of the siege on Gaza, and the participants in the Cairo International Book Fair, carrying banners that read: “Save Gaza” and “Free Despite Siege.” The protesters, whose majority belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood and *Kifayah* movements, also waved copies of the Qur’an. However, the security prohibited other protests in the Azhar area and other areas that were scheduled after Friday prayers. Moreover, on the call of the head of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, al-Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, another solidarity rally took place in Doha, Qatar. In his Friday sermon, al-Qaradawi expressed his thanks to the Egyptian people and leadership, and urged President Hosni Mubarak to resist pressure and keep the Rafah crossing opened.

In Jordan, thousands of people demonstrated in different parts of the country in protest of the siege of Gaza. About five thousand people participated in a demonstration in the heart of the capital Amman, where they repeated slogans against Israel and the US, and expressed their support for the return of the Palestinian refugees. Similar marches were organized in the cities of al-Zarqa', al-Karak and Irbid during which the flags of Israel and the US were burned, and the demonstrators urged the inhabitants of GS to be persistent and steadfast. Besides, the demonstrators voiced slogans of support to Ezzedein al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas, and demanded further resistance operations against Israel. In another vein, the Imams launched during Friday sermons harsh attacks on Israel and the US, and criticized the conspicuous "international silence" towards the Israeli "collective punishment" imposed on the 1.5 million inhabitants of GS.

In Manama, some Bahraini civil and political societies organized a sit-in in al-Fateh Islamic Center in support of the Palestinian people of GS and the protestors demanded the lifting of the siege imposed on GS since several months. The Imam of al-Fateh's Mosque, the biggest mosque in al-Bahrain from which Friday sermon is transmitted via the official television and Radio, allocated his sermon to the Palestinian issue, where he urged the Muslims to continue supporting the Palestinian cause. Besides, Ibrahim al-Sharif, secretary general of the National Democratic Action Association (NDAA), called upon the Arab governments to support the Palestinian people, and donate part of the oil revenue for their help. Al-Sharif asked the Palestinian president Mahmud 'Abbas to stop the negotiations with the Israelis once and for all in protest of their continuous aggression on the Palestinians, and urged the international community to protect the Palestinians from the Israeli aggression. The head of the National Justice Movement, Dr. 'Abdullah Hashem, had also called on the people of Bahrain to support the Palestinians at all levels.²⁷⁸

4. The Arab Public Stance on the Relations with Israel and Normalization

From the above, it is clear that there were significant developments in the Arab stance on the Palestinian issue, be this on the official and public levels. Specifically was the preference of the option of the peaceful settlement not only at the level of the official Arab regime but also by wide public sectors. The

latter desperate response seemed to have been triggered by the Arab masses' realization of the paralysis of the governing regimes, or by sheer desperation in that environment of extensive official media campaign which propagated the peace option and doubted the futility of all other alternatives, including the continuation of the struggle. Hence, it was natural that the call for normalization gains ground in the fabric of the Arab society, particularly so as many institutions were founded to advertise the so-called "peace culture" versus the "resistance culture," which had no similar institutions of advertisement—neither at the official nor at the popular levels.

The call for normalization had no longer become repugnant and shameful as it used to be in the past, on the contrary it became increasingly tolerated, even accepted, particularly so because of the falling apart of the boycott institutions, and the greedy Arab private sector that looked for quick profit via deals with Israeli companies and institutions, irrespective of the sacred and national concerns of the Nation, as was the case in the past.

This significant transfer was an outcome of the Arab decay and deterioration. Normalization was not confined to the official level, but, with government encouragement, extended to public sectors and organizations. The membership of the contact group with Israel, which was formed by the Arab Summit as part of its drive to reactivate the Arab peace initiative, could have been extended to include, besides its original members Egypt and Jordan, other Arab states had it not been for the Israeli negative response to the Arab peace initiative.

In other words, there was a good opportunity for the extension of the membership of this committee to include other countries that had no relations with Israel if, in the words of Ahmad Abu al-Ghait, "Israel exhibited its intention to pursue the peace path."²⁷⁹ Please note the condition of just "exhibiting intention," and not to be actively involved in the Arab peace initiative.

