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Chapter Three

The Palestinian Issue and the Arab World

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Introduction

In 2008, Hamas control over GS was reflected on the political scene in the Arab-Palestinian relations. The Arab countries dealt with the Palestinian cause, according to each country's attitude towards Hamas movement and the PA, and towards Hamas control over Gaza and the subsequent developments including the truce between Hamas and Israel with Egyptian mediation and ending with the Israeli aggression on Gaza by the end of the year, and the disagreements that arose amongst the Arab countries between the moderate and the opposing countries.

This year was marked by diverged official and public Arab attitudes towards the Palestinian cause, and by the Arab officials' enticements according to the attitudes of their countries or regimes towards Hamas, PA, and Israel.

Similarly, those disagreements were reflected in the Arab attitudes on Arab joint action demonstrated mainly in the failure of some Arab countries to participate in the Arab Summit Conference held in Damascus, and the lack of a unified Arab position on the inter-Palestinian disagreements. The diverged official and public attitude was also towards the calling for lifting the siege on Gaza, the suspension of the truce between Hamas and the Israeli occupation authorities, and the Israeli aggression on Gaza at the end of the year.

There is no doubt that the disagreements between Fatah and Hamas had an impact on the inter-Arab relations. Accordingly, the disagreements increased between "moderate" Arab states and the Arab "refusal front" states (*al-mumana'ah*). Though disparately, the moderate Arab states supported the PA, led by Mahmud 'Abbas, on the grounds that he represents the Palestinian legitimacy, while the Arab "refusal front" states supported Hamas and the Palestinian resistance.

Demonstrations erupted throughout the Arab States in support of the Palestinian resistance during the Israeli aggression on the GS, denouncing the official Arab silence that is incapable of ending the aggression. The Israeli aggression revealed the Arab failure to confront the Israeli military machine, and defend the Palestinians.

In spite of the siege and the closing of crossings before the Palestinians in the GS, the Arab League failed to hold a summit meeting to find solutions and support

for the Palestinians. Only one meeting was held by the Council of Arab Foreign Ministers of the Arab League, and it failed to take decisions to lift the siege and reopen the crossings.

The Arab official responses were much below the level of the suffering in which a million and a half Palestinians live in the GS under the Israeli siege and closed crossings. The suffering began in 2008 with the siege and the crisis of closing the crossings in the GS, and was escalated by the Israeli aggression on the GS.

First: The Attitudes of the Arab League and the Arab Summit

The interest of the Arab League in the Palestinian cause continued, despite the apparent impotence and loss of credibility in making applicable decisions, and effectively implementing them on the ground. ‘Amr Musa, the Secretary-General of the Arab League, has been concerned with the Palestinian cause as the central Arab cause in the Arab world, but the complexities brought to light the official Arab regime incapacity to adopt a unified stance on its implications.

This had an impact on the Arab Summit Conference held in Damascus, which was boycotted by some Arab countries. In its meetings, the Arab League has been calling for lifting the siege on the GS, reopening the crossings, and achieving national reconciliation between Hamas and the PA in Ramallah, without achieving any of these objectives.

The failure of the Arab official regime to play an active role in supporting the Palestinian cause led the Secretary-General of the Arab League to say, “I call upon all Arabs, at least, to speak out; in order to stop the siege on Gaza, and to supply its people -as much as they can- with money, medications, and food; especially that Gaza is under a complete blockade and daily aggression, this must not pass without an Arab stand.”¹

However, it seems that the Arabs’ voices were disparate in criticizing the Israeli practices against the Palestinian people. Some Arab States stood by the PA in Ramallah, criticizing Hamas in Gaza and holding it responsible for the failure to lift the blockade, other Arab countries stood together with Hamas, without directly criticizing the practices of the PA, but rather attributing the failure in the peace

process to Israel and not to Hamas. The Arab League held Israel responsible for the explosion of the situation in the GS, forcing thousands of Palestinians to storm the Egyptian-Palestinian borders for food, without blaming Arab leaders, not even indirectly for such events.

1. Mediation to Resolve Inter-Palestinian Disputes

Arab League attempted to play a role in the convergence of views between Hamas and the PA. The Secretary-General of the Arab League called for launching a dialogue between these two parties. However, it is noted that the Arab League, represented by the Secretary-General, has taken a position closer to the position of the PA in Ramallah than the position of Hamas. Despite ‘Amr Musa’s denial and saying that the Arab League is at equal distance from all the Palestinian factions, and there is no differentiation between Hamas, Fatah or others.

‘Amr Musa, also said that Hamas is not intended by the Arab foreign ministers’ decision to penalize whoever hampers the Egyptian efforts of reconciliation, which applies to whoever hampers these efforts. Hampering is an issue that we would consider, it’s not decided in advance, and this decision is not a menace, it is the position of attempting to save the Palestinian cause. When asked about his meeting with some Palestinian factions -not including Hamas- during their presence in Cairo recently, he said that Hamas may have a point of view, but I think that Hamas is a major faction, and it is important to know their point of view, and I am interested in knowing the views of the different Palestinian factions. He added that his position will not change with or without their attendance. Like Fatah, Hamas has a particular position, and these positions are taken into account in the path of Egyptian-brokered reconciliation.²

The Arab League linked its mediation with the Egyptian mediation, which has not hid their aligning with President ‘Abbas and his government in Ramallah. ‘Amr Musa emphasized that Egypt will continue mediation with the Palestinian factions, noting that the Arab League supports this mediation, and that it must succeed and that all the gaps that have affected the effectiveness of the Palestinian position must be closed. He stressed that there would be no tolerance for any faction trying to thwart the inter-Palestinian reconciliation. He pointed out that everyone should take part in this reconciliation; because it is for the Palestinian people’s benefit and not for the benefit of one faction over the other. He added that all Arab citizens

believe that the time has come to reconsider one Palestinian stand; in order to meet the challenges ahead.

In order to resolve the disagreements between the Palestinian factions and to stop the Israeli practices, the Arab League proposed sending Arab forces to the GS to separate the factions. Musa described the inter-Palestinian fighting that is taking place in the occupied Palestinian territories as being “the curse that was put on the Palestinians and hit all of us hard,” warning that if the fighting did not stop immediately, it will put an end to the whole Palestinian cause.³

2. The Arab Summit in Damascus

The 20th Arab Summit Conference held on 29-30/3/2008 in Damascus reflected the inter-Arab disagreements. Eleven Arab leaders participated in the summit, i.e. two leaders fewer than the number of participants in the 2006 Khartoum Summit.

The summit had a low level of representation on the part of many Arab countries, especially Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, in spite of the statements by Walid al-Mu‘allem, the Syrian Foreign Minister, that the level of representation at the Damascus summit will be higher than it was in the previous Arab summits. The Saudi King ‘Abdullah Bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz and the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak were absent. The Jordanian delegation was led by Jordan’s permanent delegate to the Arab League, as King ‘Abdullah II was absent.

Whether in its conclusion or resolutions, the Damascus summit statement was in the framework of the overall outcomes in the previous Arab summits, such as the political support of the Palestinian cause, condemning settlements and Israel’s intransigence in accepting the Arab initiative as the basis of a historical comprehensive settlement, and calling for the Security Council to play its role; fulfilling obligations to lift the siege on the GS.

The final statement of the Arab Summit, entitled “Damascus Declaration”, reaffirmed maintaining the Arab peace initiative. “The continuation by the Arab side to present the Arab peace initiative is tied to Israel executing its commitments in the framework of international resolutions to achieve peace in the region,” the Damascus Declaration said. The Arab leaders expressed their support and appreciation for Arab efforts, especially those exerted by the Yemeni leadership, in achieving Palestinian reconciliation. The statement warned against Israel’s policies of imposing siege, closure of all crossings, and the increasing violence

especially in the GS, adding that Israeli crimes were crimes of war that required necessary action.

The statement called on Israel to immediately cease its aggressive practices against civilians, as well as its practices in the occupied Jerusalem. The statement called on the Security Council to shoulder its responsibilities regarding this situation, and urged all the parties concerned to work on lifting the siege and reopening the crossings to provide the Palestinian people with humanitarian requirements. The summit called on action towards a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East; based on the relevant resolutions of international legitimacy, the principle of land for peace, and the Madrid terms of reference.⁴

Second: The Attitudes and Roles of Some Key Countries

1. Egypt

There is no doubt that Egypt was the major player regarding its relationship with the Palestinian case during 2008 and early 2009. Egypt dealt with Hamas, the consequences of the blockade on the GS, the closure of the Rafah crossing, the course of settlement and the PA, the mediation between Fatah and Hamas, the truce between Hamas and Israel, and the recent Israeli aggression on the GS.

This indicates the extent to which Egypt feels the existence of a burden or a “problem” entitled Hamas governing beside its borders; making Egypt appear as if supporting the current PA, led by Fatah against Hamas. This has an impact on its mediator role as it tries to play on two fronts; the first is between the Palestinian organizations, particularly the Palestinian resistance movement in the GS and the PA in Ramallah. The second is between Hamas and Israel; to establish truce and finalize the prisoner exchange deal between the two parties.

Regarding the dispute between Fatah and Hamas, the Egyptian government tried to strike a happy medium, but it was not practically possible. Egypt had relations with Israel and the USA, and is committed to the path of peaceful settlement. The Egyptian secular regime is sensitive regarding the Islamists, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, of which Hamas is an extension, and which the Egyptian regime considers as a threat or as a potential substitute for its current ruling regime.

Therefore, the Egyptian government is closer to the path represented by Fatah, President ‘Abbas and the PA in Ramallah. However, Egypt is aware that its national security and its weight in the Arab world and the region dictate to keep an equal distance from all of the Palestinian parties, and to remain a key player in influencing the Palestinian decision. Egypt is also aware that the Hamas takeover of the GS and its relative popularity in the Palestinian arena will leave no choice for the Egyptian government but to deal with Hamas, regardless of its attitude towards it.

a. The Egyptian Role in Establishing the National Reconciliation

Egypt has made no secret of its discontentment with the winning of Hamas in the Palestinian legislative elections and its following control over the GS located near the borders with Egypt. With the continuing differences between Hamas and its dismissed government in the GS on one hand, and President ‘Abbas and his government in Ramallah, on the other hand. Egypt tried to play the role of an honest mediator between the two parties to establish national reconciliation. The Egyptian official stance in dealing with Hamas was affected by the existence of its leadership in Syria and its distinguished relationship with the Syrian regime, at a time when the relations between Cairo and Damascus were tense. It was also affected by its concern over the presence of an Islamic government on its borders, and reflection of this situation on the inside and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

Egypt wanted the PA to continue being the one that negotiates with the Israelis, speaking on behalf of the Palestinian people, and controlling the borders with the GS; on the grounds that there is only one PA which is the one based in Ramallah, while the authority of Hamas “is in Damascus and not in Gaza”.

