

**The Palestine Strategic Report  
2016 – 2017  
Ch.6**



# **The Palestine Issue and the Arab World**

**2016 – 2017**

**NOTE:** The complete volume of  
**The Palestine Strategic Report 2016 – 2017**  
will be published soon



## **The Palestine Issue and the Arab World 2016–2017<sup>1</sup>**

### ***Introduction***

Developments in the Arab countries in 2016 and 2017 further changed the strategic environment surrounding the Palestine issue, and to a large extent, reinforced Israel's strong position in the conflict and in the region, particularly with the Arab states including the Palestinians, who remained committed to the peace process and "moderation." Other developments did not necessarily strengthen the Palestinian resistance forces, however they offered them opportunities that could be taken advantage of if they are handled more skillfully than Israel's interaction with the threats surrounding it.

The most prominent events influencing the Palestine issue and its strategic environment in 2016 and 2017 can be summed up with the following: the continuation of internal crises in Egypt and Syria; the continuation of the counter-revolutionary campaign against the Arab forces of change in general; shifts in the Gulf states (led by the Qatar crisis); and the escalation of regional conflict between the countries of "moderation" on the one hand, and Iran and its allies on the other.

In Egypt, the continued deterioration of the security situation in the Sinai Peninsula was the most important factor in favor of Israel's strategic environment. Consequently, Israel enhanced its security and military cooperation with Egypt in an unprecedented manner, gaining importance as an ally for the Egyptian military and political leadership. At the same time, security chaos in Sinai further harmed the Palestinians and resistance forces in GS, through the continued closure of Rafah crossing and the illegalization of tunnels, which were the main arteries easing the GS siege.

Furthermore, Sinai's security chaos enhanced Israel's strategic advantage as an energy supplier to Jordan. This unrest was the main reason for cutting off Egyptian gas supplies to Jordan and it remains the most important factor that might prevent the resumption of Egyptian-Jordanian energy cooperation in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> This study is the approved English translation of chapter six of *The Palestine Strategic Report 2016–2017*, edited by Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh. It is an analytical study of the conditions of the Palestinian issue and the Arab World in 2016–2017. The Arabic version of this Report was recently released in 2018, and the draft of this chapter was written by Hasan Ibhaïs.

As for Syria, its bloody internal crisis led to near total absence of its political role in the region, except as concerns its political geography, which has become subject to the balance of power among the warring forces on the ground. The country has become a key arena for resolving complex regional and international disputes. Israel has exploited these shifts to strengthen its position by consolidating its hold over the Golan, confiscating land, and freely violating Syrian airspace to hit the targets it deems to be a strategic threat.

The Syrian crisis contributed to the weakening of the “northern front” of Israel and widened the rift between the forces of the region, increasing the international prominence of regional conflict at the expense of the Palestinian issue, and increased the common security interests between Israel and Jordan. However, the relative de-escalation in Syria strengthened the forces hostile to Israel on the “northern front.”

The Gulf states’ shifts were largely the result of changes in the ruling family of Saudi Arabia and the continued campaign against the forces of reform and change. Their intersection with the US desire to re-focus the region on the conflict with Iran opens the way for major transformations. If successful this will improve the regional landscape for Israel in an unprecedented way through the “normalization” of its presence in the region, and by Arab countries joining the efforts to liquidate the Palestine issue.

But at the same time, efforts to normalize relations between the “moderate” Arab countries and Israel are on collision course with several obstacles. For as long as there is no progress in the peace process, these steps lack political cover, and the Arab official system—even the most moderate regimes—are unable to sidestep the issue of Jerusalem, on which the positions of Israel and the US have escalated the situation dramatically.

### *First: Positions of the League of Arab States*

#### **1. Impact of Changes and Revolutions on the Palestinian Issue**

Despite the League of Arab States (LAS) supposedly being the body of Arab unity and the symbol of its power, it has reflected in its structure, actions and decisions Arab feebleness and division. The developments in the Arab world in 2016 and 2017 led to a further decline in the LAS role in various Arab issues in general and in the Palestinian issue in particular. This was due to several factors: the multiple crises the Arab League was supposed to deal with; the preoccupation of many of its member states with internal



conflicts and crises; the overlap between these crises and the regional conflicts which now occupy a higher priority than the conflict with Israel on the agendas of some major Arab countries; as well as the resulting tension in relations between member States, undermining the role of the entire LAS system.

The crises in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, in addition to the war against the Islamic State group (IS) in the places it expanded into, especially Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Sinai, has cast a heavy shadow on the agendas of the Arab countries. The same applies to the counter-revolutionary campaign, the resumption of which occupied a high position in the priorities of the two leading Arab powers, Egypt and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), alongside the increasingly influential (politically, financially, and militarily) United Arab Emirates (UAE). It is possible to say the Gulf crisis and the decision to boycott Qatar by these countries (along with Bahrain) was one of the most important ramifications of the campaign. The overlap between these issues and the regional scramble for influence between the “moderate” Arab camp and Iran and its allies has increased the uncertainty looming over the region.

Despite the fact that the Palestine issue occupied the top spot in the declarations of the two Arab summits: the 27th in Nouakchott, 25/7/2016 and 28th on the Dead Sea, 29/3/2017, it wasn't at the same level on the practical agenda of these countries. The declarations contained little that is new concerning Israeli violations of Palestinian rights and territories, the Palestinian internal conflict, and the peace process.

The most prominent indicators of the decline of LAS interest in developments of the Palestinian issue are its delayed response to the riots at the Lion's Gate, which broke out on 14/7/2017 following Israel's decision to close *al-Aqsa* Mosque, and its attempt to install electronic gates at its entrance, in the aftermath of a resistance operation targeting Israeli police in *al-Aqsa* courtyard. Arab foreign ministers failed to convene a meeting to discuss the assault on the mosque until two weeks later, on 27/7/2017, the day on which the Palestinian popular uprising had already forced the Israel to reverse its measures. The Palestinian crowds entered *al-Aqsa* compound chanting “*Allah* is Great” on Eid al-Fitr, after having refused to enter through Israeli gates in the previous period.

The LAS ministerial statement was weak, and the “severe condemnation of Israel's dangerous escalation in the occupied city of Jerusalem and the *al-Aqsa* Mosque,” was devoid of any meaning, as was its rejection of “new facts on the ground (imposed by Israel) aimed at changing the historical and legal status quo.” Ironically, before

expressing support for the Palestinian people's defense of *al-Aqsa*, it praised what it said were efforts by a number of Arab kings and presidents to end the crisis.<sup>2</sup> This statement was in conjunction with the circulation of statements and hashtags on social media attributing the Palestinian victory to Arab leaders, despite the passive tone of the Arab regimes during the crisis.<sup>3</sup>

## **2. The Position on the Internal Palestinian Conflict and Reconciliation Efforts**

In 2016 and 2017, the LAS position on the internal Palestinian conflict remained the same as previous years. It continued to support the PA leadership and President Mahmud 'Abbas, as the representative of "Palestinian national legitimacy," as expressed by the 27th Arab Summit in Nouakchott, affirming "respect for the Palestinian national legitimacy headed by His Excellency President Mahmud 'Abbas, commending his efforts for Palestinian national reconciliation, and emphasizing commitment to the unity of Palestinian representation."<sup>4</sup> The 28th Arab Summit Declaration also stressed "supporting efforts to achieve reconciliation and the formation of a national unity government, under Palestinian national legitimacy, headed by President Mahmud 'Abbas."<sup>5</sup>

Beside the above-mentioned support, and the positions and statements made by the LAS Secretary-General Ahmad Abu al-Ghait, which stressed the need to complete internal Palestinian reconciliation and support the Egyptian efforts working on it, and that welcomed developments in this issue in September and October 2017, LAS did not have an active role in advancing Palestinian reconciliation.

## **3. The Position on the Peace Process**

LAS continued its commitment to the Arab Peace Initiative adopted by the Beirut summit in 2002, rejecting any attempts to introduce amendments to its terms, in response to a statement by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who said, "We are willing to negotiate with the Arab states' revisions to that initiative so that it reflects the dramatic

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<sup>2</sup> See Secretariat of the League Council Affairs, The Outcome of the Ministerial Meeting of the Council of the League of Arab States (LAS) in an Extraordinary Session, Cairo, 27/7/2017, <https://bit.ly/2GZuq2X> (in Arabic)

<sup>3</sup> See site of Aljazeera.net, 28/7/2017, <http://www.aljazeera.net> (in Arabic)

<sup>4</sup> See Secretariat of the League Council Affairs, Summit of the Council of the League of Arab States, 27th Ordinary Session, Resolutions Volume, Nouakchott, 25/7/2016, pp. 8–20, <https://bit.ly/2kv3pIG> (in Arabic)

<sup>5</sup> Secretariat of the League Council Affairs, Summit of the Council of the League of Arab States, 28th Ordinary Session, Amman Declaration, Jordan, Dead Sea, 29/3/2017, <https://bit.ly/2njSel9> (in Arabic)



changes in the region since 2002.”<sup>6</sup> The LAS efforts remained confined to the same diplomatic framework, providing cover to Palestinian negotiators in international forums and supporting international initiatives to re-launch the negotiations, the most prominent of which was the French initiative in 2016 and 2017.

In several statements, LAS affirmed the Arab Peace Initiative as the basis of any peaceful settlement and rejected amendments, most prominently the two final statements of the Nouakchott and Dead Sea summits. The first affirmed the need to dedicate “all efforts towards a just and comprehensive solution based on the Arab Peace Initiative, the Madrid Principles, and the rules of international law and relevant UN resolutions,” expressing support for the Egyptian efforts to advance the “peace process” and the French initiative.<sup>7</sup>

The second stressed the Arab countries’ commitment to the initiative and adherence to all its clauses as the embodiment of the Arab strategic vision of comprehensive and lasting “peace.” It said that the initiative is still “the most comprehensive plan able to achieve historic reconciliation, calling on the countries of the world not to transfer their embassies to Jerusalem or recognize it as the capital of Israel.” It renewed the LAS support for the outcomes of the “Paris Peace Conference,”<sup>8</sup> held on 15/1/2017 in culmination of the French initiative, in the absence of the Palestinian and Israeli parties.

LAS had taken part in the Paris conference, where Secretary General Ahmad Abu al-Ghait stressed the commitment to the Arab initiative as a cornerstone of peace and the League’s position vis-a-vis the relationship with Israel.<sup>9</sup> Abu al-Ghait later said that “thinking of alternative paths to settle the Palestinian issue (instead of the two-state solution) is only a waste of time and effort, and it would push the region into further violence and extremism, and will be met with a strong and clear Arab rejection.”<sup>10</sup>

However, despite these assertions, there have been increasing indications that separate paths of rapprochement between a number of Arab states and Israel exist, outside the

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<sup>6</sup> PM Netanyahu's and DM Liberman's Statements at the Knesset, Events, site of Prime Minister’s Office, 30/5/2016, <http://www.pmo.gov.il/English/MediaCenter/Events/Pages/eventLiberman300516.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> Summit of the Council of the League of Arab States, 27th Ordinary Session, Nouakchott Declaration, Nouakchott, 25-26/7/2016, <https://bit.ly/2Ha8ZtJ> (in Arabic)

<sup>8</sup> Secretariat of the League Council Affairs, Summit of the Council of the League of Arab States, 28th Ordinary Session, Amman Declaration, 29/3/2017. (in Arabic)

<sup>9</sup> *Asharq al-Awsat* newspaper, London, 15/1/2017. (in Arabic)

<sup>10</sup> Site of Anadolu Agency, 23/2/2017. (in Arabic)

framework of the Arab initiative and separate from the collective LAS positions. This rapprochement undermines the importance of the initiative and increases Israel's conviction in its ability to circumvent the conditions stipulated for normalizing relations with Arab countries, without the need to link the course of these relations with the peace process.

Perhaps the statements made by Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who said, "Israel was closer than ever to a peace deal" with the Arab world, highlight this. In an interview with Israel's Channel Two, Lieberman said that "the best scenario would be for Israel to reach an agreement first with moderate Sunni Arab states, and only then to look toward a final deal with the Palestinians,"<sup>11</sup> in contrast to the order of these steps set forth in the Arab initiative.

At the UN, one of the most prominent Arab initiatives involved attempts to lobby the Security Council to issue a resolution condemning Israeli settlements. But the circumstances surrounding how the draft resolution was put for a vote at the Security Council were an additional indication of a hole in the Arab consensus on Israel, as the Arab countries (including Palestine) were surprised when Egypt, representing the Arab bloc, requested the vote to be postponed on 22/12/2016, without setting a new date.<sup>12</sup>

The Egyptian Foreign Ministry justified this move by claiming it wanted to allow more time to ensure the draft resolution would not be not obstructed by an American veto.<sup>13</sup> However, Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki said that the Egyptian decision to postpone the vote was not made in consultation with the Palestinian side.<sup>14</sup> The US abstained from voting on the draft resolution, which was brought back to the Council by Senegal, Venezuela, Malaysia, and New Zealand the following day and received the support of 14 out of the 15 members of the Security Council.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *The Jerusalem Post* newspaper, 12/6/2017, <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Lieberman-Israel-Arab-normalization-first-then-Israel-Palestinian-peace-496634>

<sup>12</sup> Aljazeera.net, 23/12/2016. (in Arabic)

<sup>13</sup> Site of Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 25/12/2016. (in Arabic)

<sup>14</sup> Site of The New Arab, 22/12/2015, <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/portal> (in Arabic)

<sup>15</sup> Israel's Settlements Have No Legal Validity, Constitute Flagrant Violation of International Law, Security Council Reaffirms, SC/12657, Security Council 7853RD Meeting, UN Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, 23/12/2016, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sc12657.doc.htm>



On the other hand, the meeting of Arab foreign ministers at its biannual session on 12/9/2017 supported a Palestinian proposal to form an Arab quintet committee to counter Israel's attempt to obtain membership of the Security Council for the years 2019 and 2020. The meeting decided to mandate the LAS Secretary-General to conduct consultations for the formation of such a committee.<sup>16</sup>

The Nouakchott and Dead Sea summits called again on the Arab states to continue supporting the PA budget for one year at a time, providing a financial safety net of \$100 million per month. In addition, the most recent summit decided to increase the capitalization of the Jerusalem and *al-Aqsa* funds to the tune of \$500 million.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the seriousness of Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and the US intention to transfer its embassy to the city, official Arab reactions did not exceed condemnation, denunciation, and asking the US to reverse the decision. No emergency Arab summit was convened; however, a meeting of the Council of Arab Foreign Ministers was held on 9/12/2017.

