

The Palestinian Strategic Report 2011/12



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Chapter Three

The Palestinian Issue and the Arab World

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Introduction

A year into the outbreak of the Arab Spring uprisings, exaggeration seems to be still heavily present in discussions about the possible Arab approach (or approaches) to the Palestinian issue. In fact, the transformations of the new strategic environment have ushered in changes which we are still exploring. At the same time, some of the old features have remained intact and are still active, albeit to a limited extent. This compound duality (sustaining the old alongside the new elements) in the light of an Arab situation which is still open to a sundry possibilities, makes it more difficult to predict future outcomes, particularly long term repercussions. Such predictions need much political imagination, and a great deal of realism in order to present possible approaches to the future, policies and relations of the involved actors without promising to provide definite answers.

The 2011 uprisings undoubtedly brought to an end the political stalemate suffered in the Arab world over several decades. However, they have not led to strategic changes in Arab policies regarding the Palestinian issue similar to those witnessed in the aftermath of the first Arab revolutionary tide in the 1950s. The Egyptian uprising, which stimulated the most important changes in the region, succeeded in overthrowing the head of the ruling regime and many of its symbols; nonetheless, it retained its institutions including those assigned to manage the country's foreign policy. Consequently, the changes in the Egyptian approach towards the Palestinian issue and Egyptian-Israeli relations (which are intertwined), have not exceeded a limited tactical change. Such change represents the limit permissible in light of the strategies pursued by these institutions which are still primarily concerned with achieving stability and minimizing external problems as much as possible, in light of the critical transitional conditions in Egypt.

The wave of change witnessed throughout the Arab world in 2011, whether in the form of revolutions or popular movements demanding reform, struck a limited number of Arab regimes and did not lead to the revolutionizing the League of Arab States. The direct and immediate result of this wave did not stop traditional forces

from controlling the reins of power and reproducing of the “axis of moderation” within the League itself, while revolting forces were busy with developments in their countries.

In this context, there has been no significant change in the Arab approach to the peace settlement as the Arab Peace Initiative was neither withdrawn nor consolidated. This is true for the countries where the revolutions overthrew the old regimes and those whose regimes have, to date, survived the uprisings.

However, the Arab uprisings brought about an important development as they gave impetus to a strategic actor previously absent, or absented, from the Arab political scene. This actor is the Arab people, able to rediscover their great ability to work together and influence events. This is equally true for those people that formulated their own model of the Arab Spring and those that were inspired by the revolutionary spirit and consequently raised their demands for reform in the face of the ruling elites.

The uprisings also led to the rise of Islamic movements in many Arab countries including Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Kuwait. This resulted in a major change in the map of Arab-Palestinian relations, where it was necessary for many Arab regimes (the reasons varying with each country) to show relative openness towards Hamas.

The bottom line is that the new Arab strategic environment throughout 2011 was (and remains at the time of writing) rife with competing elements pushing each other in contradictory directions. Thus, while some factors push towards the maintenance of the conditions which prevailed before the outbreak of the uprisings, others try to create strategic, rather than tactical, changes in policies pertaining to the Palestinian issue. It is likely that this situation will continue as long as there is political mobility, lack of stability and a state of skepticism prevailing in the region. However, it remains important to remember that uncertainty is a common characteristic of all revolutions and if the people succeed in imposing their will, then it is not improbable that the conflict with Israel will see a restoration to its essence, with its Arab, Islamic and humanitarian dimensions, becoming a conflict over existence rather than borders.

First: The Stance of the League of Arab States

1. The Stance on the Peace Settlement

The new Arab strategic environment failed in its immediate developments to either revolutionize the Arab state system or allow the post-revolution forces (in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya) to control the system's epicenter. This is because the revolutions have not yet achieved their objectives or institutionalized their new regimes on political, constitutional, economic or military levels. It is also likely that the transitional phase might have led, at least temporarily, to a contradictory outcome by increasing the relative power of the Gulf states whose regimes have so far escaped the tide of the uprisings.¹

The Gulf states rushed to reap the benefits of the new opportunities created before any of the new developments had crystallized in to a new status quo and before the major Arab countries, such as Egypt and Syria, had even come close to putting their houses into order. At the same time, the Gulf regimes sought to consolidate their control over the major junctures of the League of Arab States, which represents the official Arab system. Worth mentioning in this context is the statement by the Qatari Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Hamad Bin Jassim Al Thani, in an open session attended by Arab foreign ministers, in which he said that Qatar would preside over the Arab League Council in its 136th regular session instead of Palestine. Notable also was Kuwait's success in pushing towards the issuance of a resolution to assign three of its diplomats to high level posts formerly occupied by three Egyptian diplomats. One of the Kuwaiti diplomats was Ambassador 'Adnan 'Issa al-Khudair who was appointed as assistant secretary-general for financial and administrative affairs although he could not be appointed during the tenure of 'Amr Musa.²

The change in the relative power of the actors in the Arab political system is one of the reasons for the dwindling possibility of fulfilling the idea of "an international peace conference" based on international legitimacy and aiming at resolving the conflict rather than managing it. This was the idea proposed by Nabil al-'Arabi when he was serving as Egypt's foreign minister.³ However, it was never put on the Arab League's agenda even when al-'Arabi assumed his post as its secretary-general in May 2011, although the Arab Peace Initiative Follow-up Committee continued to hold its meetings regularly throughout 2011. It is incorrect,

nonetheless, to blame this stalemate to the prevalence of the Arab uprisings on the policies of the Arab League.*

In fact, the Arab League granted the PA President Mahmud ‘Abbas, through the Arab Follow-up Committee, the freedom to pursue the strategy he deemed appropriate. It further supported (despite the reservations of some regimes) the Palestinian bid for statehood in September 2011 which was perceived as a shift in the PA strategy vis-à-vis the peace process. Later, however, the PA seemed more inclined towards the option of negotiations and the move at the UN proved to be a tactical move within the context of augmenting the conditions for negotiations. It was never a step to establish a new Palestinian strategy based on achieving reconciliation, stopping security coordination with the Israel, redefining the PA as a PLO resistance tool, or engaging the Palestinian Diaspora and following the model of the Arab Spring.

The Arab League did not take a position different from or opposed to that of the PA when it accepted, in January 2012, the initiative of the Jordanian King to conduct “exploratory talks” with Israel on resuming full peace negotiations. And even when those talks failed,⁴ the Arab side adopted a vague stance at a meeting of foreign ministers’ held at the Arab League headquarters on 12/2/2012 where they called for an international conference to look at the Palestinian issue.⁵ The call can be viewed as an attempt to escape essential responsibilities, since a similar conference called for by Russia had failed to convene after the Annapolis Summit of 2007 and relevant powers (especially the US) did not seem enthusiastic about such a conference. On top of that, holding such a conference would likely be a mere political-media maneuver, unable to enhance the peace process or evolve into a real breakthrough in the Arab world.

The decision of the Arab foreign ministers in the above mentioned meeting to provide a financial safety net for the PA worth of \$100 million per month⁶ (in case Israel decided to withhold the funds of the PA) falls in the same context. This is because it reflects the Arab regimes’ keenness on the continuation of role of the PA and their fear that its collapse, in conjunction with increased vulnerability of the region, might lead to undesirable alternatives.

*On another hand, it is important to note that enthusiasm for holding international peace conferences has declined since the 1991 Madrid Conference in favor of bilateral talks through which Israel and the US can attempt to impose their agendas and avoid international pressures and obligations.

Thus, the Arab League in 2011 adhered to the constants of the Arab approach to the peace settlement, clinging to the futile bilateral negotiations track. It is likely that it will hold on to this position as long as the PA sticks to it and it will not move towards an effective and unified position before the current developments evolve towards either an escalation with Israel or the adoption of a new Palestinian strategy.

Put differently, Arabs are waiting for the national and unified decision of the Palestinians which should be taken by the Palestinians themselves. Until then, the Arab League will follow the logic: “we agree on what the Palestinians agree on.”

2. The Stance on the Palestinian Schism

The Arab Spring has created a new political environment embracing Arab-Palestinian interaction with a new openness to all parties, with the decline of the commonly used traditional classifications of Arab states into “moderate” and “refusal front” states. This change may well help to develop new alliances between the Arab and Palestinian sides.

In this context, it is possible to state that one of the direct outcomes of the 2011 Arab uprisings has been the clear need for many Arab regimes to show more openness to Hamas, albeit for reasons varying from one country to another. Consequently, the Arab League’s attitude towards Hamas changed, especially when Islamic movements rose in a number of Arab countries including Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Libya and Kuwait.

As part of the new political climate, the Arab League Secretary-General Nabil al-‘Arabi plainly said that he had entrusted Khalid Mish‘al, the head of Political Bureau of Hamas with a message for the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad regarding conditions in Syria, during a meeting between al-‘Arabi and Mish‘al in the Arab League headquarters on 7/1/2012.⁷ This mediation upset the PLO which filed an official complaint to the Arab League considering that it was not Mish‘al’s right to take on this prestigious role, according to the statement of PLO Executive Committee Secretary Yasir ‘Abed Rabbo.⁸ The PLO’s rejection, which came within the framework of the struggle over the legitimacy of foreign representation, reflects the high sensitivity shown by the Ramallah-based PA towards the development of relations between many Arab countries and Hamas following the growth in prominence of Islamists in a number of countries and the consequent support to

their Islamist brethren in Palestine. At the same time, there are no indicators that the Arabs are about to change their stance which recognizes the PLO as the only representative of the Palestinian people.

Second: The Stances and the Roles of Some Key Countries

1. Egypt

a. Changes in the Egyptian Approach to the Peace Process and Relations with Israel

The most controversial question since the outbreak of Egypt's January 25th Revolution could be that of its impact on the Egyptian approach to two files: the peace settlement and relations with Israel. This is the case because a change in foreign policy and external relations for a country like Egypt does not usually happen according to a simple pattern. Rather, this change is the result of a cumulative and compound process and the interaction of a number of variables such as the public opinion's ability to make a change, the nature of the political system and the political will of the new political players. In addition, there is the impact of the status quo which limits the chances of a strategic change in the foreseeable future for a number of reasons:

First: The experience with the impact of the public pressure on foreign policies makes it necessary to distinguish between two issues: the ability of the different forms of demonstration to establish and reinforce the basis of the state's foreign policy on one hand, and their ability to urge the decision maker towards resolving certain issues or adopting a policy different from that already in place, on the other. Recalling many experiences, the first issue is likely while the other usually fails to be achieved. The clear example in this respect is the attack on the Israeli Embassy in Cairo which, despite its intensity and violence, failed to produce any strategic change in Egyptian-Israeli relations. However, it urged the Egyptian government to reconsider its relations with Israel⁹ and to consider the weight of public opinion which was expecting tangible outcome. Indeed, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak officially stated that "Israel regrets the deaths of the Egyptian officers that occurred during the attacks along the Israeli-Egyptian border," which occurred in Eilat on 18/8/2011.¹⁰ The very same incident has convinced the Egyptian government of

the danger of any possible escalation on the Palestinian front, in the aftermath of the Eilat operation and subsequent incidents, besides any possible popular reaction that would get out of control. This convinced SCAF Chairman Field Marshal Muhammad Hussein Tantawi to address a strongly worded message to the Netanyahu government, stating that Israel's resort to a military operation against the GS would force the Egyptian government to sever ties with Israel and cause significant damage to the peace agreements between the two countries.¹¹

Thus, public opinion can be a major motivation for decision makers to focus on the Palestinian issue or to take tactical decisions such as the reconsideration of arrangements for opening the Rafah crossing. But when taking strategic decisions such as severing or restricting Egyptian-Israeli relations and shifting towards alliance or partnership with Hamas, it would be a mere catalyst.