As for Hamas, they called on Egypt to stand at equal distance from them and Fatah, especially after Egypt has refused to allow a parliamentary delegation of Hamas MPs headed by Ahmad Bahr, the Acting Speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council, to visit a number of Arab and Muslim countries.

Cairo was receiving delegations of the Ramallah-based PA, who met with senior Egyptian political leaderships, while the delegations of Hamas and the Government of Isma‘il Haniyyah, only meet with officials of the Egyptian intelligence, in particular General ‘Omar Suleiman, director of the Egyptian General Intelligence Services (EGIS).

Egypt held Hamas mainly responsible for the Palestinian disagreements, for not supporting the Egyptian efforts in putting an end to the crisis in the WB and GS, and in consolidating the Palestinian ranks, and for the failure of the inter-Palestinian dialogue, which was expected to be achieved in Cairo. Egypt also accused Hamas of not giving the Egyptian efforts the opportunity to succeed.

An Egyptian diplomatic source said that while they move towards reconciliation, the source of risk in the recent events in Gaza is that Hamas is saying that there was difficulty in co-existence on the ground between them and Fatah in Gaza. Surprisingly, the practice of violence from the part of Hamas cadres against Fatah cadres in the GS started after about five weeks of reaching a truce agreement between Hamas and Israel. This also raises doubts.

The diplomatic source pointed out that Hamas has not dealt with the bloody seashore incident as a security or criminal matter. Its response was rather marked by retribution against Fatah leaders. Such a response, in turn, reverberates in the WB.⁵

In spite of the sensitive relationship between Egypt and Hamas, Egypt has continued to play the role of mediator between Fatah and Hamas. Egypt wanted to enable the PA to negotiate with Israel confidently and from a solid ground. Meanwhile, the Egyptian mediation between Hamas and Israel focuses on reopening the Rafah crossing in accordance with the 2005 crossings agreement, and on settling the issue of the captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit and the Palestinian prisoners, in order to completely lift the siege on the Palestinian people in Gaza. Hamas has insisted on not waiving its direct role in the management and conduct of action on the Rafah crossing and the lifting of the siege on Gaza, and not confining its role to securing the passage from the outside, which what Hamas considers “a derogation of its legal and administrative role, which was ascribed to it by law as it was the winner in the last parliamentary elections. Thus, Hamas sees that it is entitled to form a government to run the country, while this view clashes with the law of the PA and the agreements of its establishment.”⁶

Concerning the Palestinian national dialogue, the Egyptian government was closer to the Authority in Ramallah and President ‘Abbas. Egypt supported ‘Abbas in his demand to form a government to lift the siege (i.e. a government compatible with the conditions of the Quartet), and that Hamas should “be committed to”, not only “respect” all the agreements and commitments that the Palestine Liberation

Organization (PLO) is committed to. That meant, for Hamas, to abolish its Islamic and resistance framework, and to recognize Israel and the Oslo accords, which Hamas rejects entirely. The Egyptian government refused to recognize the realities created by Hamas on the ground following its control over the GS. The Egyptian point of view was summarized in the following four points:

First: formation of a transitional technocratic caretaker government of national figures not affiliated to the Palestinian factions in order to lift the blockade on the GS. This government has two missions: the preparation for the agreed upon legislative and presidential elections, on one hand, and to address the security issue on the other hand.

Second: the agreement on a Palestinian Charter that includes ending the Israeli occupation of the territories occupied in 1967, bring a solution to the refugee issue, and ending the internal division and fragmentation.

Third: delegating Mahmud ‘Abbas and the PLO to conduct negotiations with Israel on the basis of the Palestinian National Charter, which is supposed to be agreed upon.

Fourth: Building the Palestinian security services on a professional basis, and providing Arab support, whether in the form of intervention forces, or in using the Arab security expertise, or through financial and material support.⁷

On the other hand, Egypt has shown no interest in the involvement of Arab parties in its mediation between Fatah and Hamas. The Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmad Abu al-Ghait, stressed that Egypt could manage alone the mediation, and that “one who wants another force has to prove whether he will be allowed to do so or not.” He added that, “Whoever that will be will not be able to bring another force that would accept to intervene with Hamas, such game will be very open, and whoever considers offering an alternative to Egypt is rather thinking of the US dollar, there are those who could be given more dollars to be taken to the a certain direction of policies.”⁸

Egyptian initiative for the Palestinian dialogue states the following points:

1. Stop all forms of inflammatory media campaigns.
2. The release of all prisoners from Hamas and Fatah, at the same time and under the aegis of an Arab committee led by Cairo.

3. To allow the return of the citizens who left the GS without arresting them.
4. The abolition of the ban on a number of associations and institutions in the West Bank and Gaza.
5. Commitment to the PLO as the sole legitimate and representative of all the Palestinian people. In this context it will be achieved through (a) starting the reform and restructuring of the PLO (when the dialogue starts), which are to be completed within four months. According to Palestinian sources, Fatah rejected this paragraph. As for paragraph (b), it offers a suggestion to adopt general electoral, institutional, and survey standards to determine the rate of representation in the organization's institutions.
6. Hamas movement should vacate its existence and cadres from the Authority's political and security headquarters and institutions in the GS, and the return of these sites to the legitimate authority.
7. Freezing the work of the Executive Force of Hamas.
8. Maintaining the work of the police under temporary supervision of an unbiased Arab committee.
9. The Arab security team to be led by Egypt for the supervision of the arrangement and resolving contentious issues relating to security institutions. (This point has not been approved by Hamas and other Palestinian factions).
10. Sending an Egyptian-led Arab force of three thousand persons to the GS to contribute in maintaining security. (Rejected by Hamas and other factions).
11. Formation of a transitional government to prepare for legislative and presidential elections before March 2009, based on the commitment to the program of the PLO. (Rejected by Hamas and other factions).
12. The commitment of all factions to international agreements signed and committed by PA. (Rejected by Hamas and other factions).
13. The commitment of the factions to the political solution through negotiations, and in case of failure of this option there will be consultation and agreement on adopting and pursuing another option.
14. The invitation to join the institutions of the PA, which denotes commitment to its program, while the political parties, outside the framework of the PA, are entitled to oppose peacefully.

As a result of the disagreements between the PA and Hamas, Egyptian mediation has failed to convene the Palestinian national dialogue, which was scheduled to be held in Cairo on 9/11/2008. It was Hamas who refused to launch the dialogue before releasing Hamas Palestinian prisoners in the prisons of the PA in the West Bank. Cairo has criticized Hamas for its last minute apology to participate in the dialogue, which has increased tension in the relationship between Egypt and Hamas. Mustafa al-Faqi, head of the Egyptian Parliamentary Foreign Relations Committee, held Hamas responsible for failure of the dialogue, saying that Egypt “wouldn’t tolerate an Islamic state on its eastern border”⁹ (See the part of dialogue and reorganizing the Palestinian home in the first chapter of this book).

b. Egypt and the Release of Shalit

Egypt has continued to mediate between Hamas and Israel for the release of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, in return for the release of the captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in Gaza. Egypt insisted not to share this mediation by any other parties, but the year 2008 ended without reaching a solution. The meetings were taking place under the supervision of Minister ‘Omar Suleiman, the director of the EGIS; General Amos Gilad, head of the Defense Ministry’s Diplomatic-Security Bureau; Ofer Dekel, the Israeli in charge of the file of prisoners; and delegations from Hamas.

Hamas insisted that the exchange of prisoners must include the exchange of about one thousand Palestinian prisoners, of which 450 identified by Hamas, of those who were sentenced to imprisonment for long years. Hamas also demanded to include the release of the Legislative Council members and a number of leaders and national figures, as well as, women and children. While Israel threatened to retrieve Shalit by force, and to invade Gaza to release him in case that the Egyptian mediation fails.

On The other hand, Hamas linked the issue of prisoner exchange with lifting the siege imposed on Gaza and reopening of the crossings, while Egypt has asked Hamas to soften its stance on the prisoner exchange issue. Egyptian mediation has not succeeded, because both sides; the Israeli and the Palestinian were maintained to their position. However, Egypt is still the most appropriate mediator to Israel and Hamas.

c. Egypt's Stance Towards the Lifting of the Blockade and Opening of the Rafah Crossing

Egypt has committed itself to the agreement on the crossings that the PA signed with Israel in 2005. Consequently, Egypt closed the Rafah crossing, except in exceptional circumstances, after Hamas takeover of Gaza and the departure of European observers from the crossing. This situation was interpreted by many Palestinians as participation in the blockade, and as an attempt to thwart and overthrow the Hamas government. While the Egyptian government justified it by its commitment to the agreement on the crossings, and its political and international commitments.

In January 2008, due to their enormous suffering, the Palestinians opened a new hole in the wall on the Egyptian border from which hundreds of thousands of Palestinians flowed into the Egyptian side. The Egyptian security forces tried to prevent the Palestinians from crossing, accusing Israel of intending to establish a State for the Palestinian refugees in Sinai, but then, Egypt allowed them to enter for a few days.

Abu al-Ghait said that those who were trying to get the crossing reopened, don't want to serve the interests of the Palestinian people, but rather seek to get legitimacy, adding that Egypt would not give legitimacy to a group that doesn't deserve it, referring to Hamas. But the Egyptian Minister added "We are dealing with Hamas as a Palestinian partner who won the elections. We recognize the presence of Hamas on the ground, and respect the support of the Palestinian people for it, but it must have a legitimate presence."¹⁰

Egypt submitted a proposal to Hamas to resolve the issue of the Rafah crossing, by implementing the agreement signed in 2005 between the PA, Egypt, the European Union, Israel and the United States. Hamas rejected this proposal, and insisted on the necessity of being under the Egyptian-Palestinian management, without the presence of the Israelis, or any other party.

The Egyptians responded to this position by emphasizing that "we can not change this Agreement; because we are not the only party in it." The Egyptian side informed Hamas officials that the bombing of the border wall and the entry of Palestinians to the Egyptian cities "will not be repeated for any reason."¹¹

As a result of the lack of agreement with Hamas, due to the Israeli refusal of Hamas position, the Egyptian authorities closed three gaps at the Salahuddin street that separates the GS and Egypt, using scrap metal, barbed wire and deploying hundreds of soldiers along the border; to prevent Palestinians from entering into the Sinai Peninsula.