This pro-normalization tendency did not come out of the blue, nor was it without consequences. It is an indication of an increasing inclination to deal with Israel without any restrictions, as demonstrated by several incidents, of which some will be summarized below. First, was the story of the Saudi doctor, on which the Israeli newspaper *Ma'ariv* commented that he exceeded restrictions and went

to “Tel Aviv to perform surgery to save the life of a young Israeli girl.”²⁸⁰ This incident does not differ greatly from the participation of Israel in an educational conference in Cairo,²⁸¹ the tendency of some Bahraini ministries to abolish the clause of boycotting Israel,²⁸² a lecture that an Israeli Rabbi delivered in the Egyptian Ain Shams University,²⁸³ the infiltration of the products of Sharon’s farms into the Jordanian market,²⁸⁴ the Arab–Israeli youth forum under the patronage of Susan Mubarak, the wife of Egyptian president.²⁸⁵ All these events and others are indicators and evidences of the success of Israel to break the long hesitation of the Arab public to normalize relations with Israel.

Nonetheless, resistance to normalization continued, and some quarters that had normalized retreated from this path. Most of the national and Islamic groups and parties, as well many leftist parties, stick to the rejection of normalization, e.g., The Islamic Labor Front in Jordan.²⁸⁶ Moreover, the Egyptian People’s Assembly (parliament) questioned the Egyptian government on an agreement that it concluded with a Jewish investor to have a joint wind farm project.²⁸⁷ In Bahrain, parliament conducted an investigation on the reported tendency of some ministries to abolish the clause of boycotting Israel,²⁸⁸ The Bahrain Society Against Normalisation with the Zionist Enemy warned against the increasing volume of Israeli products in the Bahraini market, and urged the people to resist all kinds of normalization,²⁸⁹ some Bahraini members of parliament publicly refused normalization,²⁹⁰ and The Bahrain Society Against Normalisation with the Zionist Enemy called for the reopening of the Israel Boycott Office.²⁹¹ Furthermore, Jordan’s Higher Executive Committee for Defending the Homeland and Confronting Normalization urged the public to boycott Israeli products, be them of Israeli origin or produced by Israeli investors in the West.²⁹² But the most important development in this direction took place in Mauritania, where the call for the end of normalization and relations with Israel has gained momentum among many parties and leading personalities.²⁹³ All these and many other examples reflect an important fact, namely that the wave of normalization was artificial and had been engendered by some negative developments in the Arab arena. Moreover, the Arab street, whose awareness had been subjected to a huge distortion campaign, is still ready to restore its alert to the dangers of normalization with Israel, if the right conditions prevail.

Conclusion

The flaccid and disintegrated state of the Arab regimes reflects negatively on the Palestinian issue. This provides Israel with a great opportunity to impose its terms, create new facts on the ground, and attempt to achieve new breakthroughs in the Arab world. What made the situation worse is the state of friction and fragmentation of the Palestinians.

KSA played a major role in concluding the Mecca Agreement and in forming the national unity government. However, the Israeli–American insistence on the continuity of the siege, the participation of some Palestinian parties in a failed coup to topple the government, the emergence of an exceptional situation caused by the dominance of Hamas dismissed government in GS, and the control of the Palestinian presidency and the emergency government—backed by Fatah—over the WB, all of that led to the frustration of the Arab public.

The Arab countries, and in harmony with western countries, have dealt with Ramallah's emergency government as the legitimate one. It did not recognize Haniyyah's deposed government as a caretaker government, despite the legal status it has. The Arab states did not take any truly firm measures to lift the suffocating siege of the GS. There were attempts by the Sudanese, Yemeni, Egyptian and other Arab governments to reconcile Fatah and Hamas, but they were to no avail.

The Arab countries continue to cling to the Arab peace initiative to solve the Palestinian problem. Their participation in the Annapolis Conference was an attempt to push the peace settlement process forward. However, Israel and the US took advantage of the conference, without achieving any concrete progress in the peace process.

The Arab Public, frustrated by the Palestinian schism, still rejects normalization with Israel. Its solidarity with the Palestinians in general, and the besieged in GS in particular, is manifested in different forms. At the time that the Israeli trade relations with Jordan and Egypt were enhanced, the Mauritanian political relations with Israel witnessed chilliness and regression after the elections of a new president and the formation of a new government that considers those relations an embarrassing inheritance, especially in light of the escalating Mauritanian public opposition to any relations with Israel.

Endnotes

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Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies & Consultations

مركز الزيتونة للدراسات والاستشارات

P.O. Box: 14-5834 Beirut - Lebanon

Tel: +961 1 803 644 | Tel-Fax: +961 1 803 643

info@alzaytouna.net | www.alzaytouna.net



Al-Zaytouna Centre For Studies & Consultations