Second: The conditions which allowed the political rise of Islamists in Egypt are the same conditions which lay restrictions on foreign policies and which are not likely to be overcome easily, at least in the foreseeable future. The most important among these conditions are the following:

1. The nature of interaction between major political forces sharing power in Egypt has not yet crystallized. Although the SCAF had earlier vowed to hand over power immediately after the legislative and presidential elections, it seems that the council will continue with its role regarding major files, at least in the short term. This means that the influence of new actors on such files requires determining their relative power within the new governance equation, which is unattainable for the time being.

2. The Islamic movements which gained their popularity before the revolutions, on the basis of their stance towards the Arab-Israeli conflict and rejection of the unfair terms of peace settlement, need to reconsider their priorities and rhetoric, and perhaps give up on their call for Pan-Islamism. Now, they need to focus on two factors: achievement; which includes putting an end to lawlessness, improving the economic situation of their countries and enforcing the humanitarian gains of the uprising, besides the completion of the democratization process. This persuaded the Islamic movements to present a more moderate speech which did not antagonize international powers who can still offer economic support necessary to build post-uprising economies. This could be concluded from the change in the rhetoric of the MB after Mubarak

stepped down. Seven days prior to Mubarak's stepping down, MB's Deputy General-Guide Rashad Bayoumi, declared that an interim coalition government formed of the MB and other opposition forces was to undertake the abolition of the peace treaty with Israel after Mubarak's departure.¹² However, a week following Mubarak's ouster, the MB reiterated, through its spokesman who currently heads the Foreign Relations Committee at the People's Assembly, 'Issam al-'Aryan, that any decision regarding the peace treaty with Israel be taken by the Egyptian people, promising that the MB Movement would not impose its view.¹³ In the same vein, the MB (and the Salafi Movement) declined participation in the Friday protest that expelled the Israeli ambassador, following the attack on the Egyptian soldiers on the borders in August 2011. They also officially rejected prompting such ideas as the "march to Gaza," stressing that any popular initiatives for supporting the Palestinian people should be through coordination with the Egyptian authorities without breaching the political security of Egypt.¹⁴ In addition, the Building and Development Party, the political arm of al-Jama'ah al-Islamiyyah in Egypt, declared through a member of its founding committee, Tariq al-Zumar, that the movement was committed to the agreements with Israel.¹⁵

These statements and positions do not herald the beginning of strategic changes that are likely to occur in the positions of the Egyptian Islamic movements towards Israel and the Palestinian issue as much as they represent these movements' need for more time to consolidate and redefine their priorities. They also reflect the impact of the temporal and objective circumstances which urged these movements to draw a line between their overt and covert positions.

It should be noted that the Islamists' preliminary positions towards the Palestinian issue continued albeit with less prominence. MB's General-Guide Muhammad Badi' declared that Israel would not know calm or stability and security as long as it underestimates the Palestinians' rights. He also said that the Arab uprisings which were overthrowing corrupt, authoritarian regimes pave the way for putting an end to the "Zionist oppression and arrogance" and for the liberation of the holy sites.¹⁶ Badi' further asserted that the MB considered Palestine its first and foremost concern, while the previous regime had been unfair to the issue and had abandoned it in favor of the Israeli-American project, stating that this was one of the reasons behind the outbreak of the uprising in Egypt.¹⁷

Muhammad Mursi, the chairman of Freedom and Justice Party, the political arm of the MB, also asserted that the Palestinian issue was a major motive behind the revolution of the Egyptian people.¹⁸ MB Spokesperson Mahmud Ghuzlan confirmed the Movement's rejection of the Israeli presence in Palestine stressing its demands for the liberation of Palestine from the river to the sea.¹⁹

3. Egypt's January 25th Revolution only overthrew the president while the state apparatuses and structure continued to operate through the same old system with minor changes of some leading figures. Thus, the Islamic elements sought not to fill the void but to integrate with long-standing bureaucratic institutions and try to make a change from within. Islamists' keenness on change might also be faced by strong bureaucracy that might even succeed to accommodate the new members and rehabilitate them politically.

However, when the potential of a change in the Egyptian position towards peace with Israel is excluded, that does not necessarily mean that old policies towards the Israeli-Palestinian peace process will be reproduced. The role played by Mubarak has ended, and this role had included his exploitation of the Palestinian issue in favor of increasing personal power, or exercising pressure on the PA and PLO leaders to urge them to enter negotiations lacking even the minimum conditions for success. The dilemma of the current stage is not only related to the absence of options for the Egyptian players but it is also related to the Palestinian delay in identifying an alternative strategy which would replace the peace process. It appears that once the Palestinians succeed in finding this strategy they will definitely find the necessary political support.

b. Egyptian-Palestinian Relations

Relations with the Hamas Movement

In light of the success of the Egyptian uprising in overthrowing Mubarak, it is no longer politically acceptable for the new Egyptian government to proceed with old policies, especially those which triggered popular discontent. One of these policies is Egypt's relation with Hamas in the GS and arrangements related to the Rafah crossing. The former regime's fear of a political force with Islamic affiliations on its borders meant that it attached high importance to state security interests when determining its relationship with Hamas.²⁰ This approach has put Egypt in crises which almost caused the explosion of the whole security situation

in Sinai similar to when the Rafah border fence was blown up in January 2008. The former regime also damaged its reputation due to its mismanagement of Gaza aid convoys and the steel wall crisis in January 2010.

Following the revolution, Cairo pursued an interesting policy in its approach towards the GS. It needed to take action which would show that Egypt has started to restore its regional role and influence. This was even more necessary after it became more representative of popular will which has always expressed its discontent with the Egyptian policies regarding the GS. First were the declarations by Nabil al-'Arabi, the current Arab League secretary general and former foreign minister, stating that Egypt's position towards the war on GS was shameful and tantamount to a war crime²¹ in addition to his official statement confirming Egypt's moral obligation to end the siege on GS.²² Cairo needed to coordinate with Fatah and Hamas so that the Rafah crossing would not become a source of accusations that Egypt was enhancing the division with the Palestinians. Last but not least came the announcement regarding new security arrangements for the crossing's management and for signing the reconciliation agreement in early May 2011.

Moreover, Cairo needed to show it had broken with the policies of the former regime. Hence, it made a sovereign decision to replace the old mechanism of opening the crossing in presence of European monitors and without any coordination with the Israeli, American or European sides. Nonetheless, the Egyptian administration, still operating with its old staff, cannot overnight transform the crossing from one for the passage of persons to a commercial crossing. Such a transformation is considered a strategic change rather than a tactical one, and that might lead to an international crisis with Washington and Israel, and perhaps with the PA.

The above shows the positive transformation in the relations between Egypt and Hamas, although within a tactical framework. This is a reflection of another shift inside Egypt represented in the granting of political legitimacy to Islamic movements, especially the MB. These shifts were in Hamas' favor, boosting its Arab legitimacy, which it had lost since it won the PLC elections in January 2006. These transformations encouraged Hamas to confide in the new Egyptian administration and sign the Egyptian reconciliation paper, a step which came in compliance with the prevailing regional circumstances.

Relations with the Fatah Movement and the PA

Since Egypt's January 25th Revolution, relations between Egypt and the PA in the WB have undergone a new stage characterized by the following:

1. The collapse of the Mubarak regime stripped the PA of its strongest Arab ally which had provided it with support and legitimate cover for entering negotiations time and again. The new Egyptian regime, regardless of its structure, will be less willing to provide this political support.

2. The Egyptian regime will be more open to Hamas, the PA's rival in the GS, without recognizing the legitimacy of Isma'il Haniyyah's government. In this context, and according to information revealed by the Journalist Ibrahim al-Derawi, Kamal al-Ganzouri, the prime minister of the national salvation government, declined to meet with Haniyyah during his visit to Cairo on 9/1/2012, because PA sources had expressed reservations on the meeting.²³ However, al-Ganzouri, denied in a phone call with *Asharq Alawsat* newspaper, his and the foreign minister's rejection of the meeting Haniyyah whose visit to Egypt came at a time when al-Ganzouri was abroad. Al-Ganzouri further stressed that Haniyyah was received by Egyptian officials including Grand Imam of al-Azhar Dr. Ahmad al-Tayyib. In reply to a question regarding the possibility of receiving Haniyyah in future visits to Egypt, al-Ganzouri said that there should be no problem in this respect.²⁴

The emerging role of the MB and other Islamist forces in decision making in Egypt will definitely work in favor of Hamas, albeit gradually.

3. The new form of Egyptian-Palestinian relations will most probably be far from absolute alliance or hostility. Instead, it will be closer to a balanced approach towards both Hamas and Fatah. Even if we assume a major role for Islamists in foreign relations, it is not likely that Egyptian foreign policy will be entirely contradictory to that pursued during Mubarak's rule and show absolute support for Hamas and complete hostility towards Fatah.

2. Jordan

a. Stance on the Peace Settlement

The uniqueness of the Jordanian-Palestinian case, based on geographic and demographic considerations, makes the Palestinian issue strongly intertwined with

Jordanian internal policies. That's why any Jordanian approach to the repercussions of internal demands for reform is closely related to the Jordanian approach to the Palestinian issue, and especially to the peace settlement.

The dilemma today is that Jordanian-Palestinian unity in the Jordanian context is facing problems both from home and abroad. The demonstrations witnessed in Jordan throughout 2011 have exacerbated the problems of the Jordanian regime which still suffers because of the stalemate in the peace process and the dangers of sliding towards a Jordanian solution à la the Israeli formula. In theory this threat was supposed to rush the Jordanian regime into following the Palestinian debate concerning the next strategy to be adopted after the collapse of the futile negotiations process, by that point in its third decade. It was supposed to push towards the adoption of a new Palestinian-Jordanian strategy. However, this did not happen as Jordan got involved in extending the term of the negotiations option while it was in its final throes. It is likely that the Jordanian government has not realized that the "timeout strategy" is enhancing the naturalization "conspiracy" rather than defeating it.²⁵

In this context came the initiative of the Jordanian King 'Abdullah II who called on the Palestinian and Israeli sides to engage in what was known as exploratory talks to discuss the possibility of resuming negotiations in January 2012. This initiative was taken with the belief of the PLO and Israel in the need for positive interaction at this time, for tactical reasons, regardless of the ability or readiness of each side to make the initiative succeed.