The Egyptian security men, who were lined up along the border, prevented the Palestinians from entering through the three gaps in the separating wall, Salahuddin gate, Brazil, and the Barahmeh, but they allowed the return of Egyptians who have entered Gaza. The Egyptian security men allowed the Palestinians who obtained residence permits, or students studying in Egypt or in the Arab and foreign countries to cross the borders. They also allowed the Palestinians from Gaza, who were still in the cities of al-‘Areesh and Sheikh Zuwayyid and Rafah in Egypt, to return through the Salahuddin Gate.

According to the report of the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR), the Rafah crossing was closed entirely for 345 days during 2008, i.e. 94.2% of the total days of the year. While, the crossing was opened partially for 21 days, or 5.8% of the total days of the year.¹²

Egypt believed that the Rafah crossing should not be opened in the presence of an authority other than the authority of Mahmud ‘Abbas. Egypt refused any presence, even a symbolic one of Hamas at the Rafah crossing. On the basis that Hamas, from an Egyptian point of view, is a Palestinian organization, and not an authority, and Egypt recognizes only the legitimacy of President ‘Abbas, because it is recognized on the Arab and international levels.

Abu al-Ghait, the Egyptian Foreign Minister, warned saying that “Anyone who violates Egypt’s borders will get his leg broken.” Abu al-Ghait said that Egypt will continue its efforts with Israel and the European Union, to reopen the Rafah crossing legally. He also criticized Hamas for launching missile attacks on Israel, describing the confrontation as a “laughable caricature”. He noted that Hamas’ missiles are lost in the sands of Israel, meanwhile giving the Israelis an alibi to attack the Palestinians.¹³

Among the other issues associated with the blockade and the Rafah crossing, which has increased tension between Egypt and Hamas, there is the dispute over the crossing of the Palestinian pilgrims from Gaza through Egypt to Saudi Arabia.

Egypt put forward a plan for a truce between Hamas and Israel in the GS. This plan is based on three points:

1. Hamas stops launching missiles from Gaza into Israel. On return the Israelis pledges not to target the Palestinian militants inside Gaza, and to stop the targeted assassinations.
2. The exchange of prisoners, to include about 400 Palestinians detained by Israel, for the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. The plan includes the delivery of Shalit to the Egyptians, who in turn will handle him to the Israelis.
3. Israel reopens the crossings between the GS and Israel with the help of European observers.

Hamas and Israel agreed on a truce for a period of six months starting from mid-June 2008. However, Israel has not implemented the terms of the agreement, which led to the actual ending of the truce at the end of the year, when Israel carried out its broad aggression on Gaza on 27/12/2008.

Egypt has condemned the Israeli aggression on the GS in statements by President Husni Mubarak and Foreign Minister Ahmad Abu al-Ghait. Egypt held Israel responsible for the victims resulted from the aggression and called for the immediate unconditioned cessation of hostilities. However, the official Egyptian position did not fail to criticize Hamas; since it held Hamas responsible for the collapse of the truce with Israel by launching missiles into Israeli towns, in spite of warnings from Cairo that Israel is going to wage war against Gaza by the end of the truce.¹⁴

During the aggression, the issue of Egypt's closure of the Rafah crossing, constitutes a real problem between Egypt and Hamas, amid mutual accusations; as Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said that Egypt would not open the Rafah crossing, in violation of the 2005 agreement, except for humanitarian cases, in order not to participate in perpetuating the separation of the WB and GS.¹⁵ He also accused Hamas that it wanted to open the Rafah crossing to control it alone.¹⁶ In order to find a political solution to the crisis, the President announced on 6/1/2009 an Egyptian initiative for ceasing fire, opening the crossings, stopping arms smuggling into Gaza and forming a national unity government acceptable for the international community.¹⁷

2. Jordan

In 2008, there has been an important development in the Jordanian position towards the Palestinian issue. Jordan, for the first time after a nine years lapse, resumed contacts with the leaders of the Hamas movement. At the time it continued following the policy of moderate Arab states towards the PA, criticizing the practices of Israel in the WB and GS, and the Israeli project for the so-called “Jordanian option”, on both official and popular levels.

The declared Jordanian position continued which is to demand for an independent Palestinian state on land occupied in 1967 with Jerusalem as its capital, and the recognition of the legitimate rights of the Palestinians, such as, the right of return for refugees.

The other development that has taken place in the position of Jordan at the end of the year was the harmony between the official and popular attitude of the Israeli aggression on the GS, allowing protests and demonstrations, in addition to the unequivocal support for the resistance in Gaza, and of the heroic steadfastness of the Palestinian citizens. It seems that the dialogue which has already started between Jordan and Hamas, has paved the way for Jordan’s last position.

a. The Jordanian Position Towards the Political Developments

Jordan views the Palestinian case as being the first central issue of its priorities and resolving this issue is as important for the Jordanian as it is for the Palestinians. Jordan wanted to play a key role in the peace process among the Palestinians. Thus, visits of Palestinian and Israeli officials to Jordan and their meetings with Jordanian leaders continued.

The most important of these meetings was the one of the Jordanian King and the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who suddenly visited Amman. In this meeting, the King demanded that all final status issues should be included in the peace negotiations with the Palestinians. The King stressed “it’s important that the negotiations would lead to an agreement between the two sides before the end of the current year, based on the two-state solution, and in accordance with the commitments of the parties involved in the Annapolis Conference.”¹⁸

Jordan also frequently received the President of the PA who met with King ‘Abdullah II. Their talks were always focused on the developments related to the peace process and efforts for the success of the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations.

In addition to Jordan's confirmation on its support for the PA and their positions, especially on the final status issues, such as refugees, Jerusalem, water, and borders; which have a direct impact on Jordan and its future and security. Thus, the Jordanian King has defined his country's position towards the Palestinian issue, saying that the Kingdom is committed to the resolutions of international legitimacy and the Arab peace initiative as a basis for the solution.

Regarding the Palestinian refugees in Jordan, he stressed that their right to citizenship does not deprive them of their right of return and compensation. We stand firm in this position, and we insist on it. This right is included in the resolutions of international legitimacy, in particular the United Nations General Assembly resolution no. 194, which is not subject to bargaining or compromise in any way. He stressed that the acceptance of Israel in the region will remain subject to ending its occupation of Palestinian territories and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, and to reach a just, lasting and comprehensive solution for all aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict.¹⁹

Jordan believes that a Jordanian role on the Palestinian - Israeli track encourages Israel to make progress in the negotiations with the PA to end the conflict. However, Jordan continued to reject the "Jordanian option" to resolve the Palestinian issue, where the Jordanian government shows extreme sensitivity to talking about the "Jordanian option" or "alternative homeland", and constantly declares its refusal of the Israeli projects for displacement of the Palestinians in the territories of Jordan, and the Israeli continued occupation of the WB.

On the other hand, Jordan denied on a statement by the Jordanian Foreign Minister Salaheddin al-Bashir the existence of a document known as the "Awad- 'Uraiqtat" (Bassem 'Awadallah, Jordan's former Chief of the Hashemite Royal Court and Sa'ib 'Uraiqtat) on the "alternative homeland". He stressed that by saying: "We are not a party in the negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis, but we are concerned with some of the final status issues that directly affect Jordan, and especially the issues of refugees and Jerusalem."

He added that he never heard at all from any official in the Palestinian National Authority or any other, that there is someone who is satisfied with any solution other than that of the two-state solution. He made it clear that the Jordan supports the negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis, as provided for in the Arab peace initiative and the commitments of the Annapolis, stressing that

the negotiations between these two parties is the strategic option to restore the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. He reaffirmed the Jordan's position of the inevitable establishment of a Palestinian state, and restoration of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, as the most important foreign policy issue of Jordan.

Regarding the issue of sending Arab forces to the GS, he stressed that this issue has not been arisen in the Arab League, and that he has reservation on it. The only solution to what is going on in the WB and GS is the Palestinian unity so as to ensure the reinforcement of the Palestinian negotiating role, and to strengthen the PA in front of the Palestinian people and the world.

He drew attention to the resolution of the Arab Foreign Ministers Conference to support the diplomatic efforts of Jordan in the face of Israeli plans in Jerusalem, particularly those relating to the Mughrabi Gate, and of the World Heritage Committee of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).²⁰

b. Resuming Contacts between Jordan and Hamas

An important development in the Jordanian position concerning the parties of the Palestinian cause was the formal declaration of resuming contacts, which have been lapsed for about nine years, with Hamas. It has been announced that Muhammad al-Thahabi, director of the General Intelligence Department, held a meeting with two Hamas officials, namely, Muhammad Nazzal and Muhammad Nasr on 21/7/2008.

This was the first meeting between a senior Jordanian official, and leaders of Hamas, since 1999 when the Jordanian authorities closed the offices of the movement in Amman, expelling four of its leaders to Qatar with charges of interference in the internal affairs of Jordan. These leaders included Khalid Mish'al, the head of Hamas Political Bureau; Musa Abu Marzouk, Mish'al's deputy; 'Izzat al-Rishiq, Information Officer; and Ibrahim Ghosheh, the Spokesman of Hamas.

The tension reached its peak in the relations between them, in 2006, when Jordan cancelled the visit of Mahmud Zahhar, the Hamas leader and the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, and accused the movement of storing and smuggling weapons into Jordan, in preparation for operations in Jordan. Hamas has strongly denied these charges, saying that they were politically motivated, and that Jordan was bowing to US pressure.

This meeting increased the probabilities of strengthening the relationship between Jordan and Hamas, in contrast to Jordan's previous position of preferring to deal only with Fatah and the PA, instead of dealing with the rest of Palestinian factions, including Hamas. The meeting increased optimism in ending the crisis that existed in the relationship between Hamas and the Jordanian authorities.

Muhammad Nazzal, who participated in the meeting, stated that the Hamas delegation had come to Amman on behalf of Khalid Mish'al not only to seek the reform of the relationship with the Jordanian government, but also in order to know the Jordanian position on the Palestinian cause from overall dimensions. The meeting was held between a political delegation of Hamas, though it was held with the highest security official, from the Jordanian side. This had significantly important implications, because it was not with officials from the Jordanian government, but with the head of Jordanian intelligence.

Thus, this meeting was very similar to the contacts between the director of the EGIS, 'Omar Suleiman, and Hamas delegations visiting Cairo.

It is too early to talk about new foundations of the relationship with Hamas, especially that Jordan is still restricting its political choice on the Palestinian issue in dealing with the PA headed by Mahmud 'Abbas and the channel of communication with Hamas is still security, not political.