LAS Secretary-General Ahmad Abu Al-Ghait, warned of the consequences of any party violating the legal status of Jerusalem. LAS warned against changing the legal and historical status of Jerusalem. On 9/12/2017, an emergency meeting of the Council of Arab Foreign Ministers condemned Trump's decision, calling it "void." Their statement reaffirmed that "East Jerusalem" is the capital of the Palestinian state, and that the decision "threatens to plunge the region into more violence and chaos." It regarded the US decision a serious development, in which it was biased towards Israel, and that it has violated international law and resolutions, thus isolating itself as a sponsor of the peace process. The statement also urged the US to reverse its decision, while calling on various countries to recognize the Palestinian state and its capital "East Jerusalem." They also called for issuing a Security Council resolution that confirms that the Trump decision contradicts international resolutions. LAS welcomed the UN General Assembly resolution of 21/12/2017 concerning Jerusalem.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Palestine News and Information Agency (Wafa), 12/9/2017, <http://www.wafa.ps/arabic/index.php>

<sup>17</sup> See Secretariat of the League Council Affairs, Summit of the Council of the League of Arab States, 27th Ordinary Session, Resolutions Volume, Nouakchott, 25/7/2016, pp. 49–52; and see Secretariat of the League Council Affairs, Summit of the Council of the League of Arab States, 28th Ordinary Session, Resolutions Volume, Amman, 29/3/2017, pp. 39–41, <https://bit.ly/2GyxP9z> (in Arabic)

<sup>18</sup> For more see *Al-Hayat al-Jadida* newspaper, Ramallah, 2/12/2017; *Asharq al-Awsat*, 6 and 10/12/2017 (in Arabic); *Al-Khaleej* newspaper, al-Shariqa, 7/12/2017; *Alittihad* newspaper, Abu Dhabi, 12/12/2017; Wafa, 21/12/2017; and Reuters News Agency, 9/12/2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-israel-arabs/arab-states-urge-u-s-to-abandon-jerusalem-move-idUSKBN1E30R7> (in English)



## ***Second: Positions and Roles of Some Key States***

### **1. Egypt**

In 2016 and 2017, Egypt re-established its position and status prior to the January 25 revolution. It became the most influential Arab party in many aspects of the Palestine issue and the conflict with Israel, and as the main sponsor of the political settlement of this conflict, benefiting from its restored equilibrium, especially in terms of relations with Hamas and GS. This marked the most prominent change in the Egyptian position on the Palestine issue during these two years, as the Egyptian authorities gradually stopped viewing Hamas as a political opponent because of its links to the Muslim Brothers (MB) movement in Egypt. The regime's war against the MB movement has been the main feature of the post-coup period of July 2013, particularly affecting Hamas and GS in 2014 and 2015.

#### **Impact of Shifts and Revolutions on the Palestine issue**

In 2016 and 2017, to a large extent, the Egyptian regime settled the internal conflict with the forces of change that emerged after the revolution of January 25. It re-established Egypt's status as the main guarantor of the peaceful settlement, which it considers a strategic solution to the conflict with Israel. Hence continuing the path set forth by the military establishment since the coup of July 2013 to restore Egypt's strategic status, following major doubts regarding the fate of Camp David Accords during the limited period of Islamist rule.

In these two years, Egypt also restored the "big sister" role of Palestine, being the broker of Palestinian national reconciliation. The Egyptian General Intelligence Services (GIS) rebalanced Egypt's relationship with Hamas compared to the years 2014 and 2015, thus returning to a similar relationship of that of the long tenure of ousted Egyptian President Muhammad Hosni Mubarak.

Therefore, Egypt dealt with the Palestine issue through two main determinants: The first was considering peace a strategic option that governs the Egyptian view of various aspects of the issue and the relationship with the Palestinian parties and with Israel; and second, managing the relationship with GS (and those who rule it) based on national security considerations.

As a result of these considerations, the Egyptian army campaign of September 2013 to restore security in Sinai continued. Thus, continuing the demolition of border tunnels



between GS and North Sinai, and the expansion of the security buffer zone with GS, which the Egyptian authorities began in October 2014. On 4/10/2017, the third phase of the buffer zone began, increasing its width to 1,500 m.<sup>19</sup>

The campaign demolished more than two thousand tunnels during the period July 2013 to September 2015,<sup>20</sup> but the number of tunnels slated by the Egyptian army for demolition decreased significantly over time, with only 42 tunnels demolished from January 2017 until 6/8/2017.<sup>21</sup> From that date until the end of October 2017, the army has only announced the demolition of three additional border tunnels.<sup>22</sup> Although there is no comprehensive data on the total number of tunnels that were demolished during 2016 and 2017, the figures above suggest their decline as the campaign almost completely demolished them. It has since become easier to deal with any new ones.

While these Egyptian security measures succeeded in limiting border tunnels, they were not as successful against insurgents, the most significant security challenge in Sinai. Foremost among those is the Islamic State affiliate known as Wilayat Sinai (Sinai Province), which has claimed the majority of attacks targeting security forces and the army in the peninsula.

Improved relations between Egypt and Hamas increased their security cooperation on border control. The Palestinian security forces in GS declared in April 2016 an increase in outposts and personnel along the border at the request of Egypt,<sup>23</sup> while in June 2017 GS Interior Minister announced the start of the establishment of a buffer zone with a depth of 100 meters on the border with Egypt.

This improvement in relations did not change conditions at the Rafah crossing, where border activity declined considerably since the end of June 2013, with the crossing remaining closed to most individuals. Gazans continue to pay the price of the Sinai security deterioration, with the insistence of the Egyptian authorities on improving security there in order to open the crossing. This was the gist of the message conveyed by the Egyptian authorities to the Takaful Committee, which was formed by the Palestinian factions in GS to discuss the easing of the siege with Egyptian officials in Cairo in

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<sup>19</sup> Aljazeera.net, 5/10/2017. (in Arabic)

<sup>20</sup> Aljazeera.net, 19/9/2015. (in Arabic)

<sup>21</sup> Site of Arabs 48, 6/8/2017, [www.arabs48.com](http://www.arabs48.com)

<sup>22</sup> See site of the Egyptian Ministry of Defense, Armed Forces News, Press Releases, <http://www.mod.gov.eg/ModWebSite/PressReleaseAr.aspx> (in Arabic)

<sup>23</sup> *Alghad* newspaper, Amman, 24/4/2016.

August 2017. Salah al-Bardawil, member of the delegation and a Hamas official, said Egyptian GIS told them the Rafah crossing would not be fully opened unless security in Sinai was restored.<sup>24</sup> This may explain the lack of improvement at the crossing, even after Hamas announced the dissolution of its administrative committee in GS and the Palestinian government taking control of the crossings.

In this context, since the beginning of 2016 until the end of November 2017, the Rafah crossing was opened for only 80 out of 730 days, including 44 days in 2016 and 36 days in 2017. At least 23 thousand people with urgent needs are pre-registered and waiting to cross into Egypt.<sup>25</sup>

It should be noted that even in the days in which the crossing was opened, it was in fact either partially open in one direction or open only to certain categories of residents of the besieged Strip, such as pilgrims and Palestinians stranded on the Egyptian side of the crossing.<sup>26</sup> As a result of the continued closure of the crossing and the restriction of movement for Palestinians, a report by the Arab Organization for Human Rights in Britain said a black market for trafficking individuals between Gaza and Egypt had emerged, run by Egyptian GIS and army officers in coordination with Palestinian smugglers, charging amounts of up to five thousand dollars per trip.<sup>27</sup>

However, the Egyptian authorities opened the crossing exceptionally for fuel shipments to operate the Gaza power plant in June and September 2017,<sup>28</sup> after the PA in Ramallah imposed sanctions against GS, leading to the closure of the power plant due to the interruption of fuel supplies and the reduction of Israeli electricity supplies to GS. The move may have been part of Cairo's desire to push forward its mediation efforts for Palestinian reconciliation and to avoid the total collapse of the humanitarian situation in GS.

#### **a. Egyptian-Palestinian Relations**

The restoration of the balance to Egypt's relations with the various Palestinian factions, especially Hamas, was the most prominent development since the official Egyptian engagement with the Palestinians in 2016 and 2017. The shift can be attributed

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<sup>24</sup> Site of The Palestinian Information Center (PIC), 22/8/2017.

<sup>25</sup> See United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the occupied Palestinian territory (OCHA oPt), Report on Gaza crossings, February 2018, [https://www.ochaopt.org/sites/default/files/gaza\\_crossings\\_operations\\_status\\_january\\_2018\\_1.pdf](https://www.ochaopt.org/sites/default/files/gaza_crossings_operations_status_january_2018_1.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR), Closure Update, <http://pchrgaza.org/en/?cat=65>

<sup>27</sup> Arab Organisation for Human Rights in the UK, 19/1/2017.

<sup>28</sup> *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* newspaper, London, 23/6/2017; and *al-Khaleej*, 17/9/2017.



mainly to the political realism of the two sides. Egypt also overcame the ramifications of its internal crisis which, since the coup of July 2013, had caused tension between the Egyptian regime that led a putsch against the MB movement's rule, and Hamas, which has close ties to the movement.

Cairo's pragmatism in its relations with the Palestinians was extended to relations with Palestinian President Mahmud 'Abbas and the Fatah movement, and the faction of expelled Fatah official Muhammad Dahlan. Hence, Cairo retained important cards necessary to restore its political weight in the Palestinian internal equation, after it had previously suffered diminishing influence.

Cairo was keen to govern its relations with the Palestinians based on the aforementioned determinants. The improvement in its relations with Hamas came on the back of starting to perceive the GS situation as an Egyptian national security issue, with GIS handling relations with the Palestinian factions, without this affecting Egypt's continued official support of the PA as the legitimate political representative of the Palestinians and its partner in the peace process.

The positive shift in Cairo-Hamas relations began in March 2016, despite the fact that on the 6th of that month, the Egyptian interior minister accused Hamas of involvement, alongside MB movement, in the assassination of the former Attorney General, Hisham Barakat. Hamas condemned and denied that accusation.<sup>29</sup> Few days later, two rounds of talks were held between a senior Hamas delegation and Egypt's GIS, on 12–15/3/2016, in a visit described by the Hamas politbureau member Musa Abu Marzuq as having "opened a new page and a friendly dialogue with the brothers in Egypt."<sup>30</sup> Hamas leader Mahmud al-Zahhar commented that Egypt had changed its attitude towards the movement after nearly three years of tension and estrangement.<sup>31</sup>

While the content of the meetings of the second round was not shared with the media,<sup>32</sup> Ma'an News Agency quoted Egyptian security sources as saying that the two rounds resolved all the fundamental differences amid good faith...from Hamas towards

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<sup>29</sup> *Almasry Alyoum* newspaper, Cairo, 6/3/2016.

<sup>30</sup> PIC, 16/3/2016.

<sup>31</sup> Site of Mubasher.aljazeera.net, 25/3/2016,

<http://mubasher.aljazeera.net/news/2016/03/2016325184512196862.htm> (in Arabic)

<sup>32</sup> Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri commented on the arrival of the movement's delegation to Cairo on 30/3/2016, saying that the movement would want to keep the details of the meetings away from the media in the interest of the success of this round of talks. See *Almasry Alyoum*, 30/3/2016.

Egypt, with the movement insistent on rapprochement with Egypt to break the deadlock between the two sides. Sources added that Hamas could prove its good faith through two main issues: Hamas should continue to pursue Palestinian reconciliation in an expedited and serious manner with the Fatah movement and should control the Palestinian border with Egypt.<sup>33</sup>

To be sure, relations between Egypt and Hamas developed mainly along these two tracks. The beginning of 2017 witnessed a new round of meetings, the most prominent of which were the talks between GIS Director General Khaled Fawzy, and Isma‘il Haniyyah, deputy head of the Hamas political bureau on 23/1/2017,<sup>34</sup> as part of a Hamas visit to Egypt to discuss bilateral relations and the security situation along the border.<sup>35</sup> This was followed by a visit lasting several days by a GS security delegation to Cairo to discuss a number of security issues, most notably the border.<sup>36</sup> These meetings resulted in the Ministry of the Interior in GS taking several new measures to control the border with Egypt in June 2017, as mentioned previously in this chapter.

Palestinian reconciliation was the next focus in Cairo’s relations with Hamas. The movement’s positive response helped further develop these relations. In September 2017, Egypt agreed to open a coordination and liaison office in Cairo, and grant a permanent residence to Ruhi Mushtaha,<sup>37</sup> Hamas politburo member, after Hamas announced the dissolution of its GS administrative committee.

As for the relationship with PA President ‘Abbas, it continued on the basis that it is the only channel for official relations with Egypt, as the PA is the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and the political partner in the peace process with Israel. Cairo continued to be, along with Amman, the most prominent Arab coordinator with the PA regarding the latter’s political moves in the peace process, particularly after Egypt assumed membership of the Security Council as the representative of the Arab bloc.

In this context, Egypt was a party to the tripartite consultative mechanism launched in May 2017, which includes both Egypt and Jordan, as well as the PA, to coordinate efforts on negotiations with Israel. Jordan hosted a meeting of the Foreign Ministers of

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<sup>33</sup> *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 12/4/2016.

<sup>34</sup> *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 24/1/2017.

<sup>35</sup> Site of The Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), 26/1/2017. (in Arabic)

<sup>36</sup> Aljazeera.net, 1/2/2017. (in Arabic)

<sup>37</sup> Raialyoum electronic newspaper, London, 21/9/2017.



Jordan and Egypt, and the top Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat, who then said that the two-state solution was the only way to achieve comprehensive peace, expressing hope US President Donald Trump would help push for the resumption of “peace” talks.<sup>38</sup> The meeting came ahead of Egyptian President ‘Abdul Fattah al-Sisi’s visit to Washington to meet with President Trump. In August 2017 Cairo also hosted another meeting for the foreign ministers of the three countries to agree on a unified position on the “peace process” when a US delegation visits the region.<sup>39</sup>

The Egyptian partnership with President Mahmud ‘Abbas dominated the relationship with the Fatah movement in general, but it should be noted that Egypt has sought to maintain its relations with both sides of Fatah’s internal dispute, namely the ‘Abbas and Dahlan factions. In addition to sponsoring the Dahlan reconciliation with Hamas, in October 2016 Egypt hosted the “Egypt and the Palestinian Question” conference held in the resort of Ein Sukhna, organized and funded by Dahlan. Egypt facilitated travel for conference participants coming from Gaza via the Rafah crossing, despite official Fatah objections against the conference and its attempts to discuss issues related to Fatah as this was deemed to be an interference in its internal affairs.<sup>40</sup>

In the context of the shift in Egypt’s positions and openness to all sides as part of its efforts to restore its role in the internal Palestinian dossier, a PIJ delegation also visited Cairo in November 2016, led by its Secretary General Ramadan ‘Abdullah Shallah, to meet with the GIS chief and discuss PIJ’s proposals for internal Palestinian political reorganization.<sup>41</sup> In August 2017, PIJ, Hamas and the Dahlani faction in Fatah, also participated in talks with Egyptian officials regarding ways out of the GS crisis.<sup>42</sup>

#### **b. Position on the Palestinian Internal Conflict and Reconciliation**

Based on its relational change with Hamas, Egypt resumed its active mediation between the two conflicting Palestinian parties, which was welcomed by various parties, especially following a series of meetings held by Egyptian GIS with the Fatah and Hamas delegations in Cairo in September 2017. Consequently, Hamas announced it would dissolve its GS administrative committee, and accept the entry of the National

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<sup>38</sup> Anadolu Agency, 14/5/2017. (in Arabic)

<sup>39</sup> *Al-Hayat* newspaper, London, 20/8/2016.

<sup>40</sup> Site of Almonitor, 25/10/2016. (in Arabic)

<sup>41</sup> Aljazeera.net, 16/11/2016. (in Arabic)

<sup>42</sup> *Al-Hayat*, 12/8/2017.