Whatever the reasons were that prompted the PLO to participate in these talks, Jordan's sponsorship of the initiative showed that its government was attempting to fill the vacuum left by the fall of the Mubarak regime. Jordan also wanted to perform some valued role, fearing a future Egyptian departure from the peace process as MB power increases. Ultimately, Jordan fears the future Egyptian approach to the Palestinian file might further complicate the situation for the Jordanian government especially if it is added to the hurdles created by the Israeli right which rejects the peace settlement and proceeds with its settlement building policy, the Judaization of Jerusalem and the Jordan Valley as well as altering the geography of the WB.

On top of that, this initiative confirmed that the Jordanian leadership's policies continue to be based on a package of options:

First: The peace process did not collapse completely and it is possible to maintain it as a strategic option regardless whether it is the only option or not.

Second: The situation in Jordan and in the region is still not apt for taking strategic risks that would threaten the Jordanian-Israeli peace and have repercussions on the relationship between Jordan and Washington. Here it becomes clear why traditional regimes prefer tactical changes to strategic changes as the former could be changed with only minimal losses should they threaten the regime or its interests, although the latter might offer root solution to stalled problems. In this context, the regime in Jordan is strongly concerned about some potential developments such as the dissolution the PA or the outburst of a third *Intifadah* in the WB. The impact of such scenarios on the Jordanian internal arena, where Palestinians constitute a high proportion of the population, would be difficult to predict. Indeed, an *Intifadah* would undermine the regime's ability to cope with the pressure exercised by Jordanian opposition groups to suspend the peace treaty with Israel especially as these pressures intensified with the popular demonstrations in 2011 when the demands of the Jordanian street coincided with the demands of the traditional opposition including the Islamic Labor Front (ILF) and the Jordanian left.²⁶

Third: The PA will not pursue any options that undermine the current goal of bilateral negotiations unless the internal situation is destabilized. Therefore, Jordan needs to coordinate more with the PA to help ensure that negotiations would not be blocked even if they are currently stalled by Israeli policies. The point here is that Jordan prefers to keep the negotiations option open for as long as possible in anticipation of other scenarios which represent a greater threat to the stability of the regime.

Worthy of mention in this respect is the important surprise visit by the Jordanian King 'Abdullah II to Ramallah on 21/11/2011,²⁷ his fourth visit to the PA administered territories since 1994, the second to Ramallah and the first during Abu Mazin's tenure. The visit was intended to boost the position of the PA after it lost the first round of the application for full membership in the UN and its subsequent organizations. In addition, it was a reassuring message for President 'Abbas, the PA and the PLO implying that improved relations with Hamas will never be at the expense of the Jordanian regime's commitment to "Palestinian legitimacy," Jordan retaining its position of only acknowledging the PLO (and consequently the PA in Ramallah) as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.

Fourth: The bet on the pragmatism of the Hamas leadership which would prevent it from getting involved in criticizing the Jordanian regime for assuming this role, especially at a time when Hamas was trying to restore its official presence in Amman. Hamas was also maintaining its inclination towards moderation in the context of the new conditions brought about by the Arab Spring.

Jordanian policy reflecting its determination not to block negotiations, has created an Israeli reaction which reveals Tel Aviv's understanding of the critical situation Jordan is undergoing in light of the new conditions prevailing in the region. Despite its consistent position regarding the peace process with the Palestinian side, the Netanyahu government realized the seriousness of the current situation for the Jordanian regime which became susceptible to the dangers of escalating protests among the Jordanian people. These dangers increase with each Israeli violation in Jerusalem and its holy sites, which are still under the administration of the Jordanian Ministry of Awqaf, Islamic Affairs and Holy Places.

In fact, Israel has no interest in aggravating the situation, with and against the Jordanian regime, especially when Israel is facing regional isolation in the wake of the revolutions and after the disturbance in its relation with Turkey following its attack on the Freedom Flotilla. Ultimately, Netanyahu's last minute decision to postpone the demolition of the Mughrabi Gate ramp in the Old City came after Egyptian and Jordanian warnings that it would cause instability across the Arab world.

Also interesting was the unplanned visit by Israeli President Shimon Peres to Amman on 28/11/2011 before which he met with Netanyahu to discuss the importance of strengthening strategic ties between Israel and Jordan.²⁸ In the same vein, the Israeli Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, considered a hawk, issued a statement in which he stressed that "stability in Jordan is in Israel's interest." He also criticized those who say that "Jordan is Palestine," saying that this "would create a continuous Palestinian state which would endanger us. It's in our interest for this not to happen."²⁹ This statement could not be considered a shift in Israel's right-wing vision, because it is not issued by the Knesset. It is a statement of a foreign minister who, according to one Israeli analyst, often gives meaningless declarations.³⁰ Nevertheless, it revealed Israel's need to calm the situation in Jordan by silencing the "Jordan-is-Palestine" logic which has always triggered instability as well as mitigate any tension in the relations between Israel and Jordan.³¹

b. Jordanian-Palestinian Relations

Introduction: The Dilemmas of Change in Jordan and the Approach to the Palestinian Issue

Within Jordanian circles calling for change and reform, the Palestinian issue affects several topics:

1. The priorities of reform vary between two sides: the first side, located in areas of Palestinian majority such as Amman, Irbid and al-Zarqa, gives priority to political reform based on equal rights between citizens; the second side, mainly from East Jordan, gives priority for economic reform and justice and is mainly concentrated in the southern regions including Karak, Ma'an and Tafila.

2. The Jordanian regime's dual challenge: political and economic. This gives the Jordanian regime major problems, as the joining of the opposition by East Jordanians makes economic reform a political priority. Consequently, Jordan was pushed towards rapprochement with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in order to secure financial support for the faltering economy. This step was pursued although it might strip the King of maneuvering space.³² It may even deprive him of the freedom to pursue political reform in order to satisfy the demands of Palestinian-origin Jordanians and those who have influence on Jordan's economy, who seek adequate political representation within the Jordanian political system.

3. The conflict between citizenship and identity: The political reform that Palestinian-origin Jordanians are demanding is to be granted full rights in decision-making processes and within governmental institutions, without having to consider Jordan their alternative homeland, relinquishing their right of return or detracting from the righteousness of the Palestinian cause. This equation is hard to attain while East Jordanians retain their fears over possible Israeli and western strategies to end the refugee issue.

These concerns, which are related to demographic duality, were the main reason for the opposition failing to agree on a single reform agenda; this allowed some government agencies to warn against reform.

In this context, regime members sought to generate concerns about the MB within the Jordanian community through a media campaign, and attempted to

incite tribes against the MB on the grounds that they are a Palestinian organization active within the Jordanian arena.³³ This and other similar campaigns were aimed at preventing the emergence of genuine national coalition pushing for real change in Jordan.

Some Jordanian groups have taken advantage of the agreement between the Palestinian factions—who are participating in the PLO activation committee held in Amman on 15/1/2012—regarding the exclusion of Palestinians residing in Jordan from participating in upcoming PLC elections. Hence, these sides focused on the Jordanian-Palestinian issue although the resolution was primarily aimed at sparing the Jordan the consequences of the controversy about who is considered Palestinian and who is considered Jordanian.

Relations Within the Amman-Fatah-Hamas Triangle

The Arab Spring moved Jordanian politics from its complete bias to one Palestinian side to normalization with Hamas. However, this does not mean that Amman would change its alliances or position but rather pursue a balanced approach, as was expressed by many Jordanian officials on different occasions. This indicates that the Jordanian regime has become convinced, in light of the new conditions, of the need to draw a line between its desire to maintain a strong relation with the PA and its approach to Hamas.

Regarding Jordan's relations with Hamas, Prime Minister 'Awn al-Khasawneh said that the deportation of Hamas leaders from Jordan constituted a "political and constitutional mistake." He also added that Jordan's relations with all Palestinian factions, including the PA and Hamas, should be balanced and normal.³⁴ These remarks reflect the fact that the Jordanian state, and not only the prime minister, has come to a conclusion that Jordan cannot play a role in a changing Middle East in which the MB enjoys increasing influence, without maintaining strong relations with them in the different countries involved in the Arab Spring. It is not even possible for Jordan, in light of the new developments, to assume a pivotal role in the Palestinian issue while alienating a major player like Hamas with all its influence in the Palestinian arena and among the Palestinians in Jordan, not to mention its extensive relations on the regional and international levels.³⁵

Nonetheless, Jordan had two conditions for its renewed relations with Hamas. The first was to draw a clear line between Hamas as a Palestinian faction and

the Jordanian arm of the MB. The MB Consultative Council in Jordan in early January 2012 decided upon financial and organizational disengagement from affiliated bureaus in Gulf countries and joined the Palestinian MB (Hamas). However, this was not in response to Jordan's conditions but rather the will of Palestinian MB to rearrange their cards abroad in accordance with their organizational structure and the developments of the Palestinian issue alongside the changes in the region. The Consultative Council's decision was preceded with a decision by the Guidance Office on 23/11/2011 that the bureaus would join the Palestinian MB Movement.

The second condition set by Jordan was for Hamas to abstain from any political activity in Jordan. This was rejected outright by the movement when Deputy Head of Hamas' Political Bureau, Musa Abu Marzuq reiterated the party's right to be present in all Arab capitals, particularly in Amman, since most of its leaders hold Jordanian citizenship. Abu Marzuq added that nobody could prevent Hamas from undertaking political work since it aimed at protecting the rights of the Palestinian people and he wished that Jordan reconsider its decision.³⁶

However, restoring relations between the two sides started in November 2011 through allowing families of Hamas leaders coming from Syria to enter Jordan. Following this was Khalid Mish'al's long awaited visit to Amman on 29/1/2012 and his meeting with Jordan's King in the presence of the Qatari Crown Prince, which practically means the end of the state of estrangement between Jordan and the political leadership of Hamas which had lasted 13 years. The visit allowed the prospect for an imminent development in relations between Jordan and Hamas, even if it fell short of a major breakthrough.

As for Jordan's relations with Fatah, it seems that the Jordanian inclination towards normalizing relations with Hamas was accompanied by Jordanian keenness on showing support towards Fatah, the PA and the PLO. This was demonstrated through the participation of the PM 'Awn al-Khasawneh in Fatah's 47th anniversary which was held at Al-Ahliyya Amman University on 5/1/2012. This was the first time that a prime minister had sponsored such an occasion in the presence of three of Fatah's Central Committee (Uthman Abu Gharbiyyah, Jamal al-Muhaisen and Jibril al-Rajjoub) and with the participation of distinguished Jordanian personalities led by the Senate Speaker Taher al-Masri, and deputies and representatives of political parties and civil society institutions.³⁷

Jordan's hosting of an unprecedented meeting between 13 Palestinian factions on 15/1/2012 was also very significant. The meeting was held to discuss the electoral system of the Palestinian National Council (PNC) and was attended for the first time not only by the factions of the political coalition leading the PLO but also those who intend to be part of the organization (Hamas and the PIJ) and those seeking to return to it (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) and al-Sa'iqah).³⁸

The meeting, which was led by Salim al-Za'nun and held at the PNC headquarters, re-asserted the legitimate representation of the PLO and its subsequent institutions. It also reflected Jordan's shift towards receiving all Palestinian factions without embarrassment or intervention as well as facilitating their entry and stay in the country. This step was a message from Amman to all sides that its decision to change its approach towards the various Palestinian factions was based on Jordan's exclusive recognition of the PLO, its institutions, embassies and decisions.