However, Thahabi, the former director of the General Intelligence Department, expressed Jordan's keenness to support the Palestinian people, respect their choice, and recognize the Hamas movement and its obtained popular legitimacy, and its role in the formation of the Palestinian National structure. He also expressed Jordan's acknowledgment of the fact that Hamas represents half of the Palestinian people, and Jordan's trust in the support that Hamas received in the legislative elections. Thus, the Jordanian government is ready to open a new chapter in the relationship with Hamas, and wants to keep the channels of communication and coordination with them in the future.²¹

The Jordan's new position was in line with the change in internal Jordanian policy toward Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan. On the other hand, Hamas is aware of the importance of Jordan in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and considered the resuming of contact with the Jordanian leadership as significant support for it in the Palestinian arena. Some believe that Jordan had changed its position towards

Hamas, because it feels that the PA, at later stage, may abandon the option of an independent Palestinian state and may agree to the Jordanian option known as the “alternative homeland”. While Hamas explicitly rejects it, preferring to continue to resist, and not to fall into the trap of the Israeli projects.

This meeting allowed the members of Hamas in Syria and Lebanon, who held Jordanian passports to enter the land of Jordan to visit their families, provided that they refrain from any political activity during the visit, and that they leave voluntarily before the expiry of visit time limit. It also allowed other members of Hamas to renew their passports.

It seems that the PA did not like the new Jordanian position, which surprised them.

During his visit to Jordan, President Mahmud ‘Abbas expressed his concerns to the Jordanian officials of opening up to the Hamas movement and opening a new chapter with them, fearing that it would lead to weakening his negotiating position with Israel. He stated that what is needed is to isolate Hamas, and not to open up with it. The PA has asked the Jordanian government for an explanation of the rapprochement with Hamas.

However, The meeting did not lead to a radical change in the Jordanian position, towards Hamas, as the year ended without an invitation for the Khalid Mish‘al to visit Jordan, which Hamas was expecting, particularly after the movement’s steadfastness against the Israeli aggression on the GS.

The reasons that led Jordan to change its position towards Hamas, could be outlined in the following points:

1. Protection of Jordan and its independence from the “alternative homeland” or the “Jordanian” option to liquidate the Palestinian cause.
2. Protection of the interests of Jordan in the WB and of its role in the Palestinian cause.
3. Emphasis on the need for an independent Palestinian state in the WB and GS with Jerusalem as its capital.
4. Reduction, and perhaps elimination of the political and economic blockade imposed on Hamas.
5. Formation of a consensus status that contributes to the political and social stability in Jordan.

6. Sympathy of part of the Arab legitimacy with Hamas, especially as they face the blockade and aggression.
7. Assistance in activating the regional role of Jordan and its role in the international policy towards the region.
8. Jordan's growing popular support for Hamas.
9. Emphasis on neutrality regarding the internal Palestinian disputes, especially those between Fatah and Hamas.
10. Showing Jordan's resistance to the American and Israeli pressures that reject the recognition of the Hamas movement.

There were some positive results of this dialogue, during the Israeli aggression on the GS, when the Jordanian authorities allowed citizens to express their solidarity with the steadfastness of the Hamas movement in Gaza, and allowed the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan to lead this popular response.

In spite of the abrupt resignation of the director of the General Intelligence Department, Muhammad al-Thahabi -who had already met with the delegation of the Hamas movement- and the appointment of Major General Muhammad al-Raqad to succeed him, however, Jordan does not seem to back down attempting to play a neutral role in the inter-Palestinian disagreements.

Resignation of al-Thahabi was linked to official Palestinian and Egyptian protests against the extensive greater openness of the Jordanian diplomacy towards Hamas, as well as, the logistical facilities provided by the security services to the protesters against the aggression on Gaza in the Jordanian streets, and the disruption of public meetings law, that requires individuals and bodies to submit a written request for permission to prior conduct of the demonstrations.

The PA has shown discontent with the Jordanian relationship with Hamas, in addition to Cairo's complaint about the demonstrations that reached the door of the Egyptian embassy in Amman, chanting slogans insulting the President Husni Mubarak, a move that was not permitted previously.

c. Jordan's Position of the Blockade on Gaza

Jordan continued to call for the necessity of lifting the siege on the GS. It also supported the truce agreement between Hamas and Israel, which was sponsored by Egypt in the mid-year. However, Jordan reserved on the Egyptian proposal to

send Arab forces to the GS, as a solution to the dispute between Hamas, which controls the sector, and the PA. The Jordanian concern arose from the belief that this may lead to the rise of the “alternative home” proposal oncemore to resolve the Palestinian problem at the expense of the Jordanian entity.

As an official said, accepting the deployment of Arab forces in the GS will be the final nail in the coffin of the Palestinian cause. The entry of Arab forces to Gaza will do no good to the interests of the Palestinian people, neither to the Palestinian cause which practically will end by the Arab forces entry to the territories still occupied by Israel. There is no doubt that the refusal of the entry of Arab forces in the GS has become a point of consensus between Jordan and Hamas.²²

On the other hand, the Jordanian King called on the international community to act urgently to relieve the suffering of the Palestinian people in the GS, by working to end the Israeli siege, reopening the crossings, and allowing the entry of food and humanitarian aid to the people in Gaza.

He warned that the continuation of the blockade would lead to a humanitarian tragedy of devastating effects on the Palestinian people. The king of Jordan donated blood for the victims of the aggression on Gaza, and ordered sending a military field hospital. He said in a press statement that: “this is the least we can offer to our brothers in Gaza. We resent what is happening there, and we need to work at full speed to stop the aggression.”²³

The Jordanians continued their dash to support their brothers in Gaza, and rushed to donate blood and money to the people in Gaza. Marches of anger, protest and solidarity mounted and extended to all the governorates of Jordan. Demonstrators from different parties and unions called for stopping the criminal attacks on the people of Gaza, expelling the Israeli ambassador from Amman, withdrawing the Jordanian ambassador from Tel Aviv, and abolishing the Wadi ‘Araba Treaty as an expression of anger and indignation of the Israeli crimes against the Palestinian people.

The Jordanian House of Representatives called upon the government to reconsider the relationship with Israel, if Israel did not put an end to the siege and shelling of the GS. In a statement signed by 88 out of 110 deputies, the House of Representatives called to “exert maximum efforts to secure the cessation of the barbaric Israeli aggression on the brother Palestinian people, and to put an

end immediately to this brutal aggression.” The Parliament also called on the government to “redouble its efforts; to end the unjust blockade, imposed by Israeli occupation authorities on Gaza.”

3. Syria

Syria has always played a significant role in the Palestinian issue; it is still officially in a state of antagonism with Israel. The Syrian Golan is still occupied by Israel. Certainly, Syria has its considerations related to national security and geo-strategic and political considerations... and others. Syria dealt with Hamas, whose leadership resides in Syria, considering that it is closer to Syria than Fatah and the PA.

However, Syria attempted to appear at the same distance from both Fatah and Hamas, especially when it has to do with ending the division, and the unity of the Palestinian ranks. Syria adopted policy and stances closer to the “refusal” front that supports the Palestinian resistance versus the Arab moderation camp. It showed clearly during the Arab Summit Conference held in Damascus, and boycotted by some Arab countries that are opposed to the Syrian position. By the end of the year, Syria called upon convening an Arab summit to support the steadfastness of the resistance in the GS during the Israeli aggression against Gaza.

a. Syria’s Support for Palestinian National Unity

Despite the continued presence of leaders of eight Palestinian groups opposed to the PA and Fatah in Syria (Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front, the Popular Democratic Front, the Popular Front - General Command and Fatah-Intifadah, al-Sa’iqa, and the Popular Struggle Front), Syria maintained contacts with the leadership of the PA led by Mahmud ‘Abbas, with some tensions occasionally in their relations.

Syria tried to play a role in converging the views of those organizations residing in Damascus, headed by Hamas, and the PA. The Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Mou‘alem said that his country “will pursue the dialogue between Hamas and the PA, in order to end the internal division among the Palestinians,” and that he “will be in touch with the leaders of Hamas and the PA; to receive specific suggestions on reconciliation.”

Heading the Arab Summit, Syria tried to revive the inter-Palestinian dialogue, to end the crisis between Hamas and Fatah, and to form a unified Palestinian public

opinion on issues of peace and defending the rights of the Palestinian people. During Mahmud ‘Abbas visit to Damascus, Syria submitted an official letter that included: calling on Hamas to hold the presidential and legislative elections on time, preparing immediately for the formation of a national unity government, and discussing the rebuilding of the PLO, in order for the PLO to reflect the popularity of the factions and the balance of power on the ground.²⁴

During ‘Abbas visit to the Syrian capital and his meeting with Assad, their talks focused on national reconciliation, the Syrian role in promoting the inter-Palestinian dialogue. The Palestinian president also discussed the strained relations between Syria and the Fatah movement, and how to improve it.

However, Syria did not succeed in its quest to achieve national reconciliation, because the PA in Ramallah believes that the Syrian government is nearer in its position to Hamas, and thus it is not fit to play this role. Apart from the fact that the presidency of the PA would prefer the dialogue paper to remain in the hands of Egypt, which supported its position against Hamas.

b. Syria’s Support to the Palestinian Resistance

Syria is still considering the importance of Palestinian resistance in the Arab-Israeli conflict, as an important approach in dealing with Israel. That is why Syria embraces the presence of Palestinian organizations leaders there. Proceeding from this, Syria agreed to convene a conference in Damascus in support of the Palestinian resistance, entitled, “The Arab International Congress for The Right of Return”, attended by about five thousand participants from sixty countries, including heads of councils of Arab civil society organizations, representatives of Arab communities in the Diaspora countries, Many of the Palestinian and international figures, including Mahathir bin Mohamad, the former Malaysian Prime Minister, Bishop Kabouji, and George Galloway.

The Conference was characterized by massive multi-views attendance and by topics covered comprehensively and in depth by 205 Arab and foreign intellectuals and researchers in 25 symposiums. The conference was really the largest and most important Arab and international conference regarding the Palestinian cause in general, and the right of return, in particular. It represented the popular response to the overall fateful threats to the national constants, and not only the right of return. The conference also aimed at meeting the targeting of the Palestinian cause, and

the attempts to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict according to the American-Israeli requirements.

Syria knows that such positions may cause some tension in its relations with the “moderate” Arab countries. However, the Syrian positions were accurately outlined within an interpretation that is aware of the regional, Arab and international reality, and that recognizes the Israeli and American traps, as well as the serious challenges facing the “refusal” and resistance options.