Reconciliation Government headed by Rami Hamdallah to GS on 2/10/2017 to assume its duties. The government would officially take over the administration of Gaza's crossings at the beginning of the following month.

When reading Cairo's behavior in this issue, we find that its focus on the success of its political efforts made it reassess its previous approach in 2014 and 2015, when it had put pressure on one Palestinian party then the other. In this context, Egypt pressured President Mahmud 'Abbas to push forward its reconciliation efforts. And it approved fuel shipments to Gaza's power plant via the Rafah crossing in June 2017, following PA sanctions on Hamas in GS. Fatah member Mohammad Shtayyeh, a member of the Fatah Central Committee, later commented on Egypt's easing of restrictions on GS, stating that any action taken by Egypt must be in coordination with the Palestinian leadership, so as not to be trying to row in two directions, adding that the PA did not want to undermine its actions against GS.<sup>43</sup>

In the same context was the Egyptian brokerage of reconciliation between Hamas and expelled Fatah leader Muhammad Dahlan and his faction in GS. Hamas leader Ahmad Yusuf considered the Egyptian reconciliation initiative would "achieve a real breakthrough in Gaza."<sup>44</sup> Egypt offered reassurance that there would be facilitations concerning the GS crossings and economic conditions if case an accord was reached.<sup>45</sup>

### **c. Position on the Peace Process**

The stability of military establishment rule in Egypt in 2016 and 2017 reinforced the centrality of the peace process in its foreign policy, as the most important diplomatic dossier, regionally and internationally. Statements of President al-Sisi on the Palestinian issue reflected this, as well as his speeches in international meetings and forums, focusing on his country's desire to push the peace process forward.

In May 2016 Al-Sisi sent a message to the Palestinians and Israelis that a real solution to the Palestinian issue should be found, as this would lead to a warmer peace, stressing Egypt's readiness to provide all possible guarantees to achieve such an outcome. He called on the Israeli leadership to allow this message to be broadcast in Israel, summarized as: "There is a real chance for peace despite the circumstances in the region."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Palestinian Press Agency (Safa), 10/7/2017.

<sup>44</sup> *Alghad*, 13/6/2017.

<sup>45</sup> *Al-Hayat*, 13/6/2017.

<sup>46</sup> *Al-Ahram* newspaper, Cairo and *Assafir* newspaper, Beirut, 18/5/2016.



His appeal was welcomed by the Fatah Movement, which said that al-Sisi's speech reflected Egypt's firm commitment to peace and stability in the region and the world at large.<sup>47</sup> Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu also welcomed the appeal, saying, "I appreciate President El-Sisi's work and also draw encouragement from his leadership on this important issue,"<sup>48</sup> as did LAS and the US.<sup>49</sup>

During a meeting with the editors of the Egyptian national newspapers, al-Sisi expressed his belief that "conviction in the importance of peace is increasing on the Israeli side," stressing that the Palestinian issue was the key to security and stability in the region and that the continuation of conflict undermines both.<sup>50</sup> In an address to the United Nations General Assembly at its annual meeting, al-Sisi reiterated his call for both sides to resume negotiations. In September 2016, he called on the Israeli people and the Israeli leadership to find a solution to the Palestinian issue, describing the Egyptian experience of peace with Israel, as "wonderful."<sup>51</sup> He addressed the "Israeli people" in his next address to the Assembly in September 2017, saying "Egypt has a wonderful and excellent experience in peace with you for more than 40 years. We can repeat this experiment and wonderful step." He also pointed out that the security and safety of the Palestinian citizen, along with the security and safety of the Israeli citizen must be safeguarded, and appealed to the Israeli public to stand by their political leadership.<sup>52</sup> Al-Sisi may have mistakenly repeated in his address the phrase "Israeli citizen's security," but this was in line with his tendency in his speeches to address the Israeli side.

Al-Sisi tackled the same issue during his talks with US President Donald Trump on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. In an interview with the American Fox News Channel, he said: "I say to President Trump you have an opportunity to solve the issue of the century...and this is one of the major pretexts of terrorism."<sup>53</sup> The Egyptian president

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<sup>47</sup> *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 19/5/2016.

<sup>48</sup> Site of The Times of Israel, 17/5/2016.

<sup>49</sup> *Al-Youm al-Sabi*, 18/5/2016 and *al-Ayyam* newspaper, Ramallah, 19/5/2016.

<sup>50</sup> Site of *al-Ahram al-Arabi* magazine, Cairo, 22/8/2016.

<sup>51</sup> Statement by President al-Sisi Before the United Nations General Assembly, On Ent Channel, site of YouTube, 20/9/2016, [https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/71/71\\_EG\\_en.pdf](https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/71/71_EG_en.pdf)

<sup>52</sup> President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's Address to The 72 nd Session of The UN General Assembly, Speeches and Statements, site of State Information Service, 20/9/2017, <http://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/117685?lang=en-us>

<sup>53</sup> President El-Sisi on Middle East Peace Plans, Fox News Channel, site of YouTube, 20/9/2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXJwpLCXKwE>



had expressed his belief that President Trump “is the decisive figure” in reaching a solution to the Palestinian issue, while reiterating the existence of “an opportunity for peace” and calling on Israelis to seize it and not to waste it.<sup>54</sup> Al-Sisi had presented to Trump his vision for the final resolution in Palestine during a previous meeting in the White House in April 2017. Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shukri said at the time that this vision was to create two states and working to change the regional climate to remove the causes of tension and conflict.<sup>55</sup>

Benjamin Netanyahu summed up Israel’s commitment to the stability of peace with Egypt by saying, “Our peace treaty is an anchor of stability and security in our region,” adding, “I want to thank President a-Sisi for his leadership and for his efforts to advance peace between Israel and the Palestinians and in the broader Middle East.”<sup>56</sup> Al-Sisi’s positions vis-à-vis Israel were also widely welcomed politically and at the media level in Tel Aviv. Israeli Construction and Housing Minister Yoav Galant considered Israel “very lucky that Sisi took over,” in a leaked audio recording of a closed meeting with the heads of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. Galant said al-Sisi was “Mubarak with a facelift”, adding that it was in the Israeli and American interest to support the current regime in Egypt.<sup>57</sup> Similar positions were expressed by Israel’s Energy and Water Minister Yuval Steinitz, who urged international backing for al-Sisi in bringing economic and security stability to his country, saying, “If Egypt crashes, that will be a danger not just for Israel and the Middle East, but for Europe too.”<sup>58</sup>

Press reports in February 2017 suggested the existence of Egyptian proposals to cede territory in Sinai to a future Palestinian state to settle Palestinian refugees there. However, the official spokesman of the Egyptian Presidency, Alaa Yousef, denied the reports, stressing that this has not been discussed or proposed at any level by any Arab or foreign official with the Egyptian side, further stating that it was inconceivable to delve into such unrealistic and unacceptable proposals.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> *Al-Ahram*, 18/5/2017.

<sup>55</sup> *Al-Hayat al-Jadida*, 3/4/2017.

<sup>56</sup> PM Netanyahu’s Statement for Egypt’s National Day, site of Prime Minister’s Office, 28/7/2016, <http://www.pmo.gov.il/English/MediaCenter/Events/Pages/eventEgypt280716.aspx>

<sup>57</sup> *Haaretz*, 28/5/2016. (in English)

<sup>58</sup> The Times of Israel, 10/4/2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-can-treat-but-not-absorb-syrian-casualties-minister/>

<sup>59</sup> *Shorouk News* newspaper, Cairo, 23/2/2017.



Egypt officials demanded a reversal of Trump’s Jerusalem decision, but at the same time, the Egyptian interaction was limited, and the media coverage was toned down. Media outlets revealed that there was a “covert effort by Egyptian intelligence to sway public opinion in favor of accepting President Trump’s decision recognizing Jerusalem as Israel’s capital.”<sup>60</sup>

#### **d. The Relationship with Israel**

In 2016 and 2017, there were consistent signs of improvement of political and diplomatic relations between Cairo and Tel Aviv. The Egyptian ambassador returned to Tel Aviv nearly three years after he was withdrawn during the tenure of the deposed President Mohamed Morsi, at the time in protest against the Israeli military war on GS in November 2012. The new ambassador Hazem Khairat presented his diplomatic credentials to Israel’s President Reuven Rivlin on 25/2/2016.<sup>61</sup> Later, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shukri went to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem on 10/7/2016, the first visit of an Egyptian Foreign Minister to Israel in nine years<sup>62</sup>. Following that visit, Rivlin and Prime Minister Netanyahu attended a reception held by the Egyptian embassy in Tel Aviv on the anniversary of the July 23 revolution in Egypt, where Netanyahu stated, “We must work together against it; we must work together for peace. The peace between us has been strong and steadfast, for almost 40 years. It has endured all the pitfalls and weathered all the storms and challenges.”<sup>63</sup> The remarks were made days after Israel’s defense minister Avigdor Lieberman described Egypt as “the most important and serious ally we have in the Middle East and among Arab states.”<sup>64</sup> Egypt, alongside Jordan, also took part in firefighting efforts to contain wildfires that lasted several days in Israel in November 2016. Netanyahu later thanked both countries on his social media accounts for their assistance.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Site of Elwatannews.com, 6/12/2017, <https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/2801286>; *The New York Times* newspaper, 6/1/2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/06/world/middleeast/egypt-jerusalem-talk-shows.html>; and *The New York Times*, 10/1/2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/10/world/middleeast/egypt-times-investigation-jerusalem.html>

<sup>61</sup> President Rivlin receives diplomatic credentials of new Egyptian Ambassador to Israel, site of Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 25/2/2016, <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2016/Pages/President-Rivlin-receives-diplomatic-credentials-of-new-Egyptian-Ambassador-to-Israel-25-February-2016.aspx>

<sup>62</sup> *Asharq al-Awsat*, 10/7/2016. (in Arabic)

<sup>63</sup> PM Netanyahu’s Statement for Egypt’s National Day, op. cit.

<sup>64</sup> *Yedioth Ahronoth* newspaper, 25/7/2016, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4833025,00.html> (in English)

<sup>65</sup> *Assabeel* newspaper, Amman, 26/11/2016.

An important milestone in the bilateral relations was when President al-Sisi met Netanyahu on 18/9/2017, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, in their first formal meeting, where al-Sisi “stressed the importance of renewing peace talks in order to reach a just solution based on the idea of two states for two peoples.”<sup>66</sup> But it should be noted here that *Haaretz* newspaper had earlier reported that Netanyahu had secretly met with al-Sisi in Cairo in April 2016, accompanied by Knesset opposition chairman Isaac Herzog.<sup>67</sup>

As part of the political coordination between Tel Aviv and Cairo, Egypt informed Israel in advance of its intention to transfer the islands of Tiran and Sanafir to Saudi sovereignty. Tel Aviv expressed non-objection to the move, “as long as Israeli ships are guaranteed freedom of navigation in the area.”<sup>68</sup> Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shukri confirmed this later.<sup>69</sup> At the time Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya‘alon said that “Israel has signed off on Egypt's move to concede control over strategic islands in the Tiran Straits to Saudi Arabia,” adding that Saudi Arabia has “given Israel written assurances the kingdom will guarantee Israel freedom of passage in the Tiran Straits.”<sup>70</sup>

As for security and military relations, the deterioration of security in the Sinai served as an opportunity for an unprecedented evolution in Egyptian-Israeli collaboration, where the Islamic State affiliate known as Wilayat Sinai (Sinai Province) continued to use the peninsula as a staging ground. For Israel, this was a positive development that improved its security environment, given the fact that the gains from this outweighed the size of the security threat posed by Wilayat Sinai. At the same time, Israel benefited from the Egyptian counter-insurgency campaign to crack down on arms smuggling routes to Hamas in GS, which poses a graver security threat to Israel.

There have been numerous indicators of increased security coordination and improvement of the strategic environment for Israel in 2016 and 2017, including what was confirmed by Yossi Melman, Israeli national security analyst, who wrote: “In Israel, relations with Cairo are defined as a ‘strategic alliance’ and its importance to the national security interests is only second to the Israeli-American intimate ties.” He added, “the

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<sup>66</sup> *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 19/9/2017, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5018546,00.html> (in English)

<sup>67</sup> *Haaretz*, 12/6/2017. (in English)

<sup>68</sup> *Haaretz*, 11/4/2016. (in English)

<sup>69</sup> *Al-Ahram*, 11/4/2016.

<sup>70</sup> *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 12/4/2016. (in English)



military-security ties between the two countries, based on shared perceptions and interests, have risen to new heights, much higher than during the Mubarak years.”<sup>71</sup>

As for the nature of the objectives served by the increased collaboration, it should be noted that Israeli newspaper *Maariv* reported that the replacement of Egypt’s elected administration with the current regime led Israel to downscale its effort in the fight against arms smuggling to Gaza. The newspaper reported that Mossad Chief Yossi Cohen put the relationship and cooperation with the Egyptian GIS at the top of his priorities.<sup>72</sup> In the same context, Israeli Energy and Water Minister Yuval Steinitz said that Egypt had flooded the border tunnels with Gaza “due to Israel’s request,” affirming that security cooperation between the two countries was “better than ever.”<sup>73</sup> In an article in *Yedioth Ahronoth*, the Israeli Ambassador to Egypt David Govrin praised the warmth of relations between Tel Aviv and Cairo, adding that four decades earlier, Israel would never have dreamed of having this level of security cooperation with Egypt.<sup>74</sup>

The unprecedented security collaboration manifested in November 2016, when the Israeli public prosecutor issued a charge sheet against a Palestinian handed over by Egypt to Israel after being arrested in Egyptian territory, on charges of smuggling weapons into GS.<sup>75</sup> There were also several reports of Israeli drones carrying out raids against targets in Sinai in 2016 and 2017, in the context of Israel’s operations against threats to its security from the border with Egypt, especially against Wilayat Sinai.

The New Arab website (*al-Araby al-Jadid*) reported that an Egyptian citizen was killed in Rafah on 29/8/2016, when his car was struck by a drone believed to be Israeli, after receiving threats from Israeli officers not to move in the border area. The newspaper quoted a Sinai tribal sheikh as confirming that a number of residents of the area had received similar messages from Israeli officers.<sup>76</sup> A similar strike killed 10 Egyptians on 20/1/2017, in a house in the ‘Ajra area south of Rafah city, including a 10-year-old boy.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Site of Middle East Eye (MEE), 19/8/2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/egypt-israel-sinai-secret-intelligence-sisi-netanyahu-144068994>

<sup>72</sup> Site of Filastin Alaam, 11/1/2016.

<sup>73</sup> *The Jerusalem Post*, 6/2/2016.

<sup>74</sup> Raialyoum, 17/11/2016.

<sup>75</sup> *Arabs* 48, 6/11/2016.

<sup>76</sup> Site of the New Arab, 30/8/2016. (in Arabic)

<sup>77</sup> Quds Press International News Agency, London, 21/1/2017.