3. Syria

a. Relations with Israel

The internal Syrian arena witnessed significant developments from mid-March 2011 and the ruling regime became occupied with confronting increasing demands for change, reform, and the end of the regime. The regime accused its opponents of being part of a conspiracy targeting Syria's steadfastness, resilience and its support for the resistance. However, opponents of the regime stressed their right to establish a democratic system that will reflect the free will of the Syrian people.

The state of turmoil engulfing Syria and the disintegration of the Refusal Front do not necessarily mean the door is open for a peace settlement with Israel. In addition, the state of instability in Syria, whether or not regime collapses or remains in place, means that the whoever rules the country would be too occupied with stabilizing the internal situation to focus on the potentially controversial of either peaceful settlement or escalation with Israel.

It is possible to say that the marches along the borders with the occupied Golan on 15/5/2011 (*Nakbah* anniversary) which led to the deaths of four and the injury of 170,³⁹ as well as the marches on 5/6/2011 (*Naksah* anniversary) which ended with the death of 23 and the injury of 447, killed by Israeli forces⁴⁰ were triggered by motivations beyond the issue of the Palestinian refugees in Syria. In fact,

not all of those who participated in the marches were refugees; there were also Syrian activists in what seemed to be an attempt by the regime to shift focus to the conflict with Israel. Most probably, the Assad regime was not an organizer of these marches, but neither did it find any reason to prevent them, seeing them as a way to relieve public stress and tension. Ultimately, this could be an indicator that repeating these marches in the future remains likely as long as the deadlock continues in the occupied territories. It could also herald a deterioration of the situation unless there is quick agreement regarding the format of the regime in Syria under which a unified, stable government could be formed. However, the prospects of such a government are slim since there is increasing division among the opposition, at home and abroad, and the change in tactics of the uprising, from peaceful to militarized, with the possibility of international military intervention open. Syria might undergo a phase of instability, poor governance and perhaps the dismantling of state bodies if things continue in the way they are at the time of writing. Such a development would limit the ability of any new regime to enter any confrontation with Israel or risk agreeing a long-term peace settlement, which would be the preferred outcome of Israeli government.

Even if we assumed that a quick agreement between the Syrian factions on the new form of governance could be made, the regime's need for foreign support would limit its choices, possibly narrowing them down to peaceful settlement as the only option. In this context, it is possible to interpret the declarations of Burhan Ghalyoun, the head of the Syrian National Council (SNC), which stressed determination to restore sovereignty over the Golan through negotiations and international legitimacy.⁴¹

The gloomiest scenario regarding Syria's future, however, is the country plunging into total chaos. This scenario assumes the collapse of the regime and the division of the Syrian army and security forces while the opposition fails to agree on clear objectives. Consequently, Syria might fall in an alarming state of chaos in which sectarian fighting and skirmishes on the border would not be unexpected. Also dangerous is Israel's probable exploitation of the situation to strike Syrian military installations, in addition to civilian targets and the Palestinian refugee camps in Syria under the pretext that these targets are under the control of militants hostile to Israel. This would ultimately lead to the dismantling the Syrian state, dividing it into mini-states, turning Syria from an influential regional player into

a source for producing sectarian conflicts among Sunnis, Shiites and Druze as well as Palestinian refugees. Tension could spread quickly to Syria's borders with Israel, Lebanon and Iraq.⁴²

b. The Syrian Revolution and the Palestinian Peace Settlement

Western and Israeli voices have warned against the price which Israel would have to pay for the continued stalemate in the peace process in light of the new Arab revolutionary atmosphere. These voices have urged Israel to enter into instant negotiations with the Palestinian side to reach a swift, final settlement of the Palestinian issue, before the stalemate turns into a strong justification of the emergence of radical inclinations that would be adopted by new Arab forces. However, these voices declined after the outbreak of the revolution in Syria. Further, the prevailing climate of uncertainty turned into a strong justification for the Israeli government to postpone the peace process, while some voices stressed the futility of any peace agreement with any Palestinian side which could be ousted at any time,⁴³ once the Palestinian territories witness an uprising similar those across the region.

Therefore, the peace process has probably been affected by developments in Syria which remains one of the key actors in the region. As the new revolutionary Arab environment would be unwilling to accept anything short of a just peace settlement agreed on by the Palestinians, the future "stable" Syrian regime would have to be careful, taking into consideration Palestinian developments and its ability to increase international pressure on Israel.

c. Syrian-Palestinian Relations

Since Hamas' leadership settled in Syria in 2000, the movement has received wide support on popular and official levels alike. Although Hamas has always remained committed to the policy of noninterference in the internal affairs of Arab states, it was obliged to take a position under pressure from the Syrian people and the regime. During the first few months of the uprising, Khalid Mish'al spared no effort to try to reconcile the two sides, seeking national consensus on the process of reform without any foreign intervention. Nonetheless, the widening schism between the regime and the opposition forces made reconciliation impossible.

Hamas issued a statement on 2/4/2011 stressing its support for both the Syrian people and government. It acknowledged Syria's support of the Palestinian people

and its embrace of Palestinian resistance, especially Hamas. It hoped that the Syrian people would overcome the current circumstances by achieving their aspirations in a way which also preserved Syria's stability and strengthened its position towards resistance.⁴⁴

Clearly, the statement issued by Hamas was drafted carefully and although it did not completely satisfy either side, it helped clarify Hamas' critical position and its embarrassment as an ally. And while it recognized the support of the Syrian regime, it could not deny the fact that the Syrian people had embraced the resistance. Hamas had also to adhere to its principles regarding respecting peoples' will and their right to freedom and liberty.

With the continued deterioration of the situation in Syria including the disturbance of political processes, Hamas found it better for its leaders to quietly leave the country without provoking the regime. This continued over months until most leaders had left the country by the end of January 2012. At the same time, Hamas kept many of its field cadres in Syria to follow up on the movement's affairs and the needs of the Palestinian people. According to Hamas, its leaders' departure from Syria was to be expected in light of the urgent need to continue its work without being disrupted by events. In addition, these leaders originated outside the country and have no obligation to stay. Thus, Hamas kept its official presence and institutions in Syria although many of its leaders and figures left the country.

Hamas maintained its "balanced" position and did not issue any further official statements for a while. However, at the end of 2011 and in early 2012 statements were issued showing more inclination and support for the Syrian uprising, especially from Hamas leaders in the GS. Most significant among these was Haniyyah's speech in al-Azhar Mosque, on 24/2/2012, when he said, "I salute all people of the Arab Spring, or Islamic winter, and I salute the Syrian people who seek freedom, democracy and reform."⁴⁵ Additionally, Khalid Mish'al, who left Syria in January 2012, expressed no desire to return under the ongoing situation.

Although the movement did not officially announce its departure from Damascus, by the time it happened it was almost inevitable, as a resistance movement would not survive the political fall out of supporting the regime's crackdown against its own people. The delay in announcing such a decision was based on the need to minimize the repercussions of departure.

Each of the scenarios regarding the future of a “post-Bashar Syria” has its impact on Syrian-Palestinian relations. The scenario of chaos and expansion of internal fighting might bring the Palestinians in Syria in to the conflict, when the social fabric breaks down into sectarian and ideological groups. However, the stability scenario, which would be achieved after the collapse of the regime through the agreement of different opposition forces on new political formula, would determine Syrian-Palestinian relations, dictated by the nature and inclinations of the new regime. Its relations with international players, particularly the US, together with regional and Arab forces, and its convictions and approach to the dilemma of having a part of Syria under occupation, will also impact these relations.

Some expect that the stalemate in the Syrian-Israeli peace process to continue, and any new regime will find no quick solution to the occupation dilemma. Thus, maintaining the strong relationship with the Palestinian resistance factions might be necessary in order to enhance the regime’s internal legitimacy.

Another scenario is the political rise of the MB in Syria as the most organized opposition group, which would enhance the possibility of a regional alliance among the Arab Spring countries. This alliance would use the Palestinian angle not only to enhance its influence in the region but also to stay in harmony with its ideological and political vision vis-à-vis the Palestinian issue. In such a scenario Syria’s relations with the Palestinian resistance factions will acquire a strategic dimension. The leader of the Syrian MB, Mulham al-Droubi, expressed the movement’s stance towards the Palestinian resistance, saying it would find more support under a free Syria, in which it would be completely independent, not used as a means of pressure by any side.⁴⁶ For his part, Zuhair Salem, the spokesperson of the Syrian MB, said that the brothers in Hamas and other Palestinian brethren will visit Syria, where they would be considered a part of one people, sharing the same cause.⁴⁷

However, away from such scenarios, which all depend on various factors, it is necessary to point out that the new Syrian regime, regardless of its form and nature, would probably need a transitional period to rearrange itself before it establishes stable relationships with the Palestinian factions.

4. Lebanon

Lebanon did not witness any uprisings in 2011 similar to those in the Arab Spring countries. This is principally because of its unique sectarian geopolitical

position, the high degree of freedoms enjoyed by the population, its particular kind of democracy, and the Spring it witnessed in 2005; these factors combine to work against root or revolutionary changes. Yet, the ongoing turmoil in Syria is very likely to influence the Lebanese arena, especially if the situation deteriorates further and the Syrian state split up due to the outbreak of sectarian conflicts. Ultimately, any government led by either March 8 or March 14 would face serious limitations upon running the country with all its currents and intertwined situation.

The government formed of Prime Minister Najib Mikati, which won a confidence vote on 7/7/2011, continues to receive support from Hizbullah and the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). His government seemed inclined throughout 2011 to understanding the regime in Syria, although its desire to maintain the ruling coalition puts limits on its support for the Syrian regime.