Therefore, Syria maintained diplomatic language, stances, and tracks; in an attempt to take advantage of available opportunities, without exaggerating the possibilities and expectations.

Confirming the Syrian position of supporting Hamas and the Palestinian resistance factions, Hamas confirmed that “its relationship with Syria is strong, and is unlikely to be affected by any regional changes on the ground,” and that the transition of Hamas and Islamic Jihad leaders from Damascus, has not been addressed at all during the meetings with Syrian officials. Hamas also confirmed that Syria hosts the resistance and “refusal” factions, in spite of the Syrian indirect negotiations with Israel.²⁵

The Syrian support for the Palestinian resistance during the Israeli aggression on Gaza, was confirmed by a Syrian invitation to convene an urgent meeting of Arab kings and presidents to discuss the joint Arab action; to stop the Israeli aggression and support the Palestinians in the GS. These Syrian efforts did not succeed, however, they participated in the summit which was held in the capital of Qatar, entitled Summit in support of Gaza, where Khalid Mish‘al represented Hamas and the Palestinian resistance, while Mahmud ‘Abbas boycotted this summit.

c. Syria’s Position Towards Israel

The Israeli army still occupies the Golan Heights since 1967. Though Syria deals with the Palestinian issue on a national basis, it wants to restore its land that is still occupied. From the Syrian perspective, Israel is an occupier of the Palestinian and Syrian lands. Thus, Syria started in 2008 a series of indirect negotiations, with some Israeli officials, through the intermediary of Turkey, aimed at the withdrawal of Israel from the Golan Heights in return for Syrian recognition of Israel.

These negotiations were conducted, after the Syrian President Bashar Assad has suggested that his country is preparing for war with Israel, if the occupation of the

Golan continues, saying that, “None of us rule out the option of war.”²⁶ However, the Syrian President refused to make secret and direct contacts with Israel, stressing that any talks with Tel Aviv will be announced to the public opinion. Assad said that the principle on which Syria acts is to reject secret talks or contacts with Israel, whatever they were, and all what can be done in this regard will be announced to the public opinion in Syria.²⁷

Five rounds of indirect talks between Syria and Israel were held in Ankara, under the auspices of Ahmet Davutoğlu, the chief foreign policy advisor to Turkish Prime Minister and Feridun Sinirlioğlu, deputy undersecretary for Middle East Affairs in the Turkish Foreign Ministry. The talks dealt with security arrangements, normal peace relations -if Israel withdraws from the Syrian Golan, scheduling the Israeli withdrawal, and the water issue. It is believed that Israel is not serious in these negotiations, and that it wanted to break the alliance between Syria and each of Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah.

The talks stalled because of the Israeli aggression on Gaza and with the end of the year, Syria announced that these talks stopped. Assad outlined Syria’s policy of refusing to have any agreement with Israel at the expense of his country’s relations with Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah. However, he showed once again his readiness for peace with Israel in return of fully restoring the Golan Heights, i.e. beyond the line of June 4, 1967.²⁸

4. Lebanon

In the following part we will shed light on developments related to the Palestinian presence in Lebanon in 2008; and on Lebanon’s position on the aggression against the GS.

a. The Palestinian Situation in Lebanon

A unified Palestinian leadership of emergency to be responsible for the day-to-day interaction between the Palestinians and the Lebanese authorities was formed by a decision from all the Palestinian factions in Lebanon, whether under the PLO or from outside. It was emphasized that all factions would abide by the decisions of the Palestinian leadership of emergency in dealing with emergency situations in Lebanon.

The factions explained this agreement as a result of “the serious developments that swept through Lebanon, as well as, to prevent the Palestinian from being

caught by these conflicts, to maintain fraternal relations with all Lebanese parties, to maintain the same distance from everyone, and to consolidate the Palestinian position in order to preserve the higher interests of the Palestinian people.”

It was emphasized that the Palestinians in Lebanon will abide by this position, and that “its violation constitutes a Detrimental to the best interests of the Palestinian, and a departure from the Palestinian consensus.” The statement issued by the leaders of Palestinian factions declared their commitment and respect to the unity of Lebanon’s land and people, and their invitation to the Lebanese parties to dialogue.

The statement called upon all Lebanese parties to avoid “the involvement of Palestinians whether politically or in the media in the current events, not to rush in believing any rumors or fabricated information in this regard, and to contact with the concerned Palestinian leaderships to make sure of any position, information, or rumor.”

Palestinian factions took executive measures for the content of the agreement including the formation of Emergency Committee in Beirut, headed by Brigadier-General Khaled ‘Aref, a PLO official in charge of foreign affairs, with sub-committees in each camp in Beirut and its suburbs at the Emergency Committee’s disposal. It was also agreed that Major General Dr. Midhat Kamal (may God have mercy on him, was assassinated later in 23/3/2009) would be nominated for the Secretariat of the Central Emergency Committee.

In a speech during a meeting held in the camp of Burj al-Barajneh refugee camp in the southern suburbs of Beirut, Kamal said that “the developments, that have occurred in Lebanon, have unified the Palestinian factions,” adding that the Central Emergency leadership “seeks to spare the camps the involvement in any negative developments in Lebanon.” Noting that the Palestinians avoid taking any party’s side whether it was in support of the government or with the Lebanese opposition.

‘Abbas Zaki, the PLO representative in Lebanon endorsed the agreement, emphasizing “the firm Palestinian stance, of not to interfere in the Lebanese domestic affairs,” and stressing that “the Palestinians will not be with one party against another in any inter-Lebanese conflict, and they will spare no effort to be a bridge of agreement between the Lebanese.”

He called for “letting those lying in wait for the Palestinian people miss their opportunity, through strengthening the Palestinian joint frameworks.”²⁹

on 7/1/2008, in the celebration of the 43rd Fatah movement anniversary, ‘Abbas Zaki has presented what was later known as the “Palestine Declaration”, in which he offered an apology to the Lebanese people for any damage the Palestinian presence have caused to Lebanon. The announcement states:

It is fair to say that the Palestinian huge presence, human, political and military weight had an overwhelming impact on Lebanon on all levels, certainly in addition to its known share of participation in the duty of supporting the Palestinian cause (supporting state), which affected strongly its state, economy, its social human structure and living. It is as well fair to state that the Palestinian involvement in this country especially during the 1975 and 1982 wars was generally forced by internal and external vanquishing circumstances.

And this is not being said to disclaim responsibility or to attribute the events that took place then to the ‘conspiracy theory’, but we say this in search of justice for both victims, and in order to be able to open the door for reevaluation and to help ourselves to purify our memory. Thus, we do want to take the initiative to apologize to any damage we have caused to our Dear Lebanon whether intentionally or not. And this apology is in no way conditioned by a counter apology.³⁰

On the other hand, 44 Christian Lebanese signed a joint letter headlined “Appeal to our Palestinian brothers in Lebanon”; on the eve of the anniversary of the Lebanese war. It was a written apology for the “unjustifiable acts committed during the civil war in Lebanon and resulted in the death of innocent fellow Palestinian.” The letter says:

In the 33rd anniversary of the outbreak of the Lebanese war and in response to the appology made by ‘Abbas Zaki, the representative of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Lebanon on 7/1/2008; in our turn, we would like to recognize that some of us, we Lebanese Christians, committed unjustified acts during that long war which resulted in the death of innocent fellow Palestinians. This hurts us and we would like to apologize, asking God to show us how to compensate, if possible, for the injustice perpetrated. We call on our fellow Palestinians to enter into relations and dialogue with us in the service of a decent, secure and fraternal life for us all. We are confident that what we express here is shared by many of our fellow Lebanese.³¹

A joint seminar was held in the headquarters of the Kataeb Party, which was one of the the most vocal opponents of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon, on the occasion of the anniversary of the event that took place on 13/4/1974, when some members of Kataeb Party fired at a bus carrying Palestinians in the neighborhood of 'Ain al-Rummaneh.

At the seminar, Amin Gemayel; the party leader, Akram Shayeb; Member of Parliament, Nadim Abdel-Samad; the President of the National Committee of the Democratic Left Movement, and 'Abbas Zaki, the PLO representative in Lebanon. Gemayel described the meeting as "a meeting of openness to achieve the Lebanese-Palestinian reconciliation that supports the inter-Lebanese reconciliation." Meanwhile, the MP Shayeb emphasized the refusal of "imposing resettlement", and urged "all the Palestinian factions to unite." Zaki affirmed, "the establishment of a Palestinian state is the only savior that exempts Lebanon from this heavy burden," adding that the issue of the State is "a Lebanese issue in the first place."

It should be noted that both events are linked to the Palestinian presence in Lebanon, and concerns over resettlement. Especially since the resettlement issue had been raised again between the Lebanese factions, as one of the most important political issues of concern to the Lebanese politicians and the Lebanese public opinion, from across the political spectrum. The opposition accuses the Lebanese government that it is seeking to settle the Palestinians in Lebanon, while the government denied the charge. Thus, the resettlement fear returned to loom in Lebanon.

Change and Reform bloc chief MP Michel 'Aoun accused the government of taking the decision to resettle the Palestinians. He said, "in waiting for completing the sale movie, we go to link between the current government and the sale of land and resettlement, saying that the right of return is a normal right." He added: We want to know the practical position of the government particularly that the President George W. Bush asked to establish a fund to compensate the Palestinians in replace of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). According to 'Aoun "The resettlement is actually taking place had the Lebanese did not realize its real risks, and if the plotters continued their conspiracy over the country and its people with the complicity of some people inside." He said, "The settlement is not a scarecrow, as some claim, it still exists, and worked upon to be finalized by the PA President Mahmud 'Abbas and Yossi Beilin, the Israeli official."³²

The Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Lebanese Forces, Samir Geagea, responded to 'Aoun saying that 'Aoun claims possession of documents that confirm the scheme of resettlement of Palestinians in Lebanon. The presence of Palestinians in Lebanon dates back to 1948, when there was an actual planning for the resettlement, meaning the creation of a PA in Lebanon. "General 'Aoun was not -with all due respect- the one who confronted it. We did so, and everyone is aware of what the Kataeb and the Lebanese Forces have done, at that stage." Geagea called on to stop bidding on this topic. He asked: Where is this scheme? Who implements it? Geagea added that the settlement requires the consent of the two parties; the Lebanese and Palestinian, but the two are against it.