In the economic sphere, the most significant development was the signing of an agreement between Egyptian natural gas company Dolphinus Energy with the group of companies operating the Israeli Tamar gas field to import natural gas over a period of 15 years, in a deal valued at about \$20 billion.<sup>78</sup> However, the announcement by Egyptian Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources Tariq al-Mulla in November 2017 that his country would stop importing liquefied natural gas in 2018 may put an end to this deal. The minister said that the new discoveries in the Egyptian field of “Zohr” will mostly supply the domestic market, and the nation’s two existing gas-liquefaction facilities are large enough for international sale in 2019.<sup>79</sup>

Israel’s power company Israel Electric Corp (IEC) continued to demand compensation from Egyptian energy companies for the suspension of gas supplies in 2012. The Israeli company said the appeal filed by the Egyptian Natural Gas Holding Company (EGAS) and the Egyptian General Petroleum Corporation (EGPC) before a Swiss court, against a previous ruling requiring them to pay damages worth \$2 billion, had been rejected.<sup>80</sup>

## **2. Jordan**

### **a. Impact of Changes and Revolutions on the Palestine Issue**

In 2016 and 2017, Jordan generally did not change its position within the strategic environment of the Palestinian issue. As in the past two years, Jordan endeavored to protect itself from the crises and changes in the Arab world. Jordan was in the eye of the storm, as it was positioned in direct contact with the two main axes of conflict in the region: The Palestine issue and Israel; and the growing conflict over influence between the Sunni Arab countries, or the “countries of Arab moderation,” and Iran.

If we add to the geographical factor, the historical and demographic factors related to Jordan’s linkages to the Palestinian issue, as well as its position in the alliances in the region and its internal economic conditions, we see that decision-makers in Jordan face a very complex equation.

On the one hand, Jordan is a key US ally, a key member of the Arab “moderation club” and of the “war on terror.” It has had a peace agreement with Israel since 1994, which created a raft of common economic and security interests.

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<sup>78</sup> The New Arab, 20/3/2017. (in Arabic)

<sup>79</sup> Eni's Giant Gas Field Prompts Egypt to End Imports in 2018, site of Bloomberg Markets, 14/11/2017, <https://bloom.bg/2ihdF5D>

<sup>80</sup> Reuters, 28/4/2017, <https://reut.rs/2GUnfcd> (in English)



On the other hand, the continued Israeli Judaization at *al-Aqsa* Mosque creates sustained popular and parliamentary opposition to the peace agreement, and maintains the relationship between Amman and Tel Aviv as a “cold peace,” given that Jordan is the custodian of *al-Aqsa* and other holy sites in Jerusalem. This is not to mention the demographic considerations and the close ties between the Jordanian people and the Palestinian issue, and Jerusalem in particular.

Moreover, Jordan, which was the first to warn against the emergence of a “Shia crescent” in the region, is now in direct contact with this crescent on its eastern and northern border. Iranian influence increased in Iraq and Syria after the wars there, and with the increased Iranian military presence, along with its ally Hizbullah, in Syria. This is of course in addition to security threats posed by the Islamic State group, of which Jordan is a key enemy.

Furthermore, the Gulf crisis and the wide domestic political changes to the south of Saudi Arabia raise concerns in Jordan regarding the possible repercussions to its internal stability, particularly on economic and energy security. There also are increasing signs of keenness by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) to forge closer ties with Israel, amid talk of a deal that includes the waiver of the right of return of Palestinian refugees and the internationalization of Jerusalem, both issues being a concern to Jordan.<sup>81</sup>

In short, these factors have pushed Amman to balance its political calculations delicately, and made it unwilling to escalate tension with its neighbors, especially Israel, thus preserving its alliance with the US and safeguarding its political, economic, and security interests.

For the time being, all of this is in the interest of Israel, and despite the deterioration of political relations with Tel Aviv, Jordan sees it as the strongest and most influential country enjoying international support among neighboring countries. Thus, it sees that its political, economic and security interests at the strategic level lie with continued cooperation with Israel. It seems that Tel Aviv is well aware of these considerations, exploiting them to strengthen its strategic position, while continuing its Judaization and settlement policies in Jerusalem, without worrying about the impact of this policy on its shared interests with Jordan.

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<sup>81</sup> See David Hearst, “Jordan fears 'turmoil' as Saudis rush to embrace Israel,” MEE, 17/11/2017, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/exclusive-jordan-braces-turmoil-saudis-rush-embrace-israel-1491957420>

## **b. Jordanian-Palestinian Relations**

In 2016 and 2017, Jordan maintained its traditional positions vis-à-vis the parties to the internal Palestinian dispute and its support for President Mahmud ‘Abbas as the legitimate representative of the PA and PLO. Amman’s relationship with the Palestinian resistance factions, especially Hamas, saw no considerable development or change.

Coordination regarding the peace process and other issues continued between Amman and Ramallah, especially concerning Jerusalem and Israeli assaults against *al-Aqsa* Mosque. These issues were the focus of the Jordanian monarch’s visit to Ramallah in August 2017, following the Lions’ Gate uprising (*Habbat al-Asbat*). Palestinian officials considered the visit to be a show of support for the PA facing Israel’s attacks in *al-Aqsa* and Jerusalem. Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki said after the meeting that the two sides agreed to form a joint crisis cell, which would continue to evaluate the previous phase, draw the lessons, and deal with any challenges at *al-Aqsa* Mosque.<sup>82</sup>

This coordination on *al-Aqsa* also continued when Jordan announced its intention to install surveillance cameras in *al-Aqsa* Mosque in March 2016. During a meeting with Jordanian Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh, ‘Abbas expressed his support for the move,<sup>83</sup> which Jordan said was aimed at monitoring violations of the occupation at the mosque.<sup>84</sup>

However, some Palestinian and Jerusalemite positions rejected such a move, because, according to former Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and Palestine ‘Ikrima Sabri, it is in Israel’s interest. Consequently, Jordan backed off from its decision.<sup>85</sup> More than a month after Jordan announced the initial decision, Jordanian Prime Minister ‘Abdullah Ensour, confirmed that his country would not install cameras in *al-Aqsa* Mosque, saying, “We were surprised after the announcement of our intention to implement the project, to see the reactions of some of our people in Palestine, expressing concern and reservations about the project, and doubting its goals and intentions,” adding that “because we respect all the opinions of our brothers in Palestine in general, and in Jerusalem in particular, we found that this project is no longer consensual, but is the subject of contention, and therefore decided not to go ahead with its implementation.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> *Al-Hayat*, 8/8/2017.

<sup>83</sup> Wafa, 24/3/2016.

<sup>84</sup> *Alghad*, 16/3/2016

<sup>85</sup> *Alquds*, 24/3/2016.

<sup>86</sup> *Alghad*, 18/4/2016.



In the context of Jordan's support for Palestinian negotiators, and their coordination regarding the peace process, a meeting between the Jordanian and Egyptian foreign ministers and the Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat took place in Amman in May 2017. It was ahead of President Trump's visit to the region and was later dubbed the trilateral consultation mechanism.<sup>87</sup> The foreign ministers of the three parties met again in Cairo in August 2017 to coordinate positions on how to deal with the US delegation's visit to the region to discuss the "peace process."<sup>88</sup>

As for Jordan's official relations with Hamas, they did not witness any development. However, Jordan agreed that Khalid Mish'al, head of Hamas political bureau, could attend his mother's funeral in Jordan in September 2016, explaining that it was for humanitarian reasons and at Mish'al's request.<sup>89</sup> Jordanian diplomacy also had no active role in Palestinian reconciliation efforts, which Egypt has long preferred to keep within its jurisdiction.

### **c. Position on the Peace Process**

Despite tense political relations between Amman and Tel Aviv, the Wadi Arabah Peace Treaty remained a strong pillar of Jordanian foreign policy, which, along with Egypt, continued to offer support to negotiations and provide an Arab umbrella and reference frame for the Palestinian negotiator. *Haaretz* revealed in February 2017 that the Jordanian city of Aqaba hosted a secret summit between Jordan's King Abdullah II and Egyptian President 'Abdul Fattah al-Sisi with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and US Secretary of State John Kerry in 2016, to resume negotiations with the Palestinians with the support of Arab countries.<sup>90</sup> During a meeting with his party's ministers, Netanyahu confirmed his participation at the summit, which was held on 21/2/2016.<sup>91</sup> Abdullah II and al-Sisi held another summit on 21/2/2017 in Cairo, during which the two sides stressed that the two-state solution and the establishment of a Palestinian state along the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital were "national principles that cannot be waived."<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Anadolu Agency, 14/5/2017. (in Arabic)

<sup>88</sup> *Al-Hayat*, 19/8/2017.

<sup>89</sup> *Alqabas*, 4/9/2016.

<sup>90</sup> *Haaretz*, 19/2/2017. (in English)

<sup>91</sup> *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 19/2/2017. (in English)

<sup>92</sup> *Al-Hayat*, 22/2/2017



Yet the resumption of Palestinian-Israeli negotiations and support for the peace process with Israel did not feature in the speeches of the Jordanian monarch with the same prominence as in the speeches of the Egyptian president. Rather, Jordan's dispute with Israel over the latter's violations at *al-Aqsa* Mosque remained the biggest focus in the addresses that dealt with the Palestinian issue. This was an additional sign of the continuation of a "cold peace" between Jordan and Israel. For example, when addressing the "peace process" in the Jordanian king's speech at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2016, he did not convey a friendly tone towards Israel compared to the Egyptian speech, warning that "No injustice has spread more bitter fruit than the denial of a Palestinian state," and adding that "Peace is a conscious decision. Israel has to embrace peace or eventually be engulfed in a sea of hatred in a region of turmoil. Safeguarding Jerusalem is a key concern...the Holy City; a strategic linchpin not only for my region but for the world. This is a priority for me personally."<sup>93</sup>

This dispute with Israel remained a focal point alongside every mention of the Palestine issue and the need to make peace in the speeches of Jordan's top leaders at prominent Arab and international events in 2016 and 2017, including the 27th and 28th rounds of the Arab Summit in Nouakchott (July 2016) and the Dead Sea (March 2017) and the Arab-American Islamic Summit in Riyadh (May 2017).<sup>94</sup>

King Abdullah of Jordan warned, in a phone call with President Trump, of "pre-empting a comprehensive solution that leads to the establishment of a Palestinian state, with East Jerusalem as its capital." He emphasized that "Jerusalem is key to achieving peace and stability in the region and the world." His remarks at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation Extraordinary Summit in Istanbul, on 13/12/2017, affirmed that "the United States' recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel is a dangerous decision, whose implications threaten security and stability. It undermines efforts to resume the peace process."<sup>95</sup> The Jordanian government stated that Trump's decision was a violation of

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<sup>93</sup> Speech by His Majesty King Abdullah II: 71st United Nations General Assembly, site of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Washington DC, 20/9/2016, <http://jordanembassyus.org/news/speech-his-majesty-king-abdullah-ii-71st-united-nations-general-assembly>

<sup>94</sup> Speeches, site of King Abdullah II, <https://kingabdullah.jo/en/speeches>

<sup>95</sup> King Receives Call From US President, Warns of Serious Implications of Moving US Embassy to Jerusalem, Press Room, Media Centre, site of King Abdullah II, 5/12/2017, <https://kingabdullah.jo/en/news/king-receives-call-us-president-warns-serious-implications-moving-us-embassy-jerusalem>; and Remarks by His Majesty King Abdullah II At the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation Summit, Speeches, Media Centre, site of King Abdullah II, 13/12/2017, <https://kingabdullah.jo/en/speeches/organisation-islamic-cooperation-summit>



international resolutions and the UN Charter. Both the Jordanian parliament and senate also rejected the US move.

#### **d. The Relationship with Israel**

On the political front, Jordanian-Israeli tension continued due to the latter's Judaization of *al-Aqsa* Mosque, which is under the historical and legal guardianship of Jordan. This was reflected in the speeches of the Jordanian monarch mentioned above, as well as Jordan's efforts in international institutions, and in UNESCO in particular. Jordan rejected Israeli measures at the mosque and any change to the status quo there and reaffirmed its custodianship on *al-Aqsa* and its status as an Islamic holy site.

Jordan's king stated in an interview that his country would "persist in undertaking our religious and historical responsibilities towards Al Aqsa Mosque/Al Haram Al Sharif, which faces repeated violations by extremist groups." He said he would continue to "stand up against all violations of their sanctity or attempts for temporal and spatial division," stressing that *al-Aqsa* is "indivisible." The king said, "We have successfully led efforts to adopt this definition at the UN and UNESCO. Moreover, we maintain all available political and legal options to stand against violations and protect holy sites."<sup>96</sup>

The events that led to Lions' Gate uprising (*Habbat al-Asbat*) increased tensions between Jordan and Israel. After the Israeli authorities closed *al-Aqsa* Mosque on 14/7/2017, following a gun attack by three Palestinian youths that killed two Israeli policemen inside the courtyard of *al-Aqsa*, the Jordanian government demanded Israel reopen the mosque immediately to worshippers and refrain from taking any measures that could alter the status quo in Jerusalem and *al-Aqsa*. An unnamed official told Israeli TV that "instead of condemning the attack, Jordan chose to attack Israel," adding, "It should be expected that all sides involved, including Jordan, exercise restraint and avoid fanning the flames."<sup>97</sup>

However, the following day the Jordanian monarch made a call to Netanyahu in which he appealed for calm and de-escalation, condemning the "attack" in *al-Aqsa*, and at the same time reiterating Jordan's absolute refusal of the continued closure of the mosque, demanding Israel to reopen it.<sup>98</sup> The official Jordanian government spokesperson

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<sup>96</sup> Interview with His Majesty King Abdullah II, Interviews, Media Centre, site of King Abdullah II, 15/8/2016, <https://kingabdullah.jo/en/interviews/interview-his-majesty-king-abdullah-ii-1>

<sup>97</sup> *Alrai* newspaper, Amman and Arabs 48, 14/7/2017; and The Times of Israel, 15/7/2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/waqf-says-israel-has-completely-taken-control-of-temple-mount/>

<sup>98</sup> *Alghad*, 16/7/2017.

Mohammad al-Momani rejected the measures that the occupation tried to impose on worshipers by installing electronic gates at the entrances to the mosque. He said, “We remind Israel that it is an occupying force.” He added that any change in the status quo in Jerusalem and *al-Aqsa* violates Israel’s obligations as an occupying power and it is not authorized to do so under international law.<sup>99</sup>

Moreover, several incidents in 2016 and 2017 infuriated the Jordanian public against Israel and the Jordanian government’s handling of these events, thus increasing the tension between Jordan and Israel. Israeli security officers caused the deaths of four Jordanian citizens in three separate incidents during the period in question, most recently when Israeli embassy guards in Amman killed two Jordanians, around the same time of Lions’ Gate uprising, causing protests and popular reactions in Jordan. The embassy incident took place on 23/7/2017 at an apartment rented by the Israeli embassy, when an Israeli security guard shot a boy called Muhammad Jawawdeh, who was in the apartment to assemble furniture, claiming the boy had tried to stab him and had injured him. The boy and the owner of the flat, Dr. Bashar al-Hamarneh, were killed in the altercation.<sup>100</sup>

The killer then left Jordan along with the entire staff of the Israeli embassy in Amman, which caused widespread anger in the Jordanian street. Although the government said the killer had diplomatic immunity, it did not allow him to leave until it interviewed him for his testimony. Jordan’s Public Security Directorate stated that investigations showed the incident had been the result of a personal dispute. Israeli newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth* mentioned that “There’s desire from both countries to solve this crisis,” and that “It appears the guard will be allowed home after an agreement between Amman and Jerusalem receives a royal approval,” adding that “a Jordanian official said as part of the talks between Amman and Jerusalem, Israel has made promises concerning the removal of metal detectors.”<sup>101</sup>

It should be noted that the Israeli government’s handling of the incident provoked official anger in Jordan when Benjamin Netanyahu received and embraced the killer following his return, stressing the government’s solidarity with his case. The king responded that “Such conduct is utterly rejected and provocative. It angers us all,

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<sup>99</sup> *Addustour* newspaper, Amman, 21/7/2017.