The Lebanese reaction to the Arab revolutions and popular demands for change was generally supportive and sympathetic. For example, Hizbullah stressed that the Egyptian revolution was a great service to the Palestinian issue. The party also congratulated Egypt which sponsored reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, hoping for Egypt to resume its leading role in adopting the nation's issues and supporting them.⁴⁸ Hizbullah's Secretary-General Hasan Nasrallah, attested that the situation in the whole region has changed, stating that developments in Egypt are a blow to the US and Israel.⁴⁹ However, Hizbullah expressed a different position regarding the events in Syria, with Nasrallah stating that the collapse of the regime there would serve American and Israeli interests. According to Nasrallah this is because there are plans to replace the Assad regime with another moderate regime, friendlier to Israel.⁵⁰ Nasrallah also stressed the importance of Syrian support for the Palestinian issue and as a guardian against Palestine's liquidation. Nasrallah added that Syria, mainly through its leadership, has always supported the resistance in Lebanon and Palestine. He further stressed that all those who love Palestine and Jerusalem want a Syria that holds fast to its nationalistic position as well as a Syria that implements reform and fosters progress.⁵¹

As for the civil rights of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, the issue continued to be governed by political disputes in line with the traditional positions of the different political parties. It is always accompanied with arousing the fear of naturalization of the Palestinians in Lebanon. Some officials called for granting the Palestinians their civil rights including Social Affairs Minister Wa'il Abu Fa'ur,⁵² Prime Minister Najib Mikati⁵³ and al-Jama'ah al-Islamiyyah MP 'Imad al-Hout.⁵⁴

Others, however, focused on warning against the dangers of naturalization of the Palestinians, such as Samir Geagea, the leader of Lebanese Forces,⁵⁵ and Amine Gemayel, the leader of the Lebanese Social Democratic Party (*al-Kataeb*).⁵⁶

In line with the approval by the Lebanese Parliament of the motion to amend the Social Security Law on 24/8/2010, the Director-General of the Social Security National Fund (SSNF), Muhammad Karaki, released the informational memorandum number 437 on 23/5/2011. The memorandum provides that Palestinian refugees working in Lebanon and registered at the Directorate of Political and Refugee Affairs (DPRA) of the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities are subject to the provisions and benefits of Lebanese Social Security Law, End of Service Indemnity Branch, as of 2/9/2010.⁵⁷

On 22/2/2012, Labor Minister Charbel Nahhas issued decision number 26 by the virtue of which the Palestinian refugees registered at the DPRA of the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities, can obtain work permits valid for three years without requiring an employment contract. In addition, Palestinians would be able to practice professions previously held exclusively by Lebanese citizens, although a number of professions remained off limits.⁵⁸

On 13/2/2012, the Ministry of Interior launched the DPRA Guide and the Palestinian Refugees Documents Computerized Archiving Process in order to clarify and facilitate transactions associated with the personal status of the Palestinian refugees. It also announced the beginning of a process of archiving all records and documents of the DPRA to avoid their loss and preserve their content.⁵⁹

Regarding the health of the Palestinian refugees, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) agreed with the Lebanese Ministry of Health in March 2011 that it would ensure that medicine for incurable diseases and cancer drugs would be provided to Palestinian patients with price reduction of 63%.⁶⁰

On 28/10/2011, Lebanese President Michel Suleiman signed the first batch of nationality withdrawal decrees from people who had acquired Lebanese nationality, but it was later discovered that they did not deserve it according to the State Consultative Council. The Lebanese daily *Assafir* mentioned that the first batch included around 180 people, mostly Palestinians who were shown to be still registered with UNRWA, and this is contrary to the provisions of the constitution, especially its preamble which rejects any form of naturalization.⁶¹

Lebanon made a positive step towards the recognition of the Palestinian state as the government decided in its 10/8/2011 session on the beginning of implementation of the ministerial decision number 2 of 27/11/2008, which provides for the establishment of diplomatic relations with the state of Palestine.⁶² On 17/8/2011, Prime Minister Mikati and Palestinian President Mahmud ‘Abbas inaugurated the Palestinian embassy in Beirut.⁶³ In addition, President Suleiman showed support for the Palestinian bid for statehood in his speech before the UNGA in New York on 21/9/2011.⁶⁴

As a result of the Lebanese recognition of the state of Palestine and the establishment of diplomatic relations with it, the Lebanese government issued a directive demanding all public administrations and institutions and municipalities to adopt PA documents related to issues of personal status,⁶⁵ with the continued adoption of documents issued by the DPRA and any other documents adopted previously.⁶⁶

The Palestinian Situation in Lebanon

Fatah held its second conference on 9/10/2011 to elect its new leadership in Lebanon. The conference ended with the election of 15 members to the movement’s leadership in Lebanon.⁶⁷ Ref‘at Shana‘a was elected as “*Amin Sir al-Iqlim*,” i.e., the secretary of Fatah’s civilian organizations in Lebanon, while Mahmud al-Assadi was elected as his deputy, Munzer Hamzeh became central finance officer, Abu Iyad Shaalan Secretary-General of Popular Committees, Hussein Fayyad became head of the militia, and Youssef Zamzam took stewardship of recruitment and organization.⁶⁸ Fathi Abu al-‘Ardat was appointed as “*Amin Sir Qiyadat al-Saha*,” i.e., Fatah’s secretary in Lebanon.

Apparently, Fatah witnessed internal debate regarding the merger of the military units and formations within the framework of a “civil and social police.” Fatah leader, Munir al-Maqdah explained that Fatah’s core problem would be the fate of some seven thousand members, cadres, officers and chiefs of staff and how these would be accommodated.⁶⁹ In late March 2012, Fatah Leader Mahmud ‘Abbas, endorsed the integration of all military and security institutions within the Palestinian National Security Forces headed by Brigadier-General Subhi Abu ‘Arab, who was charged with the final restructuring of the forces.⁷⁰

The Hamas representative in Lebanon, ‘Ali Barakah, called on the Palestinian factions to facilitate the establishment of a unified political frame of reference in Lebanon which would undertake dialogue with the Lebanese government and the involved local and international sides while supervising security and people’s committees in the refugee camps and works on addressing all suspended issues to alleviate the suffering of the Palestinian people in Lebanon.⁷¹ Barakah also asserted that tackling the Palestinian issue solely from a security perspective is wrong and does not help resolve the Palestinian predicament in Lebanon.⁷²

On the security level, the situation in ‘Ein al-Hilweh came to the fore after an escalation of sporadic security incidents within the camp. On 14/12/2011, Ashraf al-Qaderi, one of the bodyguards of Palestinian Armed Struggle Chief, Mahmud ‘Issa, who goes by the nom de guerre of al-Lino, was killed.⁷³ On 18/12/2011 another bodyguard of al-Lino, the Palestinian ‘Amer Fostoq, was also killed.⁷⁴ PLO factions, the Islamic forces and the coalition of the Palestinian forces in Lebanon condemned the assassinations and all forms of tension in ‘Ein al-Hilweh. All parties stressed the importance of uncovering the perpetrators and holding them accountable to prevent any side from exploiting the camp in agendas which ultimately serve only Israel.⁷⁵

The situation in the Palestinian refugee camps triggered concern among different Lebanese movements and parties that voiced worries that incidents in the camps could be exploited by actors with local and regional agendas. Such positions were expressed in the statements of General Ashraf Rifi, the Internal Security Forces (ISF) Director-General,⁷⁶ Nawfal Daou, the member of the March 14 Secretariat General,⁷⁷ Sami Gemayel, al-Kataeb MP⁷⁸ and Samir Geagea, the leader of the Lebanese Forces.⁷⁹

After the arrest of six members of the “terrorist network” which included two soldiers from the Lebanese army, and the escape of its head, Toufic Taha to ‘Ein al-Hilweh camp, Geagea demanded the removal of all weapons inside and outside the refugee camps, even saying that if it was necessary, the country would take drastic action, as it did in Nahr al-Bared in 2007. In an interview with Voice of Lebanon Radio, Geagea called on the Lebanese government to do whatever it takes to bring to court those in charge of the “terrorist network.”⁸⁰ Geagea’s talk about a “new Nahr al-Bared” was a provocation to all Palestinian forces and some Lebanese movements, especially given that the Palestinians had paid for the Nahr al-Bared tragedy without originally being its perpetrators.

‘Azzam al-Ahmad, the member of Fatah Central Committee who is in charge of the Palestinian file in Lebanon, responded to Geagea’s calls. He said that the problem is not with the Palestinian refugee camp since it is well known that the cell included members of the Lebanese army, other Lebanese members and only one Palestinian.⁸¹

Lebanon and Israel

On 15/5/2011, the Palestinian situation in Lebanon witnessed a significant development when the Return to Palestine March was organized to commemorate the 63rd anniversary of *Nakbah* Day. The march headed to the Palestinian borders at Maroun al-Ras with the participation of more than 45 thousand Palestinians from different Lebanese regions.⁸² Israeli soldiers shot at the protesters when they approached the barbed-wire fence, 112 participants were wounded and 10 killed.⁸³ Hizbullah and other pro-resistance movements seemed to back the march which was also supported by the Syrian government, possibly in an attempt to relieve the pressure being exerted on the Assad regime and shift the focus to the Israeli enemy. The Palestinians in general enthusiastically supported the marches towards Palestine as a way to activate the issue of the refugees and alert the world to their plight.

Following the Maroun al-Ras massacre, various Lebanese sides denounced the assault and the Lebanese permanent mission in New York filed a complaint against Israel before the UN Security Council. Lebanon stated that the aggression “constituted an act of hostility and stresses again the violation of the Lebanese sovereignty by Israel and its disregard of the U.N. resolutions.”⁸⁴ Hizbullah hailed the Palestinians for their sacrifices, whether in Maroun al-Ras, occupied Palestine or the occupied Golan, and it condemned Israeli barbarism.⁸⁵ For its part, al-Jama‘ah al-Islamiyyah issued a statement stressing that the blood which flowed on the borders of Palestine had foiled all plots being prepared to abolish the right of return.⁸⁶

The *Naksah* anniversary also witnessed preparations to organize a march similar to that on *Nakbah* day. However, the Israeli massacre in Maroun al-Ras was a major factor in the decision to cancel the Return to Palestine March II. The Lebanese army confirmed its rejection for such marches on the borders and declared the border region a military zone.⁸⁷

Escalating Israeli rhetoric and threats against Hizbullah and Lebanon continued during 2011 especially after the discovery of gas fields in the Mediterranean. In face of these threats, Lebanese President Michel Suleiman called for defending Lebanese sovereignty and natural wealth including the gas and oil fields discovered off the Lebanese coast.⁸⁸ In response to Netanyahu's threats to strike Lebanon, President Suleiman said that despite Lebanon's lack of military and financial support of the type enjoyed by Israel, Lebanon was the only country which had defeated Israel militarily.⁸⁹

In retaliation to the Israeli threats to reoccupy Lebanon, Nasrallah assured that if Israel declared war on Lebanon, resistance fighters would be ready to liberate the Galilee in the north of occupied Palestine.⁹⁰ He also said that should Israel decide to launch a war, it would start from Tel Aviv rather than northern settlements, adding that the surprises prepared by the resistance would change the face of the region.⁹¹ Nasrallah also warned that Israel and anyone else who tried to damage Lebanese infrastructure would only bring damage upon their own infrastructure. He affirmed that Lebanon is capable of striking back and also able to protect the oil companies that would drill for oil and gas off the Lebanese coast.⁹²

Israel Defense, the Hebrew magazine specialized in military and security affairs, mentioned that the special military units in Hizbullah were conducting exercises which simulate the use of widespread long-range missiles that party has. The magazine added that the fighters were preparing launch pads with missiles targeted at Israel. It also said that among other things, Hizbullah wanted to set missiles in these points which cover a range of 400 km.⁹³ Additionally, *Yedioth Ahronoth* mentioned that Hizbullah was preparing for the post-Assad era by transferring weapons from Syria to Lebanon in anticipation of the fall of the Assad regime and the halt of the arms supply to Hizbullah.⁹⁴

On the security level, the Hizbullah secretary-general stated that the party's counter-espionage unit had detected three cases of collaboration with hostile intelligence within the party. He also divulged that two of the detainees were collaborators with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).⁹⁵

As for field developments, the Israeli army announced on 29/11/2011 that two Katyusha rockets had been fired at the western Galilee from Lebanon. *Yedioth Ahronoth* said on its website that the Israeli army Northern Command had been placed on high alert following the incident. The military stressed that Israel held

the Lebanese government responsible for the incident. A military spokesperson reported that the military had responded with artillery fire on Lebanon. A group calling itself ‘Abdullah ‘Azzam Brigades—Al-Jihad Base claimed responsibility for firing the rockets.⁹⁶

Overall, there is no sign of an imminent Israeli attack on south Lebanon. Nor are there any signs that Hizbullah wants to wage a war against Israel. However, the possibilities of escalation on the borders remain intact especially with the developments of the situation in Syria and its possible repercussions within Lebanon.

5. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Countries

a. The Stance on Peace Settlement

The Gulf countries’ approach to the peace settlement file still supports bilateral negotiations and the PA’s policies; the approach remains “we agree to what the Palestinians agree.” Thus, there were no new developments in 2011 in this respect, with the exception of the Qatari stance which will be tackled in detail because of its importance.

It seemed that the Gulf countries were unaware of the dire need for new alternatives concerning negotiations with the Israelis, which are at a dead end. This is due to three factors:

First: The apparent calm and stability in the Palestinian interior. Indeed, the Palestinian territories have not witnessed escalation since the collapse of the statehood bid in the UN Security Council, otherwise it would have impacted the overall Arab approach to the peace settlement file.

Second: Developments of the Arab strategic environment have moved the epicenter of the Arab system (at least temporarily) to the Gulf region. Consequently Gulf countries used the Arab League as mechanism to pass their preferred policies without embarrassment and without assuming direct responsibility for representing Arab popular opinion.

Third: Gulf countries, especially the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), were engaged with the uprisings in Yemen and Bahrain as well as with Syrian. They made tireless efforts to secure Arab and international resolutions which undermine the Assad regime and push towards Arab and international military intervention in Syria. Therefore, less energy was afforded to Palestinian- related files.

b. Relations Between the Gulf Countries and the Palestinians

A year prior to the outbreak of the Arab Spring, in early 2010, relations between the Gulf countries and Hamas witnessed some positive developments (cold relations had prevailed since the collapse of the Mecca Agreement). The KSA agreed to receive Khalid Mish'al in early 2010. Mish'al was conducting an Arab tour along with several Hamas leaders, and it included visits to the Gulf states of the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain. The relative Saudi openness to Hamas came when the KSA realized that persistence in isolating Hamas (after Cairo has started building the steel wall) might lead to the explosion of the Palestinian situation with repercussions that reach across the region, not only Egypt. It also recognized that the complex issues facing the Arab world dictated that Palestinian reconciliation was in need of Arab support not limited to Egypt. The Gulf, KSA in particular, reflected the Gulf leaders' keenness on controlling Hamas' relationship with Iran and blocking the ability of the latter from undertaking what they perceive as the "manipulating" of the Palestinian situation.

In the context of repositioning Gulf policy after the Arab Spring, certain developments will effectively determine the nature of relations between Hamas and the Gulf states. The most important among these are:

1. The deterioration of Iran's regional role which is one of the determinants of the approach of the Gulf countries, especially KSA, to relations with Hamas. This deterioration is mainly a result of the situation in Syria. Moreover, Hamas' noninvolvement in supporting the Syrian regime, in contrast to the vocal support of Hizbullah and its secretary-general, caused Iran to question its future relationship with the movement. This means that Iran's special relations with Hamas before the Arab Spring, which motivated the Gulf states to urge Hamas to adjust its relations with Iran, have entered a grey area. This development might encourage the Gulf states to reach out to Hamas without prior concerns about the movement and its relations.

2. The MB Movements enjoy wide influence and advanced political positions in the "new Middle East," and it is difficult to predict whether or not the Gulf countries approach to Hamas will be affected by the aggressiveness and sensitivity those regimes have for the MB. Therefore, on one hand the Gulf countries will continue to hold cautious position towards Hamas, but on the other hand, the establishment of regimes affiliated with the MB, especially in a pivotal country

like Egypt, might encourage Gulf countries to pursue more positive stances towards Hamas. In addition, the Palestinian issue could be on the verge of explosion as a result of Israeli practices and the deterioration of the prospects of peace, and this might mitigate KSA's negative stance towards Hamas. Moreover, assuming an effective role in the Palestinian file requires maintaining a certain level of relations with a major Palestinian faction like Hamas, especially in light of the continued decline of Fatah in the Palestinian arena. Additionally, it requires Hamas to match words with actions by practicing non-interference in the internal affairs of countries and by distancing itself from the new alliances that arise in the region.

3. Gulf states strategic choice to proceed with peace settlement means supporting the pro-peace settlement camp while putting limits on relations with the resistance movements, including Hamas. This means that mutual relations will be subject to Hamas' stances, how it will reposition itself in light of new facts, developments in Palestinian reconciliation, the nature of the relationship with the new actors after the political reemergence of the MB, and the changing nature of the Arab regimes.

c. Qatar

1. The Stance on Peace Settlement

The Arab Spring has given Qatar opportunities to come to the fore of the Arab diplomatic scene. Doha strongly sought to benefit from the new Arab climate using its huge diplomatic and financial capabilities alongside its famous media tool (Al Jazeera news network) to enhance its role and regional status in different files, primarily mainly Libya after the revolution, then Syria and the Palestinian issue.

Qatar's diplomacy, which was always controversial because of its pragmatic approach, has given the state more freedom to work on different files simultaneously. Thus, it was able, until recently, to combine its support of the peace process with media and financial support of Hamas, while at the same time it maintained relations with Israel in contravention to the position of the GCC vis-à-vis normalization with Israel. Strikingly, Qatar maintained distinguished relations with both Damascus and Tehran!

Qatari diplomacy since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution has been characterised by the total severance of relations with the Syrian regime. The Qataris also tried to fill the vacuum created by absencing this regime, by assuming a greater regional role, achieved by being a stronger presence on the Palestinian track, particularly the peace settlement.

Some sides believe that Qatar's involvement in the peace settlement file would further complicate the attempts to crystallize a new Palestinian strategy. This is mainly because Qatari diplomacy will not depart from the strategic position of the moderate Arab camp. Usually quoted in this respect are the statements of the Qatari Prime Minister Hamad Bin Jassim, in January 2012 during his meeting with the members of the SNC in Cairo where he said that Hamas had ended as an armed resistance movement.⁹⁷ This was strongly denied by Hamas MP in the PLC, Isma'il al-Ashqar.⁹⁸ Bin Jassim's declarations are considered to reflect the Qatari will to push Hamas towards moderation and peace settlement with Israel.

It might be difficult at this early stage to envisage the repercussions of this issue or speculate on the future policies of Qatar towards the Palestinians mainly because of the pragmatism that characterizes Qatari foreign policy and the difficulty of predicting a greater Qatari role regarding the peace settlement. The matter becomes more intricate in light of the fragility of the Palestinian interior and the difficult financial situation.

It should be noted here that Qatari diplomacy, in coordination with Turkey, played a role in urging Hamas to hasten the exit of its political figures from Damascus in December 2011 and January 2012.⁹⁹ Moreover, this diplomacy had a role in the mediation between Hamas and Jordan as the preliminary agreement on Mish'al's visit to Amman was achieved during King 'Abdullah II's visit to Qatar and his meeting with Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani, the Prince of Qatar. Indeed, Qatar was insistent on an active role so it would be part of the solution while Jordan's King welcomed Hamas' return and it was agreed to set a specific date for the visit.

One of the indicators of the revival of the relations between Jordan and Hamas was the announcement that King 'Abdullah II had called Mish'al's family residing in Amman to check on his sick mother.¹⁰⁰ Following this announcement, Jordanian newspapers mentioned that Mish'al would visit Jordan accompanied by Qatari Crown Prince Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani, and that was after Mish'al had

called Jordanian Prime Minister-Designate, ‘Awn al-Khasawneh, to congratulate him on the formation of the government.¹⁰¹ However, the visit was postponed more than once as the sides fixed an appointment which suited Jordan, Qatar and Hamas.¹⁰²

On 29/1/2012, the visit was conducted and the Jordanian King met with the Qatari Crown Prince and Khalid Mish‘al and his accompanying delegation in Amman. During the meeting, there was a review of recent developments on the Palestinian scene and King ‘Abdullah II stressed Jordan’s support for the inalienable right of the Palestinian people to accomplish their aspiration and establish a Palestinian state on Palestinian soil, a high priority for Jordan. For his part, Khalid Mish‘al stated that the meeting had been a chance to express Hamas’ commitment to Jordan’s security, stability and interests. He also said that the movement respected the framework of the political relationship which, like all human relations, is a matter of mutual consent. Mish‘al added that Hamas rejected naturalization and the idea of alternative homeland, and insists on the restoration of full Palestinian rights so Palestine would be Palestine, Jordan would be Jordan, the Palestinian state would be the Palestinian state and the Jordanian state would be the Jordanian state.¹⁰³

The delegation accompanying Mish‘al included Deputy Head of the Hamas Political Bureau, Musa Abu Marzuq, besides the Bureau members Sami Khatir, Muhammad Nazzal, ‘Izzat al-Rishq and Muhammad Nasr. On the Jordanian side, there was the Jordanian Prince Ali Bin al-Hussein, Royal Court Chief Riyadh Abu Karaki, Director of the King’s Office ‘Imad Fakhoury, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Lieutenant-General Mish‘al Muhammad Zabin.¹⁰⁴

Striking, however, was the absence of the General Intelligence Department (GID) chief from this meeting while these relations were previously organized through the GID. Such an absence might reflect the discontent of some sides in the GID with the visit, whereas the presence of the army chief conveyed a message from the King stressing his will to complete the visit and his control over decision-making in the country.