The Lebanese Prime Minister Fu'ad al-Sanyurah rejected this exchange between the politicians by emphasizing the Lebanese official and popular position against resettlement "in all its forms, and that Lebanon upholds the inalienable right of return for Palestinian refugees." Al-Sanyurah's position was a response for the statement made by US President George W. Bush who showed his commitment to a viable Palestinian state, his appreciation of the Arab peace initiative; which was to include a comprehensive and just solution to the problem of Palestinian refugees, and what the question of new international mechanisms, including compensation to resolve the problem of refugees.

Al-Sanyurah said that Lebanon was committed to the Arab peace initiative as "a draft plan for a comprehensive settlement that responds [to] the requirements of international legitimacy, and that Lebanon is entirely committed to it, without deduction or division." Al-Sanyurah stressed the necessity of resolving the problem of Palestinian refugees on the basis of "the international legitimacy and all its relevant resolutions, including the right of return."

Al-Sanyurah stressed that "Lebanon's upholds this inalienable right... and refuses resettlement in all its forms," and that this position is based on "the Lebanese national consensus, and provided in the preamble of the Lebanese Constitution in a clear and binding form."³³

There are several criteria governing the security situation in the camps in Lebanon, which are: The State, and the Lebanese parties and forces deal with the issue of the camps mainly from the security perspective. The Palestinian forces and factions and their supporters in Lebanon constitute an extension of the Palestinian

factions in the Palestinian territories, interacting with them and affected by their variables.

This was reflected more than once on the relationship between these factions within the camps, in accordance with the development of events in the Palestinian territories. During 2008, the Palestinian refugee camps witnessed a series of events that has raised Palestinian fears of repeating the events of Nahr al-Bared camp in the rest of the camps.

In February and March 2008, the Beddawi camp in northern Lebanon witnessed a series of statements which carried different signatures, such as, Fatah Alyassir's sons, the cadres and honoraries of the Fatah movement, Fatah al-Islam, and other signatures that do not have military or political extensions. These statements included threats to the leaders of the Fatah movement.³⁴ In November, the security situation was tense again in the Beddawi camp following the attempt of Fatah members to arrest one of the religious figures in the camp, accusing him of having connections with Fatah al-Islam. The attempt resulted in killing one person, arresting two wanted persons, and handing them over to the Lebanese security forces.³⁵

During 2008, 'Ain al-Helwa camp, the most prominent side in the security file witnessed a series of clashes and tensions that began with the killing of a member of Jund al-Sham in January 2008. Then, the security situation in the camp escalated on 21/3/2008, when a group of the Fatah movement, in coordination with the Lebanese security agencies, arrested a wanted member of Jund al-Sham, and handed him over to Lebanese security forces. This increased the security tension between the members of Jund al-Sham and Fatah, which led to wounding three people, and dozens of families decampment from the camp.³⁶ The tensions between Fatah and Jund al-Sham members reoccurred occasionally. A clash took place between members of Fatah and others from Jund al-Sham, in which one of the most prominent figures of the Jund al-Sham, known as Shehadah Jowhar was killed, in addition to two others, one from the 'Usbat al-Ansar.³⁷

During 2008, The most prominent event for the issue of reconstruction of Nahr al-Bared camp, was not more than the launch of the reconstruction scheme by the Lebanese Prime Minister Fu'ad al-Sanyura, on 12/2/2008, in the presence of 'Abbas Zaki; the PLO representative in Lebanon, and Karen Abu Zayd; The Commissioner General of UNRWA.

The details of this plan shows that the camp will accommodate about 22 thousand people from the camp, and the percentage of construction works to the land will be about 65%, while the buildings height would be between two and four floors. It was noted that this design reflected the position of the Lebanese army, which opposes the reconstruction of the camp's waterfront.³⁸

In 2008, some 1,900 families returned to the camp out of the 4,500 families displaced from their homes in Nahr al-Bared.³⁹ And in June 2008, the process of removing debris from the old camp in preparation for reconstruction began. This process has been scheduled for completion in August 2008,⁴⁰ however, until the completion of this report the debris were not removed completely.

Some explain the reasons for the delay in the reconstruction of the camp as the absence of a political decision of the Lebanese state in this regard, especially after the International donors' conference was held on 23/6/2008, and confirmation of Prime Minister Fu'ad al-Sanyurah that four Gulf states; namely Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, will contribute by about 50% of the amount needed for the reconstruction, which was estimated by many bodies by about \$450 million.

Benita Ferrero-Waldner, the European Commissioner declared, on behalf of the European Union, a European contribution of \$45 million to rebuild the camp.⁴¹ Ursula Plassnik, the Austrian Foreign Minister announced that \$122 million was offered for the reconstruction of Bared camp and the surrounding villages, an amount that is limited to the European and Western countries.⁴²

Dealing with camp issues, including the issue of Nahr al-Bared camp reconstruction from the security standpoint was reflected negatively on the humanitarian situation of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Despite the implementation of reconstruction plans by the UNRWA, and the donors pledge to finance the project of reconstruction, however, the political decision on this issue is still unresolved, which raises fears among Palestinians of the existence of obstacles in Lebanese decision-making institution, where some are still willing to keep the pressure on the Palestinians aiming at weakening their presence in Lebanon.

b. Lebanon's Position Towards the Aggression against the GS:

Lebanon was against the Israeli aggression on the GS, recalling the Israeli aggression against Lebanon in the summer of 2006. Lebanon called for curbing the

aggression, and called upon the Arab world to take urgent moves at the same level as the Israeli attack on Gaza. Salim al-Huss, the former Lebanese Prime Minister, said:

We, like all Arab citizens do not believe the humanitarian tragedies that are going on in the GS resulting from the Israeli barbaric aggression. We also do not understand the reason for the hesitation to convene the Arab summit meeting after the unjustifiable adjournment of the Arab foreign ministers meeting... The Arab rulers wait several days before meeting to launch a national position, while the lives of hundreds of the nation's children are lost and their bodies are torn every hour. We are shocked by the stand of some Arab leaders, who have blamed the victim, addressed the stricken by the language of gloat, and avoided uttering one-word that would be offensive to the Israeli enemy, or would held it responsible for the consequences of the atrocities committed to our own brothers in a Palestinian territory under siege.⁴³

'Issam Abu Jamra, the Deputy Prime Minister denounced the mass killings committed by Israel against the Palestinians. He said: "Violence between nations and peoples only breeds violence, and the policy of mutual understanding is the only way to achieve stability and security." After Tammam Salam, the Lebanese Culture Minister donated blood, in a campaign launched by the Islamic Makassed Society in Beirut, he said, "Today we offer a drop of blood to support and assist this people, but there is much more required; what is required is a unified stand to our Palestinian brothers and all Arabs as a whole to confirm our full right to face this Israeli aggression and ferocity."⁴⁴

General Michel 'Aoun called on the world to stop Israeli aggression against the GS and to lift the blockade imposed on it. He called on Arab states to take a firm stand on what is going on because "silence is like participating in the crime." He said in a televised statement: "The situation should not continue as it is; Gaza is bleeding for years and the world sees the situation now as being normal." He warned of "the normalization of what is going on in Gaza," pointing out that "Israel can inflict losses (to the Palestinians), but will not be able to conquer, it is an action out of fear, and this is a sign of weakness."⁴⁵

Hassan Nasrallah, the Hezbollah Secretary-General called for holding "A day of mourning and solidarity", under the title "In support for Gaza". He also called for "a third *Intifadah* in Palestine, and uprisings in both the Arab and Islamic worlds," and urged Palestinians to "unify".⁴⁶

5. Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia tried to be neutral regarding the inter-Palestinian disputes. Consequently, it advocated consistently the need to achieve national reconciliation between the PA and Hamas, and the implementation of the Mecca Agreement which was signed on 8/2/2007 under the auspices of Saudi Arabia.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia joined the so-called moderate states, and was represented with low level of representation by only its delegate to the Arab League, Ahmad al-Qattan in the Arab Summit which was held in the Syrian capital at the end of March 2008. Saudi Arabia did not participate in the Doha conference which was held in support of the GS, however, it stressed, during the visit of former US President George W. Bush to Riyadh, on the Arab peace initiative, which is essentially an initiative launched by Saudi King in 2002, when he was the crown prince.

Saudi Arabia asked President Bush to put pressure on Israel to accept the Arab initiative. It also refused to offer further concession to Israel by changing some items of the initiative, in order to be agreed upon by Israel. Saudi Arabia pointed out that the issue of the Saudi recognition of Israel is out of the question before reaching a final and comprehensive peace in the Middle East, the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, and the commitment to the Arab initiative for peace. Even more, Saudi Arabia threatened that in the case of Israel's refusal of the Arab initiative as it is without amendment, the Arab States will have to review its options.

Saudi Arabia advocated the idea of sending Arab forces to Gaza, as a solution to open the crossings and lift the siege on the GS. Arab countries were divided between supporters and opponents, but the real refusal was from the Israeli part, which feared that a clash would occur between the Israeli army, which attacks repeatedly Gaza, and the Arab forces. If those forces are there, they will intervene if missiles were fired from Gaza into Israel, and the latter responded militarily.

It seems that Saudi Arabia wanted the crossings to be handed over to those force. It also wanted them to prepare the security arrangements to ensure the integrity of elections with the Arab help through the rebuilding the security agencies on professional and national basis.⁴⁷

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia announced that it did not interfere in the issue of the Palestinian pilgrims from Gaza, stressing that it deals with Palestinians with

equality. Saudi Arabia gave thousands of them, including the GS inhabitants, the entry visas to the Kingdom to perform Hajj. The Saudi government has increased the quota of the Palestinians, taking into account their humanitarian circumstances, and all the Kingdom's ports are ready to welcome them and to facilitate their performance of rituals. It also affirmed that all the Palestinian pilgrims are being dealt with as Muslims, regardless of their political affiliation.

Third: Developments in the Field of Normalization

The issue of normalization of relations between Arab countries and Israel is still confined to the minimal with those countries that signed peace treaties with Israel like Egypt and Jordan and other Arab countries that have established limited relations with it, like Mauritania for example.

1. Egypt

Relations of normalization between Egypt and Israel have developed, in particular at the economic level. The most important was the Egyptian approval to pump the Egyptian natural gas to Israel, pursuant to an agreement signed by the two parties valued at \$2.5 billion.

The agreement states that there will be exporting natural gas from Egypt to Israel, by 107 billion cubic meters of gas annually for 15 years, renewable, which means that one fifth of the electricity generated in Israel over the next decade will be from the Egyptian gas.