<sup>100</sup> *Alrai*, 24/7/2017.

<sup>101</sup> Aljazeera.net, 24 and 25/7/2017 (in Arabic); and *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 24/7/2017, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4993675,00.html> (in English)



threatens regional security, and fuels extremism. It is absolutely unacceptable,” affirming that Jordan “will not relinquish any of their [families of the victims’] rights or the rights of our citizens; and Israel’s handling of the case at the embassy, the killing of Judge Raed Zuaiter, and other cases will have a direct impact on our relations.” A Jordanian government source said the following day that Amman had officially informed the Israeli government that it would not allow Ambassador Schlein and the embassy staff to return until Israel opened a serious investigation into the incident.<sup>102</sup>

The Jordanian king later affirmed the need to wrap up the embassy shooting probe before relations between Amman and Tel Aviv could be restored to their previous state, during a meeting with representatives of American Jewish organizations in New York.<sup>103</sup>

One of the signs of Jordan’s displeasure with Israel—triggered by the incident and the crisis at *al-Aqsa*—were the regional diplomatic efforts by the Jordanian king in August 2017, which affirmed to Israel Jordan’s custodianship over *al-Aqsa*. King ‘Abdullah II visited ‘Abbas in Ramallah,<sup>104</sup> and held talks with Turkish President Erdoğan regarding the violations against the mosque.<sup>105</sup>

Two prior incidents involving Jordanian citizens had taken place in Jerusalem: the first was when Israeli soldiers shot dead Jordan national Sa‘id ‘Amr on 16/9/2016, claiming he had attempted to stab an Israeli officer.<sup>106</sup> The Jordanian government subsequently summoned the Israeli ambassador to Amman to clarify the incident. Hundreds then took part in the slain man’s funeral in the city of Karak in southern Jordan.<sup>107</sup> On 13/5/2017, Jordanian national Muhammad al-Kasaji was killed by Israeli soldiers in the Chain Gate area in the old city of Jerusalem, after stabbing an Israeli police officer. The Jordanian government held Israel as the occupying force responsible for his murder.<sup>108</sup> Netanyahu

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<sup>102</sup> King Chairs National Policies Council Meeting, Press Room, Media Centre, site of King Abdullah II, 27/7/2017, <https://kingabdullah.jo/en/news/king-chairs-national-policies-council-meeting-0>; and Aljazeera.net, 28/7/2017 (in Arabic).

<sup>103</sup> The Times of Israel, 18/9/2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/jordan-king-said-to-urge-israel-to-wrap-up-embassy-shooting-probe/>

<sup>104</sup> *Al-Hayat*, 8/8/2017.

<sup>105</sup> King Holds Talks with Turkish President, Press Room, Media Centre, site of King Abdullah II, 21/8/2017, <https://kingabdullah.jo/en/news/king-holds-talks-turkish-president>

<sup>106</sup> Ma‘an News Agency, 17/9/2016, <http://www.maannews.com/Content.aspx?id=773176>

<sup>107</sup> *Al-Hayat*, 20/9/2016.

<sup>108</sup> The New Arab, 13/5/2017. (in Arabic)

responded with a fierce attack on the Jordanian government, “It’s time for Jordan to stop playing this double game,” he said.<sup>109</sup>

In contrast to the tense political and diplomatic relations between Jordan and Israel, security cooperation continued, and economic ties further developed, at least until the time of the embassy incident, especially in energy and water. Security wise, the Syrian crisis and the war against IS drove continued cooperation between Amman and Tel Aviv. In this regard, Middle East Eye’s analyst David Hearst said King ‘Abdullah II had revealed the presence of Jordanian-Israeli coordination to establish certain limits to the Russian military operation in southern Syria, in “a candid debriefing” with top US members of Congress in Washington on 11/1/2016. An account of this meeting has been seen by Middle East Eye. The article added that ‘Abdullah II got a call from the Israeli Army chief of staff and met earlier with the head of the Mossad in Amman. He also “accused Israel of ‘looking the other way’ in relation to Nusra’s presence in the south, because they regarded them as an opposition force to Hezbollah.”<sup>110</sup>

On the economic front, water and energy continued to be the most important factors for Jordanian cooperation with Israel, due to former’s poor water resources and lack of local sources to cover its energy needs, at a time when Israel is a possible source. A study issued by The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) of Tel Aviv University, based on water and natural gas agreements between Jordan and Israel “prove that the sides can reach understandings and perhaps full agreements in many areas, and these can create a positive environment, even if they are not substitutes for political agreements,” which means that the two sides agreed to separate their economic relations from their political areas. The study also said that “in this way Israel contributes to the stability of its local geostrategic environment.”<sup>111</sup>

In the energy sector, the frequent interruption of Egypt’s natural gas supply to Jordan since 2011, which was essential for generating electricity, prompted the government to seek alternative sources. Israel, which had recently joined the club of gas exporting

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<sup>109</sup> The Times of Israel, 13/5/2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/jordan-calls-killing-of-jerusalem-attacker-a-heinous-crime/>

<sup>110</sup> David Hearst, “Jordanian and Israeli jets confronted Russians near Syria border: Abdullah,” MEE, 25/3/2017, in: <https://bit.ly/1Pyib5R>

<sup>111</sup> Aljazeera.net, 9/12/2016 (in Arabic); and Oded Eran, “Jordan-Israel Relations: Normalization in the Shadow of Political Deadlock,” site of The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), 1/12/2016, <http://www.inss.org.il/publication/jordan-israel-relations-normalization-in-the-shadow-of-political-deadlock/>



countries, was one of the most important potential sources. In September 2016, the two sides signed an agreement to supply natural gas from the Leviathan offshore gas field in the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordanian Electricity Company, in a “historic” deal that is the largest in the two countries’ economic relations, estimated at about \$10 billion, which with a supply of 45 billion cubic meters of gas for 15 years, within two years after the signing of the preliminary memorandum of understanding. Israeli Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz said the agreement was “an extremely important national achievement” and that it was “an important milestone in strengthening the ties and strategic partnerships between Israel, Jordan and the entire region.”<sup>112</sup> The Government of Jordan refused to respond to popular objections to the gas agreement. Government Spokesperson Mohammad al-Momani said that it was one of the kingdom’s options in its strategy of diversified energy sources, stressing that it did not make Jordan dependent on Israel. He added that the interruption of Egyptian gas supplies cost the treasury \$6 billion, while this agreement would save the kingdom about \$600 million annually.<sup>113</sup>

In the same vein, Israeli company Delek announced that it had begun exporting natural gas to Jordan from the Israeli Tamar gas field in January 2017, the first batch of Israeli gas exports, for the Arab Potash Company and Jordan Bromine Company, under the accord signed by the two companies in February 2014 with US-based Noble Energy to import two billion cubic meters of Israeli gas over 15 years in a deal valued at \$771 million.<sup>114</sup>

In the water sector, the Red Sea-Dead Sea Water Conveyance project was continued, with two international donors' conferences held in Jordan in May and December 2016, during which five donors announced financial support for its implementation, with a total of \$400 million, including a US investment of \$100 million.<sup>115</sup> In July 2017, the Palestinian and Israeli sides reached an agreement regarding the share of the PA in the water that will generated from desalination of the Red Sea water in the first phase of the project.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> *Assafir*, 27/9/2016; and The Times of Israel, 26/9/2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-consortium-signs-15-year-10b-gas-deal-with-jordan/>

<sup>113</sup> *Alghad*, 2/10/2016.

<sup>114</sup> Site of Jordan News Agency (Petra), 19/2/2014,

[http://petra.gov.jo/Public\\_News/Nws\\_NewsDetails.aspx?Site\\_Id=1&lang=2&NewsID=140807](http://petra.gov.jo/Public_News/Nws_NewsDetails.aspx?Site_Id=1&lang=2&NewsID=140807) (in English)

<sup>115</sup> The Jordan Times newspaper, 3/12/2016, <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/donors-pledge-around-400-million-red-dead-project>

<sup>116</sup> *Asharq al-Awsat*, 14/7/2017. (in Arabic)

However, the tension between Jordan and Israel following the incident at the embassy cast doubts upon the implementation of the project. According to the Jordanian *Alghad* newspaper, quoting “informed sources,” negotiations were negatively impacted by the tensions, with Jordan saying it was considering pursuing the project alone.<sup>117</sup> The report was corroborated by Israel’s Channel 10, in a report that said “Israel will not go through with the terms of the Red-Dead Sea Conveyance Project unless Jordan reopens the Israeli embassy.” Official Jordanian sources responded that it would continue with the project with or without Israel, adding that Jordan would not cave in to such pressures, and would not allow the Israeli side to pass its policies without first putting the embassy guard on trial, the murderer of the Jordanians.<sup>118</sup>

The Israeli business newspaper *Globes* reported in January 2017 that the initial construction works had begun on a joint project for an industrial and free trade zone between Jordan and Israel in the Jordan Valley, over an area of 700 donam (700 thousand squared meters) on the Jordanian side and 245 donam (245 thousand squared meters) on the Israeli side. However, a Jordanian government source said that the project was merely an expansion of the zone that has existed for 20 years within the area of Sheikh Hussein Bridge, stressing that the Jordanian government never discussed the establishment of a new free zone with Israel.<sup>119</sup>

In the context of economic normalization, the Jordanian parliament granted Israeli companies the right to invest in Jordan, after amending a clause in the foreign investment law that excluded Israeli companies.<sup>120</sup>

### 3. Syria

#### a. The Impact of Revolutions and Changes on the Palestinian Issue

The intensity of the military conflict in the Syrian crisis declined in 2016 and 2017, where successive ceasefires were declared in 2016. Seven rounds of indirect negotiations were held in Astana between the warring parties, between early 2017 and October of the same year, under the sponsorship of Russia, Iran, Turkey and other regional and

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<sup>117</sup> *Alghad*, 7/11/2017.

<sup>118</sup> Site of i24News, 13/11/2017, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/diplomacy-defense/160168-171113-israel-to-freeze-water-project-with-jordan-amid-embassy-controversy>; and *Addustour*, 15/11/2017.

<sup>119</sup> *Alghad*, 5/4/2017; and Dror Feuer, “Israel, Jordan begin building free trade zone,” site of *Globes*, 15/1/2017, <http://www.globes.co.il/en/article-israel-jordan-begin-building-free-trade-zone-1001172104>

<sup>120</sup> *Assabeel*, 22/5/2016.



international parties. The announcement of a “de-escalation” agreement in May 2017 for a renewable period of six months in several areas across Syria was one of the most prominent outcomes of those negotiations, despite mixed results on the ground.

However, the implications of the Syrian crisis on the Palestinian issue and the entire region remain extant. They are the most serious factors weakening the Arab environment surrounding Palestine, especially the forces challenging Israel’s “northern front” at the strategic level. This is not to mention the fragmentation and destruction of Syria, which has been taken back to its “pre-state” conditions, making it extremely difficult to restore the status quo. Furthermore, the security threats that have emerged because of the Syrian crisis, especially by the IS group, have increased security collaboration between Israel and its Arab neighbors, especially Jordan, which shares the same concerns as Israel regarding the expansion of Iranian and Hizbullah influence in Syria.

In addition, the breach created by the crisis between the communities of the region continues to expand, with the competition for regional influence taking a higher priority on the political agenda of all regional powers and major world powers. This comes, of course, at the expense of the conflict with Israel.

The growing rift between the “Sunni Arab moderate” countries and the “Refusal Front,” which includes Iran and its allies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, made both sides attempt to coopt Palestinians into their respective camps, and determine their stance on the Palestine issue accordingly.

At the same time, this rift provides Israel with the opportunity for rapprochement with some Arab countries, which share its hostility to Iran. This may be one of the most positive shifts in the strategic environment for Israel. In addition, it has paved the way for the LAS designation of Hizbullah as a “terrorist organization,” denying it the legitimacy of a resistance movement fighting against Israel. Regardless of how much Hizbullah will be affected by this decision, it weakens the position of Palestinian resistance groups allied with Hizbullah against Israel, at a time when they do not receive the same share of Iranian support as the Lebanese group.

As for the de-escalation of the crisis in Syria, it could open up a range of opportunities to the Palestinians. The Palestine issue could restore some of its regional and international importance. The relationship between the Palestinian resistance and the Refusal Front could be mended on the basis of shared concerns (although this path has





both imperatives and caveats). Furthermore, the military expansion of Iran and Hizbullah in Syria poses a threat to Israel's northern front and strategic environment, although this is not a new development.

Regarding the conditions for Palestinian refugees in Syria, they continue to suffer from the ongoing humanitarian crisis there, in the same way as the Syrians. According to UNRWA, the number of Palestinian refugees who remained in Syria was 438 thousand at the end of 2017, out of the 560 thousand registered Palestinian refugees in Syria. Over 95% (418 thousand) are in critical need of sustained humanitarian assistance. UNRWA stated that of the estimated 400 thousand Palestine refugees remaining inside Syria, almost 254 thousand are internally displaced, and an estimated 56,600 are trapped in hard-to-reach or inaccessible locations. Of the 120 thousand Palestinian refugees who fled Syria, around 32,500 were in Lebanon and 17 thousand in Jordan.<sup>121</sup> This marks a decline in their numbers, which had reached, according to the figures of the same agency, 42 thousand in Lebanon and 18 thousand in Jordan by the end of 2015.<sup>122</sup> In turn, this indicates an increase in the number of Palestinian refugees migrating to other countries, as countries that neighbor Syria have closed their borders and imposed restrictions on their residence and employment. European countries were the most popular destination for refugees, with 85 thousand Palestinian refugees heading to Europe by the end of 2016, according to the statistics of the Action Group For Palestinians of Syria, while the number of Palestinian refugees from Syria who live in Turkey was 8 thousand, Egypt by 6 thousand, and Gaza one thousand respectively.<sup>123</sup>

A total of 3,628 Palestinian refugees had lost their lives due to the Syrian crisis since its outbreak until 31/12/2017, while the number of Palestinian detainees reached 1,644.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), Syria Regional Crisis Emergency Appeal 2018, 30/1/2018,

[https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/2018\\_syria\\_ea\\_final\\_web\\_0.pdf](https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/2018_syria_ea_final_web_0.pdf); and

UNRWA, Syria Regional Crisis Emergency Appeal 2017, 9/1/2017,

[https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/2017\\_syria\\_emergency\\_appeal.pdf](https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/2017_syria_emergency_appeal.pdf)

<sup>122</sup> UNRWA, Syria Regional Crisis Emergency Appeal 2016, 14/1/2016,

[https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/2016\\_syria\\_emergency\\_appeal.pdf](https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/2016_syria_emergency_appeal.pdf)

<sup>123</sup> Site of Action Group For Palestinians of Syria, 30/4/2017, <http://www.actionpal.org.uk/ar/> (in Arabic)

<sup>124</sup> Action Group For Palestinians of Syria, 1/12/2017. (in Arabic)



## **b. Syrian-Palestinian Relations**

Relations between Syria and the Palestinian factions after the outbreak of the crisis, did not change in 2016 and 2017. The Syrian regime continued to benefit from loyalist Palestinian factions based in Damascus on the military level and continued to strengthen its relationship with the PA leadership and the Fatah movement in parallel with the continued estrangement with Hamas due to its position on the crisis.