In the same context, at the opening session of the International Conference on Jerusalem, hosted by Qatar, on 26–27/2/2012, Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani submitted a proposal aimed at requesting the Security Council “to adopt a

resolution setting up an international commission of inquiry that would investigate all the actions taken by Israel since the 1967 occupation of Arab Jerusalem to obliterate its Islamic and Arabic identities.” This call was met with immediate approval from President Mahmud ‘Abbas in the presence of Hamas delegation and tens of Palestinian figures. It was also commended by the Arab League Secretary-General Nabil al-‘Arabi and Ekmeleddin Ihsanoğlu, the Secretary-General of the OIC.¹⁰⁵

This call appeared like an attempt by Sheikh Hamad (as the head of the Arab Summit) to activate the implementation of the resolution of the Sirte Summit regarding Jerusalem, which had been postponed for the second year in light of the developments of the Arab Spring. However, there is no reason to believe that the strategy suggested by Sheikh Hamad for protecting Jerusalem will face a different fate from that which is faced by supporting events and the funds of *al-Aqsa* and *al-Intifadah* which remain almost empty in light of the state of weakness and fragmentation in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

2. Qatari-Palestinian Relations

One of the most important developments of the Arab approach to Palestinian reconciliation was the signing of a new agreement between Mahmud ‘Abbas of Fatah and Khalid Mish‘al of Hamas. The agreement, the Doha Declaration, was signed in Qatar on 6/2/2012 under the auspices of the Qatari Prince, and it provided for the formation of a national unity government headed by ‘Abbas. The agreement sparked *controversy* among Palestinians and Arabs and suspicions regarding the possibility of its implementation. However, the following factors mark the importance of the agreement:

First: The agreement is tantamount to a declaration that Qatar has become involved in Palestinian reconciliation which had been almost monopolized by Egypt.

Second: The signing of such an agreement in Qatar under the auspices of the Qatari Prince with the efforts of the Crown Prince and the follow up by the prime minister means the continuation of distinguished relations between Hamas and Doha. At the same time, it means the end of the disagreement between Qatar and the PA after different disputes which witnessed mutual criticism and reached a peak after Al Jazeera published internal documents from the Israel-Palestine negotiations “The Palestine Papers,” in January 2011.

Worthy of mention is that Qatar is considered today one of the major supporters of the PA. A report issued by the Arab League Secretariat in June 2011 revealed that Qatar had given around \$76 million in aid for the PA. The report also showed that Qatar contributed to the Palestinian budget by \$15.86 million, the amount decided at the Beirut Summit of 2002, then increased by \$1 million. The report also revealed Qatari support for the Palestinian economy by exempting all Palestinian exports to Qatar from customs duty, making Qatar the 13th Arab country to implement such a decision.¹⁰⁶

Third: Developments of Normalization

Since early 2011, changes in the Arab world posed important questions regarding the normalization of Arab relations with Israel. Indeed, there are some signs showing that after the relative victory of the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen and their continuation in other countries, there is popular consensus to reject all forms of normalization with Israel, and thus any prospects for it are unlikely.

The Egyptian gas export to Israel was among the first corruption issues posed, perhaps even before the ouster of President Mubarak. In fact, Egyptian officials still deal with the issue as one of corruption, and not from a political perspective. Nonetheless, there was a major shift in the popular approach from a mere rejection to practical prevention, when the pipeline supplying natural gas from Egypt to Israel was blown up 13 times throughout 2011 and until 5/3/2012. It is widely believed that these bombings were conducted by popular and national forces opposing normalization with Israel.

In addition, reconsidering the gas treaty is considered one of the few issues to have garnered consensus among all political forces and parties in Egypt. It seemed that normalization with Israel cannot be accepted by any political movement, even if all movements declared their “respect” for the Camp David Accords, vowing to deal with it through constitutional methods. This was the position of the Renaissance Party or *Nahda* in Tunisia which won the most seats in parliamentary elections and which also stressed that the government to be formed by the party would cancel the treaties signed with Israel by the regime

of Zein al-Abidine Ben Ali.¹⁰⁷ In addition, Mustafa ‘Abdul Jalil, the chairman of the National Transitional Council of Libya (NTC), denied any attempts by the council to normalize relations with Israel.¹⁰⁸

The possibilities for cooperation between Israel and the Arab regimes that have not witnessed uprisings have declined, and the continuation of normalization for those that have already signed treaties with Israel has become more difficult. This is due to the Arab Spring which boosted the relevance of the popular will, even in countries witnessing limited popular action, in addition to Israel’s rejection for the provisions of the Arab Peace Initiative that promise full normalization with Israel should it withdraw from all the lands it occupied in 1967.

Despite the growing atmosphere of animosity against Israel in the Arab world, the volume of trade between Jordan and Israel remains striking. According to Israeli statistics, it improved by 36.6% in 2011 as compared to 2010 when the Israeli exports to Jordan increased from \$185.6 million in 2010 to \$209.3 million in 2011, a 12.8% increase. Israeli imports from Jordan increased from \$94.1 million in 2010 to \$172.9 million in 2011, an 83.7% increase (see table 1/3).

However, Jordanian statistics provide different figures showing that Jordanian exports to Israel in 2011 amounted to Jordanian Dinars (JOD) 53.2 million (\$75.1 million) compared to JOD 64.2 million (\$90.7 million) in 2010, a 17% decrease. Statistics also showed an increase in the volume of Jordanian imports from Israel by 8% in 2011, where it amounted to JOD 68.2 million (\$96.3 million) compared to JOD 63.2 million (\$89.3 million) in 2010. This means that the volume of trade between the two countries decreased from JOD 127.4 million (approximately \$180 million) in 2010 to JOD 121.4 million (\$171.4 million) in 2011 by 5% (see table 1/3).

In fact, it is not possible to reach clear conclusions regarding the disparity between the Jordanian and Israeli statistics but it is clear that the Israeli figures show a lower decline in the volume of trade.

Table 1/3: Volume of Trade Between Jordan and Israel According to Jordanian and Israeli Statistics 2010–2011 (\$ million)¹⁰⁹

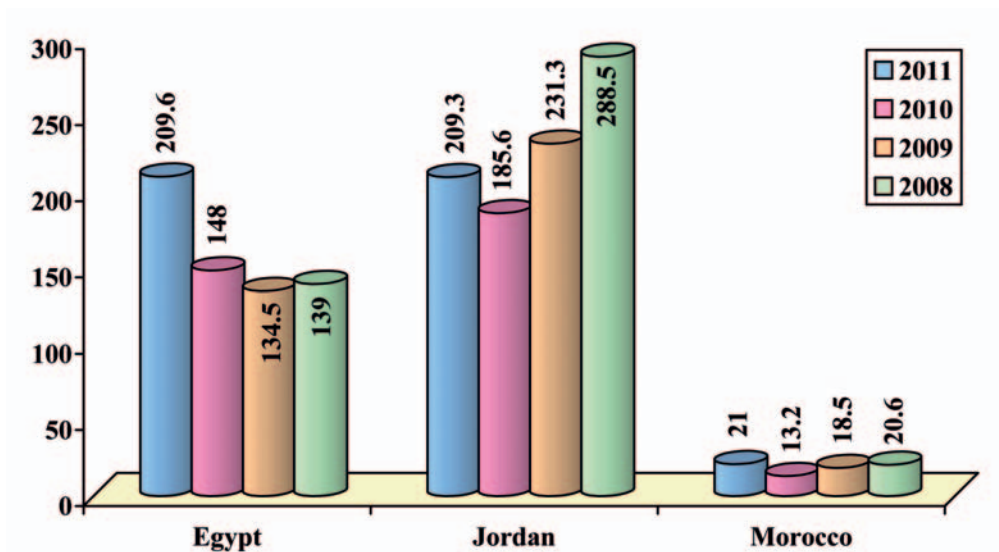
Year	Jordan's exports to Israel		Jordan's imports from Israel		Trade volume	
	Jordanian statistics	Israeli statistics	Jordanian statistics	Israeli statistics	Jordanian statistics	Israeli statistics
2010	90.7	94.1	89.3	185.6	180	279.7
2011	75.1	172.9	96.3	209.3	171.4	382.2

As for Egypt, the indicators of decline in normalization are not completely consistent with the widespread popular antagonism towards Israel. Thus, notwithstanding the decline in volume of trade between Egypt and Israel by 22.9% in 2011 compared to 2010, the volume of Israeli exports to Egypt increased from \$148 million in 2010 to \$209.6 million in 2011, a 41.6% increase. However, according to Israeli figures, Israeli imports from Egypt declined significantly from \$355.1 million in 2010 to \$178.5 million in 2011, a 49.7% decrease.¹¹⁰

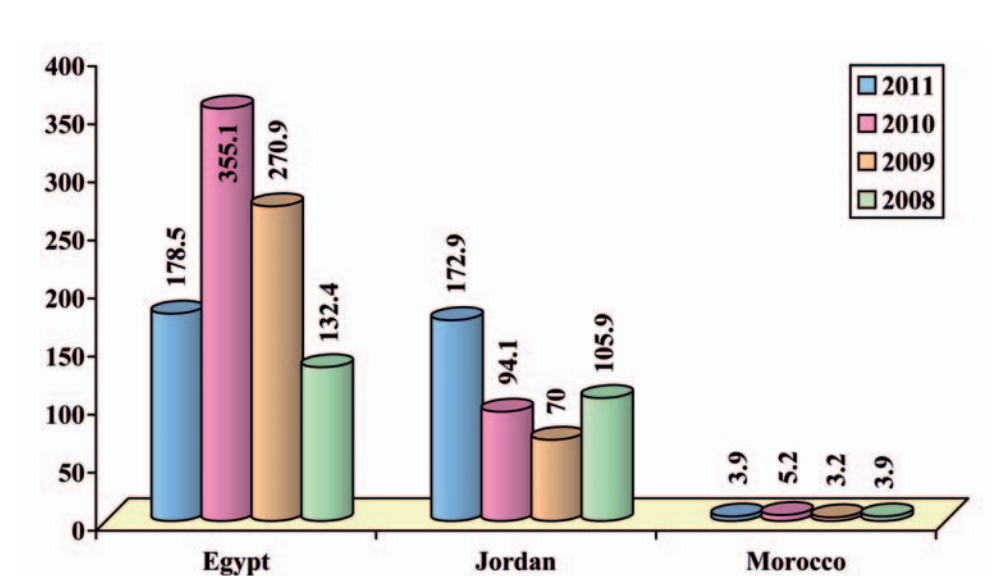
Table 2/3: Israeli Exports and Imports to/ from Some Arab Countries 2008–2011 (\$ million)¹¹¹

Country	Israeli exports to:				Israeli imports from:			
	2011	2010	2009	2008	2011	2010	2009	2008
Egypt	209.6	148	134.5	139	178.5	355.1	270.9	132.4
Jordan	209.3	185.6	231.3	288.5	172.9	94.1	70	105.9
Morocco	21	13.2	18.5	20.6	3.9	5.2	3.2	3.9

Israeli Exports to Some Arab Countries 2008–2011 (\$ million)



Israeli Imports from Some Arab Countries 2008–2011 (\$ million)



Fourth: The Arab Public's Position

1. The Masses Return as Pivotal Actor

The uprisings of 2011 helped boost a strategic actor which was previously absent, or absented, from the Arab political scene. This actor is the Arab people who were able to rediscover their ability to act and be influential, whether they succeeded in creating their own model of the Arab Spring or they only took to the streets to demand reform and change.

This development was immediately reflected in Arab foreign policies which, during the first months of 2011, sought to appease the interior.¹¹² This transformation, despite its positive connotations, requires more pressure to make strategic shifts in the vision of foreign policy decision makers, because these shifts are the result of interplay of a number of variables.