The Egyptian minister of Petroleum Sameh Fahmy, has agreed to allow the Egyptian oil and gas holding companies to export gas to Israel through the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Company, and to begin implementation. This Agreement triggered opposed reactions from the Egyptian public opinion, as represented by the civil society organizations, parties and various political currents.

The case was brought before the court, where the Administrative Court in Egypt ruled to halt the implementation of the agreement and to stop pumping gas to Israel, based on the Egyptian constitution that gave the parliament, not the Egyptian government, the exclusive right to control the sale of natural resources. However, the Government objected to the court's decision and denied the need

for the approval of the Egyptian people's Assembly to the natural gas deal; saying that it is a private agreement between the Egyptian Eastern Mediterranean Gas and Israel Electric Corporation, and not with the Egyptian government.

However, Ambassador Ibrahim Yousry, the main prosecutor in the case of the Egyptian gas exports to Israel, demanded the Egyptian government to stop immediately the supply of gas to Israel in respect of the decision of the Egyptian judiciary in this regard. About the coincidence between this decision with the intensification of the siege on Gaza, the ambassador said that Egyptian gas saved the Israeli consumer of electricity 20% of the cost, "Why do not we export the gas to Gaza instead of Israel." The Egyptian natural gas is still exported to Israel, the case is still pending before the courts.

The Egyptian companies continued importing some Israeli products, within the framework of the QIZ Protocol (Qualified Industrial Zone Agreement (QIZ Agreement)). The total number of the registered companies in the QIZ unit until November 2008 was up to 689 companies; 57% in Alexandria, the City of the Tenth of Ramadan and the Shubra al-Khaimah.

On the other hand, it was discovered that the hotels in Taba City, which located on the border with occupied Palestine, have access to drinking water through water lines from Israel, and not through the desalination plant of the Egyptian Ministry of Housing in Taba.

It was also discovered that the Facilities of the Hilton Taba Resort, which was built by Israel during the occupation of the Sinai, are all linked to the Israeli utilities network. Despite the transition of the Hotel affiliation to Egypt after the International Arbitration Commission's decision of right of Egypt in Taba, the hotel management found that it was the better and "cheaper" to access the public services of Israel.

Investors in the city of Taba admitted before the Committee on Culture and Tourism and Information in the Egyptian people's Assembly that the price per cubic meter of water is up to seven Egyptian pounds if purchased from the desalination plant, while Israel sells it only for a 1.25 Egyptian pound (the US dollar equivalent of 5.3 Egyptian pounds).

A reportage of the Seventh Israeli channel uncovered that Egypt in collaboration with the European Union hosted a conference with the participation of Israel, for

the of technology development in the field of textile and food in the countries of the Mediterranean basin, in the framework of the European technological project Medibtikar. The reportage pointed out that the project costs 7.3 billion euros (i.e. equivalent to about \$9.86 billion), and will last for three years, with the participation of Israel, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and the PA.

The Israeli representative was Sima Amir, Head of the Business and Technology Cooperation Department of the Manufacturers' Association of Israel. She said that the project will be sponsored by the European Union through several stages, where the first stage is in the area of fabric, while the second is about food.⁴⁸

2. Jordan

Jordan is the second Arab country to officially normalize relations with Israel, in spite of the popular rejection for this step. It turned out that Jordan's exports to Israel, during one month (February 2008), amounted to 3,700 tons of vegetables and fruits, while Jordan imported during the same month, 922 tons of vegetables and fruits. During the olive harvest season, Jordan also exported to Israel, huge quantities of olives at a rate of 200 to 300 tons per day.

According to a report of The Israel Export and International Cooperation Institute, which was published by Quds Press Agency, Jordanians are the largest consumer of Israeli products in the Arab world, preceding Egypt with its population that is more than about 15 times the population of Jordan. The report pointed out that Jordan is the largest "customer" of Israeli goods in the first quarter of 2008, and the volume of imports reached 102 million, an increase of 62% over the same period last year. The report considers that Jordan is Israel's first trade partner. Although the report did not refer to the nature of the Israeli products consumed by the Jordanians, however, it is mostly food, agricultural and industrial products. In addition to clothing products, that are mostly sold in some shopping centres, signed by "Made in Israel".⁴⁹

The Jordanian Agricultural Engineers Association threatened to publish a list of Jordanian traders and companies who imported agricultural materials, such as mango, barley and corn from Israel. It was found that 99% of imported mangoes in the Jordanian markets are from Israel not "Egypt", as being said in the Jordanian market. An official source in the association pointed out that the

growing importation of corn, barley, Soybeans from Israel, which reached from the beginning of 2008 till July 2008, respectively 5,610 tons and 1,500 tons and 3,000 tons.⁵⁰

3. Other Arab Countries

Mauritanian newspapers revealed that Israel succeeded to win some players in the Mauritanian government before the coup d'état, and that members of the Mossad managed to recruit Mauritanian MPs, in an attempt to block the way of any possibility of severing relations inherited from the era of former President Maaouya Ould Taya, especially after the President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi has pledged before and after his inauguration in April 2008, to present these relations for referendum and consultation and to take the appropriate decision in this regard. It is known that Mauritania decided to freeze the political and economic relations with Israel during the Doha summit in support of Gaza at the beginning of 2009. On 6/3/2009, Mauritania supplemented this resolution by expelling Israeli diplomats in Nouakchott, and the closing the Israeli embassy in Mauritania.⁵¹

On the other hand, 'Abdel Wahid al-Nur, the commander of the rebel Sudan Liberation Movement in Darfur admitted that his group opened an office in Israel, and that some Sudanese who fled to Israel are the ones who opened the group's office there, pointing at the same time that Israel; according to him, saved young Sudanese from genocide. Al-Nur said that the political vision of the movement allows the opening of an Israeli embassy in Khartoum, had it be for the interests of Sudan, according to him. Recently, Israel has granted asylum to 600 Sudanese from Darfur.

Al-Nur denied that he had visited Israel, but said that, "there's nothing to stop him from visiting it, if he found that it will be for his interest."⁵²

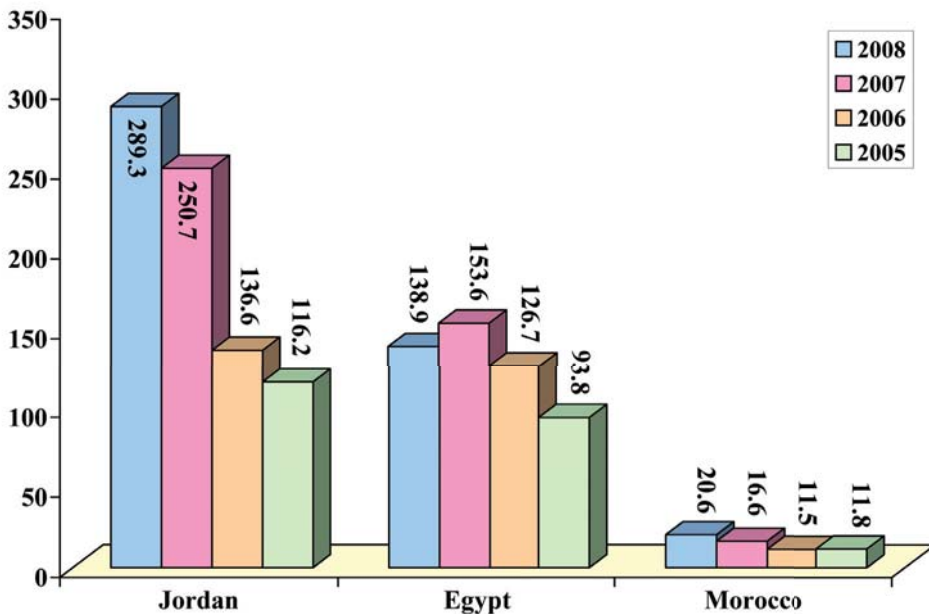
Al-Nur strongly defended the opening of an office of his movement in Israel and vowed to work on the exchange of embassies with Israel when they succeed in overthrowing Bashir, as he said, and when they achieve the establishment of the secular state. In a statement distributed to the press on 21/7/2008, and signed by the spokesman, 'Issa Ibrahim, the Office of the Sudan Liberation Movement in Israel declared its intention to organize a major rally supporting Israel, including all spectra of the Sudanese people in Israel.⁵³

In Iraq, the Supreme Judicial Council overturned the decision of the Iraqi parliament, which had been taken to lift the parliamentary immunity of the Member of Parliament Mithal al-Alusi, due to his visit to Israel, based on the Iraqi Constitution. The Iraqi Federal Court confirmed that the decision of the Iraqi parliament is contrary to the Constitution, and is not based on law. It also confirmed the right of every Iraqi to travel to Israel without imposing any legal restrictions on them.⁵⁴

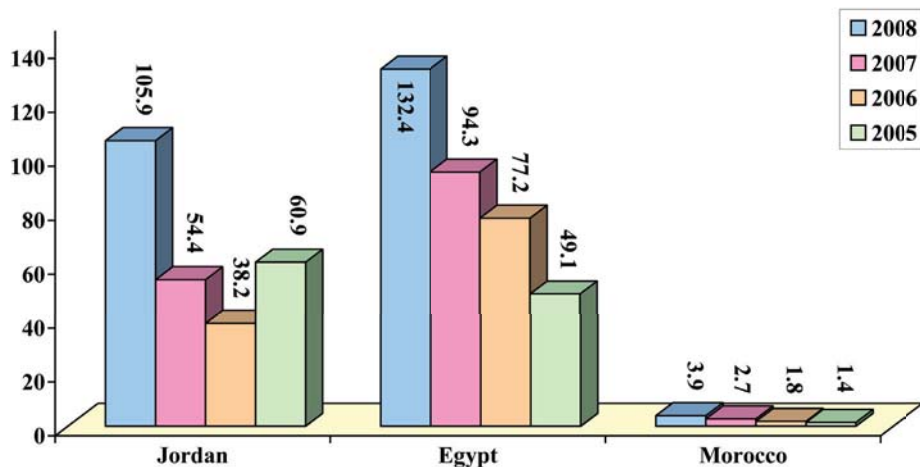
Table 1/3: Israeli Exports and Imports with Some Arab Countries 2005-2008 (\$ million)⁵⁵

Countries	Israeli imports from:				Israeli exports to:			
	2008	2007	2006	2005	2008	2007	2006	2005
Jordan	105.9	54.4	38.2	60.9	289.3	250.7	136.6	116.2
Egypt	132.4	94.3	77.2	49.1	138.9	153.6	126.7	93.8
Morocco	3.9	2.7	1.8	1.4	20.6	16.6	11.5	11.8

Israeli Exports to Some Arab Countries 2005-2008 (\$ million)



Israeli Imports from Some Arab Countries 2005-2008 (\$ million)



Fourth: The Public Arab Attitude and Orientations

The end of 2008 was the phase of Arab and Islamic popular *intifadah*, and the public massive move and broad public support for the Palestinian cause and the resistance, after the Israeli aggression against the Palestinian people in the GS. This aggression led the Arab and Islamic street in various parts of the world to re-embrace the Palestinian cause, and the heroic Palestinian resistance was able to move the street and the Arab public opinion to put pressure on the official Arab regimes in order to stop the Israeli aggression.