In this context, Fatah was able to celebrate in Syria the anniversary of its founding in January 2016, in a ceremony attended by regime and Baath Party representatives, and leaders from the movement who had come from WB.<sup>125</sup> A new building of the Embassy of the State of Palestine was inaugurated in Damascus in August 2016,<sup>126</sup> seen as an additional proof of the solid relationship between the Syrian regime and the PA and Fatah.

As for Hamas, its estrangement with the regime continued due to its stance towards the war, whereas it once enjoyed favor in Damascus. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad commented on this by saying that they were wrong when they confined their support to the Palestinian issue to Hamas and Khalid Mish'al. However, Assad took the opportunity of Hamas's internal elections to send a message and throw the ball in the court of the new leadership, attempting to salvage his image as a supporter of Hamas's resistance to the occupation, when he said that he respects every resistance fighter in Hamas confronting the Israeli enemy and will always extend his hands to them and to any new political leadership. Assad again blamed Hamas's former leaders for the deterioration of the relationship with Damascus, claiming that their reins are in the hands of foreign entities.<sup>127</sup>

In 2016 and 2017, Hamas sought to avoid becoming implicated in the Syrian crisis, as reflected in the limited number of statements it issued on the subject. In this context, in a February 2016 statement, Hamas said that its position "on what is happening in Syria and other Arab countries is a fixed position based on the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states." It stressed that it had no role in the Syrian crisis, saying its position on the Syrian people's right to self-determination had not changed.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Quds Press, 10/1/2016.

<sup>126</sup> *Al-Ayyam*, 28/8/2016.

<sup>127</sup> *Al-Akhabar* newspaper, Beirut, 25/3/2016.

<sup>128</sup> Site of Hamas, 24/2/2016. (in Arabic)

Hamas's positions on the developments in Syria in the same period were limited to condemning "massacres, killings, and genocide" in Aleppo in December 2016.<sup>129</sup> For the same reason, Hamas cancelled its anniversary celebrations in Lebanon.<sup>130</sup> However, Hamas's rhetoric focused on the humanitarian suffering and refrained from condemning any party. Hamas welcomed news of a ceasefire agreement reached later than month, calling for finding a political solution to the Syrian crisis that would prevent further bloodshed and preserve Syria's unity, people, and respect for their rights and sovereignty and end a bloody period in the country's history.<sup>131</sup>

Hamas's new leadership affirmed the same position of non-interference in the crisis, as expressed by the deputy head of the Political Bureau Saleh al-'Aruri in an interview with an Iranian newspaper in October 2017. Al-'Aruri said that the movement had no relations with Syria, which is in a state of war, adding that Hamas had moved away from that arena of war so as not to become embroiled in the conflict.<sup>132</sup>

Other than these events, the Syrian-Palestinian political relations file did not witness any significant developments. The internal crisis continued to be the main concern of the Syrian regime and its opponents, amid concerns among the Palestinian parties over becoming implicated in the internal files of the Arab countries for fear of any negative repercussions, especially after the failure of the Arab revolutions.

### **c. Position Towards Israel**

The escalation of Israel's military interventions in Syria was one of the most prominent developments in Israel-Syria relations. The latter's strategic weight had been reduced from a sizeable regional power with a prominent role in the conflict with Israel, into a war zone open to all kinds of interventions by regional and international powers.

It is possible to say that Israel's military activity was most prominent in the Syrian front in 2016 and 2017, mostly in a one-sided manner, its declared goal being the prevention of a game-changing shift in the nature of the strategic threat on that front. Israel sought to tackle this threat through two main approaches: confronting direct military presence by any of the "hostile" parties close to its border, and directly targeting any potential threats to Israel's military edge anywhere within Syrian territory.

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<sup>129</sup> Site of Hamas, 13/12/2016. (in Arabic)

<sup>130</sup> Safa, 15/12/2016.

<sup>131</sup> Site of Hamas, 30/12/2016. (in Arabic)

<sup>132</sup> *Aliwaa* newspaper, Beirut, 25/10/2017.



On the first track, the Israeli army carried out repeated strikes against targets in southern Syria near the border with the occupied Golan Heights. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu clarified Israel's security policy on the Syrian front, "We will not permit radical Islam or any other hostile entity to open a front of terror against us on the Golan." He was commenting on reports the Israeli air force had targeted an IS cell which had fired at Israeli soldiers in the Golan in November 2016.<sup>133</sup>

Israeli warplanes killed a leader in the Golan Brigade of the loyalist Syrian National Defense Forces (NDF) in March 2017.<sup>134</sup> Three NDF members were killed by Israeli bombardment in Quneitra of southern Syria, in April 2017.<sup>135</sup> In June 2017, seven Syrian soldiers were killed in Israeli airstrikes on Syrian army positions in Ba'ath City also in Quneitra.<sup>136</sup>

In April 2016, the Israeli army revealed that it had formed a secret operations room in the Golan dubbed "Fire Tent," used to plan assassinations in Syria and Lebanon. The army claimed the facility thwarted dozens of infiltration attempts in previous years from the Syrian side of the occupied Golan Heights, and provided accurate coordinates for Israeli operations against Syrian army positions that had fired shells towards settlements in the Golan or Israeli army positions. An officer in charge of the operations room said that it had prepared a huge database of targets in the Syrian interior, including regime army and Iran and Hizbullah positions, as well as IS concentrations.<sup>137</sup>

In the same context, Israeli Channel 2 reported in February 2017 that the 595th Ait/Eagle Field Intelligence Battalion of the Israeli Army, had infiltrated repeatedly into Syrian territory to collect intelligence.<sup>138</sup>

Israel coupled its military actions with its diplomatic efforts to remove Iran and Hizbullah presence close to its borders, with Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon pointing out that "The United States and Russia, both of which are currently active in the Syrian civil war, recognize Israel's 'freedom to act and to defend our interests.'"<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> *The Jerusalem Post*, 28/11/2016, <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Netanyahu-No-attacks-from-ISIS-will-be-tolerated-by-Israel-473885>

<sup>134</sup> Aljazeera.net, 20/3/2017. (in Arabic)

<sup>135</sup> *Almustaqbal* newspaper, Beirut, 24/4/2017.

<sup>136</sup> *Arabs* 48, 24/6/2017.

<sup>137</sup> Aljazeera.net, 29/4/2016. (in Arabic)

<sup>138</sup> Video shows Israeli spies sneaking into Syria, site of Press TV, 26/2/2017, <http://www.presstv.com/Detail/2017/02/26/512109/Israel-Syria-Lebanon>

<sup>139</sup> *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 22/2/2016. (in English)

In particular, Israel made sure to coordinate its military operations inside Syrian territory with Russia. The announcement regarding the formation of “Fire Tent” came days after Benjamin Netanyahu—following a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow—said Israel’s military policy in Syria was “to prevent the transfer of advanced weaponry from Iran and Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon,” and “prevent the establishment of an additional terror front against us on the Golan Heights.”<sup>140</sup> Netanyahu again visited Moscow in March 2017 to discuss Iran’s presence in Syria, after which he reiterated Israel’s rejection of Iranian practices that he said undermined security in the region.<sup>141</sup>

In the same context, *Maariv* newspaper reported that Israel had sent messages to the parties of the Syria talks that Tel Aviv was ready to reduce its interference in Syrian territory in return for a settlement or silent accords, which would prevent Iran, Hizbullah, and militants—whom Israel sees as a threat—to deploy a certain distance from the Golan ceasefire lines. It added that it would be willing to agree to the return of the regular army to the border area under the 1974 disengagement agreement.<sup>142</sup> For its part, Israeli daily *Haaretz* reported that Netanyahu proposed to international parties the establishment of a buffer zone inside Syrian territory to prevent the deployment of Iranian and Hizbullah assets close to the Israeli border.<sup>143</sup>

Israel escalated its rhetoric against the Iranian presence in Syria after the US, Russia, and Jordan agreed to back ceasefire agreements in south-western Syria, in Dar’a, Quneitra, and Suweida in July 2017.<sup>144</sup> Netanyahu commented on the agreements, saying that “Israel will welcome a genuine ceasefire in Syria but this ceasefire must not enable the establishment of a military presence by Iran and its proxies in Syria in general and in southern Syria in particular.”<sup>145</sup> A few days later, Netanyahu said his government would not support the deal, arguing that it would “empower Iran.”<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> PM Netanyahu Meets with Russian President Vladimir Putin, site of Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 21/4/2016, <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2016/Pages/PM-Netanyahu-meets-with-Russian-President-Putin-21-April-2016.aspx>

<sup>141</sup> *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 9/3/2017. (in English)

<sup>142</sup> *Arabs* 48, 31/3/2017.

<sup>143</sup> *Haaretz*, 7/4/2017. (in English)

<sup>144</sup> *Aljazeera.net*, 7/7/2017. (in Arabic)

<sup>145</sup> PM Netanyahu's Remarks at the Start of the Weekly Cabinet Meeting, Press Releases, Prime Minister's Office, 9/7/2017, <http://www.pmo.gov.il/English/MediaCenter/Spokesman/Pages/spokestart090717.aspx>

<sup>146</sup> *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 16/7/2017. (in English)



The following month, Netanyahu visited Russia again. During his meeting with Putin in Sochi, the Israeli prime minister said Israel was ready to act alone to prevent Iran from establishing an expanded military presence in Syria. “Iran is already well on its way to controlling Iraq, Yemen and to a large extent is already in practice in control of Lebanon,” Netanyahu told Putin adding that “Israel opposes Iran’s continued entrenchment in Syria.”<sup>147</sup> The Israeli defense minister, Avigdor Lieberman, supported the position of his prime minister by saying that “Israel will not sit silently while Iran expands its influence in neighboring countries,” adding, “The State of Israel does not intend to remain a bystander and accept these attempts.”<sup>148</sup>

In the second track, based on targeting potential threats to Israeli military superiority on the northern front, Israel continued to target positions in Syrian territory, focusing particularly on what it said were arms shipments to Hizbullah. The vicinity of the Mezzeh military airport southwest of Damascus was bombed in December 2016. The same airport was bombed in January 2017. Damascus accused Israel of being behind both attacks.<sup>149</sup>

Although Israel did not comment on these two attacks, an Israeli army spokesman (commenting on another incident) said Israeli warplanes had bombed a “strategic arms convoy” destined for Hizbullah in northern Syria in March 2017, adding that Syrian ground-based anti-aircraft guns had fired at Israeli aircraft for the first time in six years and that Israeli missiles had intercepted one of the Syrian missiles over the Jordan Valley area.<sup>150</sup> The anti-aircraft missile incident over the occupied Palestinian territories led the Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman to threaten “The next time the Syrians use their air defense systems against our planes we will destroy them without the slightest hesitation.”<sup>151</sup>

Following the strike, former Prime Minister and Defense Minister Ehud Barak revealed that Israel had launched 12 attacks on Hizbullah arms shipments in Syria during the previous two years (2015–2016).<sup>152</sup> Israeli army Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot said that his army would not be tricked by the calm on the northern front, and that he was

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<sup>147</sup> Reuters, 23/8/2017. (in English)

<sup>148</sup> *The Jerusalem Post*, 24/8/2017, <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Defense-Minister-Avigdor-Lieberman-Israel-will-not-be-a-bystander-in-Syria-503324>

<sup>149</sup> Aljazeera.net, 13/1/2017. (in Arabic)

<sup>150</sup> *Al-Hayat al-Jadida*, 17/3/2017; and *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 17/3/2017. (in English)

<sup>151</sup> The Times of Israel, 19/3/2017.

<sup>152</sup> *Asharq al-Awsat*, 19/3/2017. (in Arabic)

monitoring and following the changes on the Syrian and Lebanese fronts, stressing that Israel was working to prevent the transfer of arms to Hizbullah.<sup>153</sup>

On the other hand, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said that Russia could play an important role between Syria and Israel by working to prevent the latter from attacking Syria again in the future.<sup>154</sup>

A Syrian military statement said that Israeli aircraft had bombed a Syrian military position near the town of Masyaf in Hama province in September 2017, killing two soldiers and causing material damage. Lieberman hinted that Israel was responsible, saying, “We are not looking for adventures,” adding, “we are ready and determined to defend ourselves and ensure the safety of Israeli citizens...we will do whatever it takes to prevent a Shiite corridor from Iran to Damascus.”<sup>155</sup>

Moreover, Israel sought to capitalize on the collapse in Syria to reiterate its refusal to withdraw from the occupied Golan Heights, which Netanyahu confirmed during his visit to Moscow in April 2016, saying that Israel would not withdraw from the Golan with or without or without a peace treaty.<sup>156</sup> This came days after the Israeli government held its weekly meeting in the Golan, an unprecedented move, during which Netanyahu also said, “The Golan will always remain in Israel’s hands. Israel will never withdraw from the Golan Heights,” adding, “It is time that the international community recognized reality.”<sup>157</sup>

Netanyahu stressed the same position during a visit to the Golan in June 2017, on the fiftieth anniversary of its occupation. He said, “The Golan Heights will forever remain under Israeli sovereignty. We will never leave the Golan Heights.”<sup>158</sup> Israeli President Reuven Rivlin called on the “The nations of the world must formally recognize that the Golan is an integral part of the state of Israel.”<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> *Israel Hayom*, 20/3/2017. (in English)

<sup>154</sup> *Alghad*, 20/3/2017.