The absence of a common agenda for the popular forces, as manifested in the Egyptian case in particular, reduced the possibility for such shifts and even had a negative impact. For example, during the crisis of the killing of the Egyptian soldiers on the borders in August 2011, a serious public discussion took place for a while regarding the reformulation of security arrangements under the Camp David Accords. This debate was likely to be turned into an urgent popular demand were it not for the division of the political forces in this regard and the repercussions of the attack on the Israeli embassy in Cairo which diverted attention away from the main issue and contributed, at least partially, to deferring the discussion on this matter.

Nonetheless, the growing role of the political street indicates the harbingers of the formation of popular policies separate from official Arab policies and parallel to them. This might transfer the Palestinian issue from the hands of the regimes and their conservative strategy to the hands of the peoples and their strategy of seeking victory, freedom and popular pressure to achieve interests and circumvent outside pressures.¹¹³ One of the examples of popular political practices was the campaign launched by some Facebook activists after the Egyptian Prime Minister Kamal al-Ganzouri declined to receive Prime Minister Isma'il Haniyyah during his visit to Egypt in December 2011. The campaign, entitled "We will not let you down like al-Ganzouri government did," called for a popular reception for Haniyyah at Cairo airport during his second visit to Egypt on 9/1/2012,¹¹⁴ and received a great response.

2. The Dilemma of the Increase of Traditional Actors and Their Fragmentation

In the new Arab environment, the final political decision is no longer monopolized by a limited number of ruling elites or even the head of the state. In the coming stage, external political actors will have to deal with a large number of internal actors who do not necessarily share homogeneous visions.¹¹⁵ Although this is natural in democratic systems, it is a problem in countries which undergo their first battle to establish pluralistic democracies.

Under a democratic system, the multiplicity of visions is a guarantee of making decisions that are closer to the national interest. This is because multiplicity is governed by constants to which all actors adhere. However, in light of the uncertainty in the region, this diversity might turn into a bomb that might explode in the form of covert or overt political conflict. Ultimately, it will lead either to maintaining the policies of former regimes and deferring the discussion of such files to the post-transition phase until the prevalence of stability in the region or it could lead to confused decisions and statements which might cause political crises with external actors.

The likeliness of the second scenario is enhanced in the case of the spread of divisions among political forces and their extension beyond the transitional phase without reaching societal consensus on specific a charter that defines the ceiling of national interest. In the Egyptian case, political schism in 2011 was no more limited to traditional competition between liberal, national, Islamic and leftist currents, but it rather extended into one current, thus dividing it into two parties, one closer to pragmatism and moderation and another closer to revolutionary radicalism.

The Palestinian issue was always one of the most important topics of political discussion and action and one of the most effective means often used by most, if not all, movements to oppose the former Egyptian regime and embarrass it. Thus, it was only natural for political parties to use this issue and Egyptian-Israeli relations in their publicity campaigns. This lesson was well understood by presidential candidates and it seems that cancelling Egypt's gas deal with Israel and ending the siege of GS were two common themes in their statements

The most dangerous aspects of this transformation are the possible attempts of radical movements to challenge moderate ones or to inflame the situation in

the Sinai Peninsula near the border with GS and Israel thus embroiling Egypt in ill-timed confusion.

As a matter of fact, following the Eilat attacks, which were coordinated between Palestinian and Egyptian groups, Israel devised a new plan to secure the Egyptian borders that were known after the operation as the “threat borders.”¹¹⁶ Additionally, Israeli research centers conducted different strategic assessments that were presented to the Israeli security and defense leaders, in which scenarios were presented regarding possible options to deal with such threats.¹¹⁷

3. Greater Role for al-Azhar and the Popular Diplomacy

The scene after the Egyptian revolution clearly showed that al-Azhar al-Sharif is seeking to exercise a greater political and national role than the one it had assumed before the revolution. Regardless of the debate in Egypt and in the corridors of al-Azhar concerning this role, the return of al-Azhar to serve the nation’s interests means opening new horizon for institutionalizing popular diplomatic work and employing its offices and imams around the world to activate popular diplomacy that would serve the Palestinian issue. More important is employing the religious status of al-Azhar in the minds of broad sectors of the Arab and Islamic world to mobilize efforts and public opinion behind the causes it supports, especially as al-Azhar heads towards achieving more independence in its decisions and resource management after the Egyptian revolution.

The most notable aspect of al-Azhar’s “return” is its stance regarding the Palestinian issue and Egyptian-Israeli relations. The Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmad al-Tayyib launched an international campaign, in the presence of the PA Mufti Muhammad Hussein, to break the siege on Jerusalem. The campaign aimed at studying the features of the Judaization plan targeted at swallowing up all Jerusalem and eradicating its Arab aspects, cultural symbols, historical institutions, the legal rights of its people, and more importantly, started to put together an alternative plan to methodically protect the holy city based on realistic strategy.¹¹⁸

Al-Azhar started to receive Jerusalemites in The Jerusalem Support Forum which was held in Cairo for the first time on 15/2/2012. The objective was to study their needs including the health needs, movement and work needs of all Arabs in Jerusalem; children’s needs regarding books, schools and education, in addition to the needs of the youths for sports clubs, social institutions and special care in order to provide them with decent living.¹¹⁹

Al-Azhar also sponsored the initiative called the Fund for Dignity and Pride which is dedicated to the Palestinians. It also sponsored Sheikh Muhammad Hassan's initiative suggesting dispensing with American aid. Isma'il Haniyyah chose al-Azhar Mosque for its symbolism to address public opinion in the presence of thousands of Egyptians who gathered to receive him during his visit to Egypt in February 2012.

4. The Future of Partnership with the New Palestinian Movements

The Arab Spring cast light on essential transformations within public sphere in Egypt and the Arab region. Most notably, it highlighted the impact of social media on authoritarian regimes which have always demonstrated flexibility and ability to adapt and overcome the most daunting challenges they faced whether from inside the country or outside. Apart from determining the exact impact of this tool, which is still subject to study and research, there is no argument over the scope of freedom granted by social media to organize work and share experiences.

An example of this role is represented in the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, where virtual groups active on the Internet employed these media to find networks for communication. These networks transcended traditional barriers of work; party regulations and governmental censorship. Ultimately, they were able, through effective mechanisms, to mobilize society towards revolution.

The prototype developed by Marc Lynch, in a study entitled "After Egypt: The Limits and Promise of Online Opportunities Challenges to the Authoritarian Arab State,"¹²⁰ considers the five most important impacts of the new social media: individual competencies (politicization), relationships between groups (networking between groups), collective web action, the regime's policies against online activism, and the ability to mobilize other media on the internet and in reality. Despite the fact that these new tools open broad horizons of change for political work, there are some weaknesses. For, although they are advanced tools, they are still tools whose effectiveness depends on the objectives and stances of their users in addition to users' ability to employ the tools in an influential manner. This means that the human factor remains the most influential in this respect. This partially interprets the disparity in popular response to the events regardless of their gravity. It also explains the difference between the ability of the actors to mobilize for

protests and their ability to promote a specific political program which deals with the challenges of post-regime change.¹²¹

Social media, moreover, assumed a distinguished role in covering the events of the revolutions and in some cases they were the main source supplying different media outlets with information, pictures, video and audio recordings of the events which could not be reached by traditional press coverage. This development transfers the individual from being a receiver to an active user of social media, including the traditional tools like television and press. Indeed, we have witnessed the birth of citizen journalism which transformed the communication process from the traditional linear pattern between a sender and a receiver to circular pattern in which different sides exercise the role of the sender and receiver and, perhaps, the maker of the event.

The aforementioned developments open new horizons for the popular role in the Palestinian issue. In light of expansion of the political street to include the wider public of the satellite channels and social networks, and in light of the continued popular concern about the Palestinian issue, it is likely that those interested would develop cross-border links and networks forming blocs supportive of the Palestinian issue in every Arab country. The harbingers of these blocs are seen in the forces of the Arab Spring, which are joined by many Arab revolutionary forces and which originally aimed to support revolutionary forces fighting dictatorships and autocracies.¹²²

Although we cannot be certain about the ability of these networks to influence interactions inside Palestine, this is an important development in popular common Arab work. It transcends the oppression of the regimes and the barriers of working on the ground and provides an important method for exchanging experience between Arab and Palestinian revolutionary forces regarding organizing protests. At the same time, it can be turned into a means for promoting specific stances agreed upon by the Palestinians and their Arab partners, thus enhancing the former's position and providing it with the Arab momentum that it has always missed.

Conclusion

The Arab Spring has not blossomed in Palestine yet. However, the change in the strategic environment surrounding Israel, together with the establishment of Arab regimes with national and Islamic spirits reflecting the popular will, heralds a change in the conflict equation and its balances. Thus, should the changes succeed; this would mean the creation of an environment supportive of the Palestinian issue and more sympathetic to the resistance movements and more intransigent about the peace process.

The countries which have witnessed change will be, for the foreseeable future, busy with their internal affairs and establishing their constitutional and institutional stability. This might mean a distraction from the Palestinian issue, albeit temporarily. In addition, the new regimes will seek to assure the West that their Islamic and national frame of reference does not necessarily mean entering conflicts and wars with the West nor does it mean rushing into a confrontation with Israel. Yet, at the same time, it might adopt more positive policies towards Palestine and towards putting the Palestinian house in order, encouraging resistance forces to join the PLO and alleviate the siege of GS.

The changes in the Arab world have affected the reformulation of previously established alliances. Hence, the axes of moderation and resistance are no longer present the way they used to be. Perhaps, if the changes in Egypt succeed, the country will play a pioneer role in encouraging the formation of a new Arab system with an Islamic, Arab and national frame of reference. The situation in Syria remains a source of concern as there are fears the crisis there might continue for a long period, and foreign powers will be able to trigger ethnic and sectarian conflict and push the country towards fragmentation before Syrian national forces are able to take control and push towards a genuine process of reform and change.

The national and Islamic Palestinian movements might benefit from the change in the Arab world by conducting self-criticism and putting the Palestinian house and the PLO in order. It can also build on the change to reconstruct the institutions and activate their role in a way that serves the national project, benefits from the capacities of the youth and independent forces and accommodates the Islamic, Arab and human dimensions of the Palestinian issue.

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This Report

The Palestinian Strategic Report 2011/12 is the seventh in a series of annual resourceful academic studies. It discusses the developments of the Palestinian issue of this period in an objective and comprehensive manner. The meticulous analytical reading of events tries also to foresee the near future. This Report has become a basic reference on Palestinian studies, it is a must read for all those concerned.

An outstanding team of 12 academics and experts contributed to this Report in seven chapters. They covered the internal Palestinian situation, the Israeli scene and the Israeli-Palestinian relations, the Arab, Muslim and international stances towards the Palestinian issue. This Report focuses also on the issue of Jerusalem and the holy sites, and the suffering of man and land under the Israeli occupation. Besides, the demographic, economic and education indicators are also studied and analyzed.

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