The Arab popular support for the Palestinians was miles ahead the Arab official resolutions, which embarrassed many of the Arab regimes, some of which was accused of complicity, by not moving quickly to stop the Israeli aggression.

Before looking at the Arab popular position towards the Israeli aggression, it must be emphasized that the public view of the Palestinian cause in general was supporting the Palestinian resistance, and refusing to normalize relations with Israel. In Jordan, the Anti-Normalization National Conference was held on 25/10/2008. In this conference, significant papers were presented that sharply criticized the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty, its signatories, and implementers; and called for the abolition of this treaty.

Some researches that were presented in the General Federation of Jordanian Trade Unions have described the peace treaty as being “disastrous”, and the treaty of “humiliation and shame”, pointing out that the treaty has established an official alliance between Jordan and Israel. In a paper presented in the Conference, the former deputy in the Parliament of Jordan Ali Abu Sukkar said, “Normalization is a Zionist invention, for its importance and strategic necessity to the Zionist entity, which aims to integrate it in the region, and change the Arabs psychologically and mentally, in order to accept and admit the existence of (Israel) as a Jewish independent state with sovereignty, and recognize the ideological basis for it.”⁵⁶

The Jordanian trade unions threatened implicitly to resume its boycott of any Jordanian who participates in normalization activities with Israel. They criticized a Bulletin issued by the Jordanian Ministry of Health about a training course for physicians that will be held later with Israeli doctors. The unions said, in a statement of the anti-normalization committees, that successive governments have facilitated the normalization and the suspicious relations, and that the Unions consider any Jordanian who agrees to attend any Israeli activity or an activity with Israelis, to be a “normalizer”.

Many Jordanian national figures called for expelling the Israeli ambassador in Amman, and the ambassadors of countries that support the siege imposed by the Israeli occupation of the GS. This has occurred during a sit-in organized by dozens of Jordanian party members, trade unionists and representatives of public events in front of the trade unions complex in Amman the capital; calling for lifting the siege on the GS.

The same applies to the Egyptian opposition, which denounced the continuation of agricultural and economic cooperation between Cairo and Tel Aviv, despite the continuing Israeli attacks almost on a daily basis on the Palestinian people. The various Egyptian political forces and parties and trade unions have called on to demonstrate in the Bar Association headquarters in downtown Cairo, to protest against the Israeli massacres in Gaza, as well as to protest against the American interference in Arab affairs. They demanded a serious Arab and Islamic reaction to stop the Israeli massacres, and holding the perpetrators as war criminals who must be prosecuted internationally.

There were also demonstrations in the Egyptian universities to denounce the Israeli massacres against the Palestinian people in Gaza, attended by thousands of

students, demanding Cairo to take a firm stance in order to stop these massacres. They also called for expelling the Israeli ambassador, termination of the Camp David Accords, withdrawing the Egyptian ambassador from Tel Aviv, reviving the boycott of the Israeli entity and countries advocating it. The parliamentary and trade union angry reactions continued all over Egypt because of shooting an Egyptian girl dead by the Israeli troops in the border area between Egypt and the GS.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt called on the Egyptian government to refrain from participating in the siege of Gaza, and demanded the reopening of the Rafah crossing.⁵⁷ During the Israeli aggression on Gaza, the Muslim Brotherhood played an active and leading role in moving the Egyptian street, through the organization of demonstrations, sit-ins, fund-raising campaigns, as they called for Arab and Muslim peoples to stand against what they called “collusion by most Arab and Muslim regimes and governments” with the Israeli enemy, aiming at striking the Palestinian resistance.⁵⁸

Hussein Ibrahim, deputy head of the Muslim Brotherhood bloc in the Egyptian parliament, said that the decision to strike Gaza, had been declared from Cairo after a meeting between Livni and Abu al-Ghait. He described what happened as a human massacre and genocide war, and demanded the immediate halting of exporting natural gas to Israel, and the reopening of the Rafah crossing for the Palestinians.⁵⁹ The Brotherhood criticized the Egyptian initiative for a cease-fire, saying it equalizes between the executioner and the victim.⁶⁰

The opposition Labor Party condemned the Egyptian official role in the war on Gaza. The Labor Party and the Revolutionary Socialists accused the Egyptian authorities of working to support the Israeli occupation, calling for “Allowing the opportunity of Jihad for those wishing to travel to Gaza.”⁶¹ Abdul Jaleel Mustafa, the general coordinator of the Kefaya movement, said: “The image of Egypt is in the bottom, because of the support provided by the regime to Israel.”⁶² Hundreds of members of the Muslim Brotherhood, Kefaya movement, the Labor Party, the Revolutionary Socialists, and others were arrested by the Egyptian security forces, following their participation in demonstrations of solidarity with Gaza.⁶³

In Nouakchott, the Mauritanian capital, the National Rally for Reform and Development Party (RNRD) demanded the Mauritanian President to use his powers to sever relations with the “entity” immediately. In a speech before a number of

Mauritanians party leaders and a rally in the headquarters of his party, Mohamed Jamil Mansour said: “we are no longer able to be patient, no longer able to wait, the President must use his powers and sever these relations immediately, and history will write this down.” Qatar and Mauritania has frozen their recognition of Israel, during the Arab summit held in Doha in support of the GS.

In Tunisia, the opposition Tunisian Democratic Progressive Party condemned the official Arab silence regarding the ongoing Israeli aggression against the Palestinian people in the GS. It said that this silence “is implicitly encouraging the aggressor to continue air raids on the defenseless Palestinian people.”

Demonstrations swept all over Arab capitals and cities, the largest were in Morocco and Algeria; where millions of people participated.

Lebanese parties, forces and national figures held a national joint Lebanese-Palestinian meeting in solidarity with the Palestinian people and the heroic resistance in the GS, and the condemnation of the barbaric Israeli aggression on it.

Hassan Hodroj, a member of the political bureau of Hezbollah, said that what is happening in the GS could not wait, because the current aggression is not an aggression against the Palestinian people, it is rather an aggression by the United States with an international complicity. Mohamed Saleh, a Hezbollah official in the north, gave a speech at the sit-in, in which he said, “The aggression aims at terminating the resistance, and the imposition of humiliation and surrender.”

Al-Jama‘a al-Islamiyyah in Lebanon organized sit-ins where it called upon the international community to lift the siege on Gaza, called for Egypt also to reopen the Rafah crossing. During the aggression on Gaza, the *Jama‘a* has organized several joint activities with the Palestinian people, including the organization of demonstrations, sit-ins, and fund-raising, in the various regions of Lebanon.

After a massive march through the streets of Beirut, ‘Ali Sheikh ‘Ammar, the head of the Political Bureau of the *Jama‘a* said, “The Security Council should not deal with the aggression on Gaza with such lightness and irresponsibility.” He called on the Organization of the Islamic Conference to “side with the people of Palestine.” He denounced “the Arab League’s hesitation and confusion, which indicates that it is not eligible for the responsibility.”⁶⁴ He said that the time has come for the Arab peoples to move, towards reform and change, which is compatible with the option of resistance, calling on Muslim governments to take a clear position.⁶⁵

In marches that toured the streets of Damascus, the Syrian cities and the Palestinian refugee camps, the Syrian public expressed their anger and condemnation of the massacres of Gaza and the WB.

The National Union of Kuwaiti Students, the administrative committee of the University of Kuwait branch, the administrative committee of France's branch, the administrative committee of Egypt's branch, the administrative committee of Jordan's branch, and the administrative committee of Britain's branch issued a joint statement condemning the Israeli attacks on the GS and the Palestinian people.

The general secretariat of the Arab parties conference, which is based in Amman and represents 130 Arab parties from different Arab countries, issued a memorandum to the Arab leaders and kings in the eve of the Arab summit in Damascus. The general secretariat of the Arab parties called for the Arab kings and leaders "to withdraw the Arab Peace Initiative, and support the resistance in Palestine," and "not waiving the right of return for Palestinian refugees," and "lifting the siege imposed on the Palestinians and not to press them to make political compromises," and "to forward the Sana'a agreement for Palestinian reconciliation and the severance of relations with the Zionist entity and activating the Arab boycott against Israel."

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the year 2008 began with continuation of official Arab impotence, lack of influence on the course of events in the developments of the Palestinian cause; from lifting the siege and reopening of the crossings in Gaza, to the failure to put pressure on Israel to agree to the Arab peace initiative, to stop the settlements, the establishment of an independent Palestinian state - which the former President George Bush has promised by the end of the year, and finally the intervention to achieve reconciliation between the PA and Hamas.

The year ended by the Israeli aggression on Gaza; thousands dead and wounded, the destruction of homes, mosques, universities, schools and infrastructure of Gaza, and the official Arab regime and its inability to stop the aggression.

However, in contrast, the year ended by achieving the legendary steadfastness of Hamas and the Palestinian resistance, and increased public support for them.

Hamas has shown that it is able to deal efficiently, effectively and reliably, despite the lack of capabilities, in facing the Israeli aggression, and revitalizing the spirit and awareness of the Arab street, and rallying millions of Arab citizens to support the steadfastness of the resistance in Gaza encountering the Israeli war machine, after some have betted on the disappearance of the culture of resistance from the Arab street.

This resistance has prompted the sense of pride and self-confidence for the Palestinian people, the Arab world, and the Islamic nation, while other forces tried to foster the spirit of defeat and frustration in the Arab and Islamic nations. Moreover, the victory, achieved by the Palestinian resistance, resulted in increasing the divisions between the Arab regimes; between the moderate and the “refusal states”, at a time when the Arab masses have united behind the resistance approach, which emerged victorious from the Israeli aggression.

There is no doubt that these interactions will be the ones that will drive the Palestinian issue in the coming year, which will be dealt with the officially and popularly by the Arab. However, what is certain is that the steadfastness of the resistance and its victory in the battle of wills, in the GS, and the failure of the Israeli occupation in achieving its objectives, all resulted in confusion, and made everyone redo their calculations.

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