<sup>155</sup> The Times of Israel, 7/9/2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/with-alleged-airstrike-israel-punctuates-opposition-to-syria-ceasefire-pact/>

<sup>156</sup> *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 21/4/2016. (in English)

<sup>157</sup> The Times of Israel, 17/4/2016, [http://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-vows-golan-heights-will-remain-part-of-israel-forever/?fb\\_comment\\_id=1053034854769180\\_1053949638011035#f30d74cce21c11c](http://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-vows-golan-heights-will-remain-part-of-israel-forever/?fb_comment_id=1053034854769180_1053949638011035#f30d74cce21c11c)

<sup>158</sup> The Times of Israel, 6/6/2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/marking-50-years-of-rule-netanyahu-says-golan-will-forever-be-israeli/>

<sup>159</sup> i24News, 16/6/2017, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/148017-170616-rivlin-calls-for-global-recognition-of-israeli-sovereignty-over-golan-heights>



Subsequently, the Israeli government revealed its intention to impose local council elections in the villages of the occupied Syrian Golan, in accordance with Israeli law, in conjunction with the next electoral session of the local authorities in late October 2018. The move has been seen as step to force the population of the Golan to recognize the legitimacy of the Israeli occupation.<sup>160</sup>

In addition, Tel Aviv continued to take advantage of the contradictions of the Syrian scene by providing assistance to those affected by the Syrian conflict in border areas. In July 2017, the Israeli army published a list of the aid it had provided the previous year to some 80 villages in southern Syria, under the control of unnamed opposition factions, in an area inhabited by nearly 200 thousand. The Israeli army also said that it had provided treatment to more than three thousand wounded people in those areas.<sup>161</sup> Interestingly, the list was published after Netanyahu rejected the cease-fire agreement supported by the US, Russia, and Jordan in southern Syria. In the same context, the Israeli Interior Ministry announced in January 2017 that it would receive 100 Syrian orphans and assist in securing their adoption.<sup>162</sup>

However, despite the efforts made by Israel in this regard, Tel Aviv was not able to score major breakthroughs when it comes to the attitudes of the various Syrian warring parties on Israel, or to coopt any Syrian opposition faction, with the exception of some limited figures disowned by the mainstream Syrian opposition. The National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces disowned Kamal al-Labwani, who participated in a conference in Israel in September 2014,<sup>163</sup> and similarly, the Southern Front of the Free Syrian Army denied any connection with Issam Zaytoun, who claimed to represent it at the Herzliya conference in Tel Aviv in June 2016.<sup>164</sup> The participation of Fahad al-Masri via Skype, along with other opponents, including Zaytoun himself, in a session held in January 2017 by The Harry S. Truman Research Institute for The Advancement of Peace of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, did not represent any of the mainstream opposition forces in Syria.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Arabs 48, 5/7/2017.

<sup>161</sup> Yedioth Ahronoth, 16/7/2017. (in English)

<sup>162</sup> *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 27/1/2017.

<sup>163</sup> Aljazeera.net, 13/9/2014. (in Arabic)

<sup>164</sup> *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 18/6/2016.

<sup>165</sup> Raialyoum, 17/1/2017.



## 4. Lebanon

### a. Impact of Changes and Revolutions on the Palestine Issue

Despite the attempts of various Lebanese political forces to isolate the internal arena from the Syrian crisis and its complications, Lebanon continued to be affected by the crisis in 2016 and 2017, especially as Hizbullah continued to play a key role in the military conflict in Syria. As a result, this rendered Hizbullah—and Lebanon—a party to the regional conflict between Iran and the countries of Arab “moderation.”

The political settlement that Lebanon witnessed in the last months of 2016 was an indication of the desire of the Lebanese parties and their regional sponsors to isolate Lebanon from the direct effects of the Syrian war and to avoid further political tension. That settlement was based on agreeing to elect Michel Aoun, Hizbullah’s ally, as president, and appoint Saad Hariri as the head of a national accord government. In late October 2016, Lebanon’s parliament elected Aoun president. On 28/12/2016, Hariri’s government won a vote of confidence, putting an end to a period of political tension that had paralyzed the country for years.

However, the overlap between Lebanon’s improved stability with Iran and Hizbullah’s consolidation of their influence in Syria prompted their foes to re-visit the tally of their losses and gains in the regional confrontation, which culminated with the crisis triggered by Hariri’s resignation on 4/11/2017, declared from Riyadh, in protest at what he said was Hizbullah’s encroachment on the authority of the state. Hariri described Hizbullah as “an Iranian arm, not just in Lebanon but also in the Arab countries.”<sup>166</sup>

Israeli reactions to the Hariri resignation crisis showed just how keen Tel Aviv was to take advantage of the opportunity from regional conflicts to normalize its political existence, by finding a position for itself in the alliance among the “moderate” Arab countries against Iran and Hizbullah. Netanyahu said, “The resignation of Lebanon’s Prime Minister Hariri and his remarks [on Iran] are a wake-up call to the international community to take action against the Iranian aggression,” adding, “this aggression endangers not only Israel, but the entire Middle East. The international community needs to unite and stand against this aggression.” For his part, Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor

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<sup>166</sup> Aljazeera.net, 5/11/2017. (in Arabic)



Lieberman said, “In practice Lebanon has been occupied by Hezbollah and the Iranians.”<sup>167</sup>

However, Lebanon was able to avoid a full escalation of that crisis thanks to the reaction of its political leaders, who came to believe that Hariri had been forced to resign under pressure from Saudi, and thanks to the subsequent international pressure on Riyadh to allow Hariri to return to Lebanon. Although Hariri said he would suspend his resignation and later rescinded it following his return to Lebanon, which defused the crisis, especially after Hariri toned down his criticisms of Hizbullah, the course of events demonstrated Lebanon’s vulnerability to external pressures and susceptibility to become an arena for settling regional scores as it had been in the past.

Concerning the Palestine issue, this situation carries many dangers, given the unique space Lebanon provides for Palestinian political action: Lebanon is the most balanced Arab country in its relations with the Palestinian political forces, and the last refuge within the ring countries surrounding Palestine that allows various Palestinian forces to exercise political activity on their territory. Lebanon is also one of the states most committed to the right of return of Palestinian refugees.

In addition to the above, the Lebanese resistance represented by Hizbullah is an ally of the Palestinian armed resistance, and along with Iran they constitute the most formidable opponent for Israel, according to an INSS report, regardless of the position of the party on the Syrian crisis.<sup>168</sup> The unprecedented convergence between the attitudes of Israel and the Arab “moderate states” towards Hizbullah and Iran, would mean additional gains to Israel in its strategic environment. In addition to the fact that the Arab countries’ antagonism towards Hizbullah threatens to weaken and ostracize the Palestinian resistance on the back of its alliance with the Lebanese group.

### **b. Lebanese-Palestinian Relations**

The Palestinian refugee issue in Lebanon remains the main focus of Lebanese-Palestinian relations and Lebanese official interaction with the Palestine issue, as evident from several official Lebanese positions expressed in 2016 and 2017, led by those of

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<sup>167</sup> Aljazeera.net, 5/11/2017 (in Arabic); The Times of Israel, 4/11/2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-hariris-resignation-a-wake-up-call-on-iran-threat-to-the-region/>; and Site of MailOnline, 4/11/2017, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-5050129/Netanyahu-Lebanon-PMs-fears-alarm-world.html>

<sup>168</sup> Anat Kurz and Shlomo Brom (eds.), *Strategic Survey for Israel 2016-2017* (INSS, January 2017), [http://www.inss.org.il/publication/?load\\_offset=240](http://www.inss.org.il/publication/?load_offset=240)

President Michel ‘Aoun and the Lebanese government headed by Prime Minister Saad Hariri in December 2016.

In his inauguration speech in parliament following his election in late October 2016, President ‘Aoun only mentioned the Palestine issue and the refugee question in passing, at the end of the part on the Syrian refugee crisis. After calling for Syrian refugees to return to their homeland, ‘Aoun said, “Regarding Palestinian (refugees), we always strive to affirm and implement the right of return.”<sup>169</sup>

The Lebanese president’s position was clearer on the Palestine issue during a speech he made on the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People. He stressed that the occasion should be an incentive for the UN to pressure its member states to commit to the implementation of the resolutions it has issued on the rights of the Palestinian people, led by Resolution 194, which affirms the right of refugees to return to their homes. ‘Aoun continued that the just Palestinian cause revolving around the right to establish the Palestinians’ state is a core human principle over which there must be no complacency. ‘Aoun praised the Palestinian struggle, which he said had kept this cause alive in the conscience of the world nearly 70 years after the *Nakbah* (catastrophe) began. The Lebanese president also saluted Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, saying that the Lebanese had opened their hearts to them and are the strongest in solidarity with their just cause. ‘Aoun stressed his keenness on positive interaction between the state institutions and the refugees, to safeguard their dignity and provide decent living conditions for them until the goal of their struggle is achieved with their return to the land of Palestine.<sup>170</sup> However, stressing the need for the return of Palestinian refugees remained a consistent theme in the positions of President ‘Aoun, including in his speech delivered at the 28th Arab Summit in Jordan,<sup>171</sup> and the UN General Assembly in September 2017, in which he said, “The crime of expelling Palestinians from their land and displacing them cannot be rectified by another crime against the Lebanese by imposing naturalization thereon and against Palestinians by denying them the right of return.” ‘Aoun mentioned the “path aimed at elimination of refugee status in preparation for the naturalization process,”

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<sup>169</sup> Site of Lebanese Republic Presidency, 31/10/2016, <http://www.presidency.gov.lb/Arabic/News/Pages/Details.aspx?nid=23771> (in Arabic)

<sup>170</sup> *Annahar* newspaper, Beirut, 29/11/2016.

<sup>171</sup> Lebanese Republic Presidency, 29/3/2017, <http://www.presidency.gov.lb/Arabic/News/Pages/Details.aspx?nid=24142> (in Arabic)



vowing that “Lebanon will not allow this to happen, it will refuse having refugees or displaced at any cost.”<sup>172</sup>

The positions of the Lebanese government echoed the same stance, summed up by the government’s official manifesto, which stressed opposition to the principle of resettling Palestinian refugees, upheld their right to return to their homeland, and said, “Until this happens, states and international organizations must assume their full responsibilities and contribute permanently...to finance UNRWA and the reconstruction of the Nahr al-Bared camp.” The manifesto also called for “promoting Lebanese-Palestinian dialogue, to spare the camps from further tensions and armed conflict that does not serve the cause, which the Lebanese people and their government do not accept.”<sup>173</sup>

In general, these stances indicate that the view that considers the refugees a security, political, economic, and social burden continues to prevail in Lebanon and its dealing with the Palestinian issue to a large extent. It seems unlikely that a major change would take place in this regard, as long as the causes and motives are present in Lebanon, which hosts the largest number of refugees per capita in the world as a result of the Syrian war. For Lebanon’s economic status and the state of its infrastructure does not allow the creation of jobs or the provision of basic services even to its own citizens, which means that it is still a net exporter of immigrants.

It is also important to note that the continued sporadic unrest in Palestinian refugee camps also reinforces the perception of the issue as a security burden, in a country that is still haunted by fears from “the others” as a result of its turbulent past.

In this context, the Ain al-Hilweh Refugee Camp in south Lebanon witnessed several rounds of clashes in 2016 and 2017. In turn, this almost sparked a crisis in Palestinian-Lebanese relations, as the security tension prompted the Lebanese army to start building a concrete wall on the western side of the camp in November 2016. Although the army confirmed that the wall was “an agreed protection wall to preserve the safety of the camp and prevent the infiltration of terrorists into or out of the camp,” it complied to the demand of the unified Palestinian leadership in Lebanon to stop the construction of the

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<sup>172</sup> Address by H.E. General Michel Aoun, 72nd session of the UN General Assembly, site of UN General Assembly, 21/9/2017, [https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/72/lb\\_en.pdf](https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/72/lb_en.pdf)

<sup>173</sup> Site of Lebanese Republic: Presidency of Council of Ministers, 28/12/2016, <http://www.pcm.gov.lb/arabic/index.aspx?pageid=5> (in Arabic)

wall,<sup>174</sup> which was also rejected by several prominent political leaders in the city of Saida.<sup>175</sup> The unified Palestinian leadership was committed to the army request to present a security vision for the refugee camp. It undertook to prosecute and extradite those wanted outside the camp, who were using it as a haven and a base to threaten Lebanese civil peace.<sup>176</sup> The cooperation of the Palestinian parties, especially those affiliated with ‘Usbat al-Ansar and Hamas, led to the handover of Khalid al-Sayyid (affiliated to extremist Islamic groups) to the Lebanese security forces on 1/7/2017.<sup>177</sup>

Renewed clashes in the camp in April 2017 prompted Army Commander General Joseph Aoun to warn that the army “will respond firmly to any attack on military centers or residential compounds surrounding the camp and any attempt to spread the clashes outside.”<sup>178</sup> The General Director of the Lebanese General Directorate of General Security, Major General Abbas Ibrahim, later warned of “an ambush being set up for Palestinian refugee camps, and is intended to lure Lebanon and Palestinian refugees, and implicate them in an unwanted confrontation.”<sup>179</sup>

However, in contrast to the negative aspect of the Lebanese perception of the Palestinian refugees as a burden, it should be noted that the Lebanese consensus on upholding the Palestinian right of return preserves one of the last remaining non-Palestinian voices that still mention their cause when talking about the peace process in international forums. The Lebanese Foreign Ministry’s objection to the final statement of the Paris Peace Conference for not mentioning refugees is but one example of this.<sup>180</sup>

This position on the issue of refugees is a main point of convergence between Lebanon and the various Palestinian political parties, which means that Lebanon among all ring countries maintains the most balanced relations with the Palestinians, keeping all channels of communication open between its various state institutions and political parties and their Palestinian counterparts. The ability of Palestinian leaders from both sides of the Palestinian divide to continue to meet with Lebanese officials from various backgrounds, led by the “three presidents” (president of the republic, speaker, and prime

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<sup>174</sup> PIC, 25/11/2016; and *Almustaqbal*, 26/11/2016.

<sup>175</sup> *Annahar*, 23/11/2016.

<sup>176</sup> *Almustaqbal*, 28/1/2017.

<sup>177</sup> Alquds News Agency, 1/7/2017.

<sup>178</sup> Site of the Lebanese Army, 13/4/2017, <https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/> (in Arabic)

<sup>179</sup> *Almustaqbal*, 5/7/2017.

<sup>180</sup> *Al-Hayat*, 16/1/2017.



minister) of Lebanon, underscores this balance, which is primarily motivated by the need to discuss issues related to the refugee issue in Lebanon.

At the same time, the unified Lebanese-Palestinian position on the refugee issue meant that both sides were in agreement on refusing the cuts to UNRWA's services. The Lebanese government had a key role in backing the Palestinian position rejecting UNRWA's decision to scale down its healthcare offerings in early 2016. The issue figured in the talks between then Lebanese Prime Minister Tammam Salam with then UN chief Ban Ki-moon during his visit to Lebanon in March 2016.<sup>181</sup> A series of protests by Palestinian refugees then prompted UNRWA to suspend its decision in the middle of the following month.<sup>182</sup>

The improved political climate in Lebanon with the end of 2016, following the election of a new president and the formation of a consensus government, have positively developed the official Lebanese position on Palestinian refugees. This was reflected in the launching of the National Population and Housing Census of Palestinian Camps and Gatherings in Lebanon, whose results were announced on 21/12/2017,<sup>183</sup> and the issuing of the Unified Lebanese Vision for the Palestinian Refugee Affairs in Lebanon in November 2016, two years after it was proposed to former Lebanese Prime Minister Tammam Salam by the Lebanese Working Group on Palestinian Refugee Affairs formed by the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee.<sup>184</sup>

The document emphasized “the need for greater efforts to address the humanitarian and living issues of Palestinian refugees” and believed that “unnecessary restrictions on granting Palestinian refugees their economic and social rights should be lifted, including the right to work and access to social protection.” It believed that “the State's role in camp management should not be limited to the security aspect which is the case currently, but must also include political matters, access to services and human right issues.”<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Wafa, 24/3/2016.

<sup>182</sup> Quds Press, 16/4/2016.

<sup>183</sup> Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC), 21/12/2017, <http://www.lpdc.gov.lb/statements/key-findings-of-the-national-population-and-housin/398/en#> (in English)

<sup>184</sup> LPDC, “Unified Lebanese Vision for the Palestinian Refugee Affairs in Lebanon,” Lebanese Working Group on Palestinian Refugee Affairs, November 2016, <http://www.lpdc.gov.lb/DocumentFiles/unified%20vision-636365069171725661.pdf> (in English)

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

Regarding the relationship between Hamas and Hizbullah, they overcome their difference on the Syrian crisis, to re-converge around the shared principles concerning the Palestinian issue and the resistance against Israel. Both realized the necessity of reforming their alliance to confront regional threats. A meeting between the deputy head of the Hamas Political Bureau Saleh al-‘Aruri (who settled in Lebanon after the Qatar crisis) and the Secretary General of Hizbullah, Hassan Nasrallah, in Beirut, was a major indicator of relationship restoration. During the meeting, the two sides stressed the necessity of convergence between resistance movements and solidarity in the face of the Israeli attacks, and plots targeting the resistance movements in the region.<sup>186</sup>

Lebanon has become one of the last remaining Arab sanctuaries for Hamas’s leaders and their political activity. The privileges enjoyed by Hamas in Lebanon prompted the Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman to demand the US put pressure on Beirut to expel Hamas from its territory.<sup>187</sup> Lieberman’s call coincided with the start of the Qatari crisis, where Arab and US pressure was exerted on Doha to take steps against Hamas, whose former politburo chief Khalid Mish‘al lives in Qatar.

### **c. Position Towards Israel**

Lebanon’s official position towards Israel and the resistance did not see any significant developments in 2016 and 2017. The president’s inauguration speech and the new government’s manifesto kept the status in quo in place in this regard. President ‘Aoun speech reaffirmed the right to resist, saying, “We will spare no effort or resistance to liberate the remaining occupied Lebanese territories and protect our homeland from an enemy that still wants to seize our land, our water and our natural resources.”<sup>188</sup> The ministerial statement of the government of Saad Hariri also stressed “the right of the Lebanese citizens to resist the Israeli occupation, respond to its aggression, and reclaim [their] occupied territories.”<sup>189</sup>

At the same time, despite the calm on the Lebanese front with Israel since the war of July 2006, Tel Aviv continued to warn that the next round of war with Lebanon was coming in 2016 and 2017, with both Israel’s politicians and military leaders making repeated threats against Lebanon.

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<sup>186</sup> Site of Arabi21, 1/11/2017.

<sup>187</sup> Arabs 48, 9/6/2016.

<sup>188</sup> Lebanese Republic Presidency, 31/10/2016, <http://www.presidency.gov.lb/Arabic/News/Pages/Details.aspx?nid=23771> (in Arabic)

<sup>189</sup> Lebanese Republic: Presidency of Council of Ministers, 28/12/2016, <http://www.pcm.gov.lb/arabic/index.aspx?pageid=5> (in Arabic)



Deputy Chief of Staff of the Israeli army Yair Golan warned that “In any future crisis, they are not going to see a small war in Lebanon. It’s going to be decisive. It’s going to be full-scale war,” adding “There is no other way to take out this threat without...creating large damage to the Lebanese infrastructure, to Lebanese houses and other civilian facilities.” He also noted that Hizbullah “has developed capabilities that present ‘unprecedented’ threats to Israel.”<sup>190</sup> This threat was cited again by the head of the Military Intelligence Division Directorate, Herzl Halevi, who said at the Herzliya Conference in June 2016, that the next war with Hizbullah would not be simple, and that the internal front in any such confrontation would have a very difficult experience.<sup>191</sup>

In the same context, the chief of the Israeli army’s Planning Directorate Amikam Norkin, confirmed that the army was preparing for the third Lebanon war saying it was more ready than before, while warning that the war would involve a crippling ground assault in south Lebanon, but stressed at the same time that the main objective was to maintain calm on the northern front.<sup>192</sup> This coincided with statements of Chief Infantry and Paratroopers’ Commander Ghassan Alian who affirmed that the war with Lebanon was “a matter of time.”<sup>193</sup>

Israeli army Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot said that the next war would include the Lebanese state and groups operating in Lebanon with its permission and consent,<sup>194</sup> in reference to Hizbullah, which Eisenkot later said was his army’s most dangerous foe, adding that Hassan Nasrallah would be the targeted in any future confrontation.<sup>195</sup>

At the political level, the sharpest Israeli threats came in the context of responding to warnings made by Hizbullah’s chief, who said that any coming war would bring devastating results on the Israeli home front. Nasrallah said that the resistance could now turn the Israeli nuclear threat into an opportunity, and that it was able to hit ammonia storage tanks anywhere in Israel,<sup>196</sup> and Hizbullah would not adhere to red lines in relation to striking ammonia tanks or the nuclear reactor at Negev Nuclear Research Center, Dimona.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 20/4/2016, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4794305,00.html> (in English)

<sup>191</sup> *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 15/6/2016. (in English)

<sup>192</sup> *Raialyoum*, 12/10/2016.

<sup>193</sup> *Raialyoum*, 6/10/2016.

<sup>194</sup> *Israel Hayom*, 20/3/2017. (in English)

<sup>195</sup> *Alquds*, 20/9/2017.

<sup>196</sup> *Raialyoum*, 16/2/2017.

<sup>197</sup> *Al-Akhbar*, 21/2/2017.



In response to these threats, Israel's Minister of Transport, National Infrastructure and Road Safety and Minister of Intelligence, Israel Katz, vowed that "The days of the Second Lebanon War, when Israel declines to target Lebanon's infrastructure, are over. If Nasrallah dares to shoot at the Israeli home front or at national infrastructures, all of Lebanon will be struck."<sup>198</sup> Israel's Education Minister and Head of the Jewish Home bloc Naftali Bennett, explained:

The Lebanese institutions, its infrastructure, airport, power stations, traffic junctions, Lebanese Army bases – they should all be legitimate targets if a war breaks out. That's what we should already be saying to them and the world now. If Hezbollah fires missiles at the Israeli home front, this will mean sending Lebanon back to the Middle Ages.<sup>199</sup>

The Israeli threats invited an official Lebanese response. President Michel Aoun declared that the time when Israel could pursue its aggressive policy against Lebanon as it pleases had gone and would never return, and that any Israeli attempt to undermine Lebanon's sovereignty or threaten the Lebanese will be met with the appropriate response.<sup>200</sup> Lebanon also filed a complaint against Israel at the Security Council on the back of its threats to attack its infrastructure.<sup>201</sup>

Nasrallah reiterated his warnings to Israel, saying that if it "wages war against Syria or Lebanon, it will not be guaranteed that the battle will remain between Lebanon and Israel or Syria and Israel...but tens if not hundreds of thousands of fighters from all across the Arab and Muslim world could take part in the battle."<sup>202</sup>

Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman responded by asserting Israel's military superiority, stressing that it was not interested in escalation in the north or in the south.<sup>203</sup> He later said, "If once we spoke about the Lebanese front—there is no longer such a front. There is the northern front. In any development there may be, it will be one front, Syria and Lebanon together," adding "And also regarding the Lebanese front we are no longer talking about Hezbollah alone,' he added. 'We are talking about Hezbollah and the

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<sup>198</sup> The Times of Israel, 16/2/2017, [https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/top-minister-says-all-of-lebanon-will-be-struck-if-hezbollah-attacks-israel/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/top-minister-says-all-of-lebanon-will-be-struck-if-hezbollah-attacks-israel/)

<sup>199</sup> *Haaretz*, 13/3/2017. (in English)

<sup>200</sup> *Al-Hayat*, 19/2/2017.

<sup>201</sup> *Al-Hayat*, 30/3/2017.

<sup>202</sup> *Al-Hayat*, 24/6/2017.

<sup>203</sup> *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 2/7/2017. (in English)



Lebanese army; regrettably that is the reality. The Lebanese army has become an integral part of the Hezbollah apparatus under its command.” Lieberman also pointed out that “When the next campaign begins, and it doesn’t matter where it begins, in the north or the south, it will immediately become a two-front campaign. There is no longer a single front, and that is our basic assumption.”<sup>204</sup>

The Israeli army Northern Command decided to establish a new security wall extending several kilometers along the border with Lebanon. In August 2017, the Israeli Ministry of Environment announced that the ammonia storage tank in Haifa had been emptied.<sup>205</sup>

In the context of the security and intelligence confrontation between Lebanon and Israel, several Lebanese security agencies made announcements in 2016 and 2017, exposing a number of breaches, the most prominent of which was the announcement of the seizure of illegal communication stations in March 2016, providing internet services from Israeli companies, and in turn providing internet services to official headquarters and institutions in Lebanon.<sup>206</sup> A spy network was detected with five people arrested for holding telephone conversations with Israeli enemy embassies abroad in January 2017.<sup>207</sup>

## **5. GCC Countries**

### **a. Impact of changes and Uprisings on the Palestine Issue**

The rapid changes in KSA since the accession of King Salman bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz to power in 2015 have been one of the most important changes in the strategic environment in the region, especially with the rapid rise of his son MBS in 2016 and 2017, later appointed as the crown prince and gradually seizing power and levers of influence within the kingdom. The effects of these changes spread quickly from the internal political landscape to the external one, affecting relations between the GCC countries, inter-Arab relations, and relations with regional powers (including Iran, Turkey, and Israel) as well as the position on the Palestine issue and the peace process.

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<sup>204</sup> The Times of Israel, 10/10/2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/liberman-in-next-war-israel-will-face-fighting-in-north-and-south/>

<sup>205</sup> The Times of Israel, 8/6/2016, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-working-247-to-shore-up-insufficient-defenses-on-lebanese-border/>; and *Haaretz*, 31/8/2017, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-after-legal-struggle-haifa-ammonia-tank-is-finally-emptied-1.5447468> (in English)

<sup>206</sup> *Asharq al-Awsat*, 17/3/2016. (in Arabic)

<sup>207</sup> *Al-Hayat*, 26/1/2017.

In 2016 and 2017, an alliance emerged between Riyadh, led by MBS, and the UAE, led by the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces Minister Mohammed bin Zayed (known as MBZ), to consolidate the “moderate camp” in the region. It is a strategic choice for both men in order to be able to secure their political ambitions, especially in terms of securing US cover for these ambitions.

To this end, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi made a number of steps to coopt decision-makers in the US, including a clear Emirati rapprochement with Israel and the Israel lobby in the US, and an implicit Saudi rapprochement with Israel amid increasing signs of secret ties between Riyadh and Tel Aviv.

These steps also included continuing the counter-uprising campaign against the forces of change of the Arab Spring, with a view to shore up the stability of the regional order Saudi Arabia and the UAE are seeking to dominate. This particular bid was broadly supported by the majority of Arab counter-uprising regimes, notably Bahrain and Egypt. The blockade of Qatar can be seen within this context, as it was a backlash against Doha’s support for the forces of change and the Hamas movement, and its deviation from the policies of the Riyadh-led camp on many issues.

However, one of the most dangerous signs involved increasing “rumors” of an official Saudi alignment with the American push to reduce the ceiling of the Arab and Palestinian position on the peace process. Attempting to incite negative perceptions of the Palestinian resistance amid increasing calls for normalization with Israel, which would not have happened without a green light of implicit consent from official Arab entities. If anything, this suggests that KSA is pushing its policies in the region, according to a logic that sees Israel as an ally of the moderate Arab states in the confrontation against Iran and its allies.

## **b. Gulf-Palestinian Relations**

KSA’s political and economic changes in 2016 and 2017 have had a significant impact on its interaction with the Palestine issue and Palestinian political forces, underscoring the decline of Palestine’s status in Riyadh’s regional priorities for some time. In the last quarter of 2017, Palestine returned to the Saudi fore, with Trump’s administration stepping up its peace process efforts, in which Riyadh played an important role. The engagement of other Gulf countries with the Palestine issue was also affected as a result of the Gulf crisis and the preoccupation with the war in Yemen.



Politically, KSA maintained its official support of the PA, to whom Riyadh remained one of the leading regional capitals for coordinating efforts related to the Palestine issue alongside Cairo and Amman. At the same time, the PA was keen to engage with Saudi political initiatives seeking to strengthen its influence and leadership in the region, notably the Arab American Islamic Summit in Riyadh and the Islamic Military Alliance to Combat Terrorism, as well as its support for the Saudi-led Arab coalition efforts in Yemen.

As for KSA-Hamas relations, they became strained again, especially during the second half of 2017. This was evident in the Saudi attitudes towards the movement at the beginning of the Qatari crisis. Thus, the moves towards positive relations were reversed after King Salman bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz took the throne in early 2015. In April 2016, the Head of Hamas’ Arab Relations, Usamah Hamdan, confirmed these developments, saying that Hamas’s relations with the Gulf countries in general and with Saudi Arabia in particular were witnessing remarkable improvement.<sup>208</sup> In December 2014, Hamas’s leader abroad, Maher Salah was arrested by the Saudi authorities for financial reasons linked to raising and transferring funds to Palestine and the resistance without official permission. He was released after a delegation from the movement led by Khalid Mish‘al visited Riyadh in July 2015; however, he was not allowed to leave Saudi territory until December 2016.

During the year following Hamdan’s announcement, Hamas did not express any position that could be construed as provocative for Riyadh. However, after Trump’s election in 2016–2017, and the tough stance he showed at the Riyadh summit in May 2017 against sponsors of “terrorist organizations,” including Hamas, MBS considered taking measures that would secure US support for his political project. On 6/6/2017, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir lashed out at Qatar, saying “Qatar must take several steps, including ending its support for the Palestinian group Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood,” adding, “Nobody wants to hurt Qatar. It has to choose whether it must move in one direction or another direction.”<sup>209</sup> Hamas responded on 7/6/2017, expressing “deep regret and disapproval” at al-Jubeir’s statements, which are “against” Hamas, considering them “alien to the well-known supportive position of Saudi Arabia to

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<sup>208</sup> Quds Press, 27/4/2017.

<sup>209</sup> Reuters, 6/6/2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-qatar-saudi-fm/saudi-minister-says-qatar-must-end-support-for-hamas-muslim-brotherhood-idUSKBN18X2CR> (in English)

the Palestinian cause and the right of Palestinian people to resist...the Palestinian people and the Arab and Islamic nations are shocked by such statements”. The Palestinian group warned that “the Israeli Occupation benefits from such statements by committing more crimes and violations,” saying al-Jubeir’s statements “go against the international laws and the Arab and Islamic stances.” It called upon KSA “to retract these statements which are offensive to the Saudi Kingdom and its positions towards the Palestinian people and their legitimate rights.”<sup>210</sup>

The Saudi newspaper *Okaz* later accused Hamas movement leaders in GS and Qatar of swallowing millions of dollars of aid money from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as well as international humanitarian aid meant to ward off the specter of humanitarian disaster from the people of Gaza. The newspaper claimed that Hamas was using this money “in accordance to Iranian dictates to support terrorism and digging tunnels, leaving the people of Gaza drown in hunger, poverty, disease...while the so-called Hamas government forces them to pay taxes.” The newspaper described Hamas as a “terrorist” group and called it a “double agent of Doha and Tel Aviv.”<sup>211</sup>

However, the countries boycotting Qatar did not include Hamas on the “terror” list they issued on 8/6/2017, despite the media campaign against the movement, and the fact that one of the key reasons they moved to blockade Qatar was Doha’s relationship with, and funding of, the Muslim Brothers (MB) movement and Hamas.<sup>212</sup>

A television interview by the Saudi ambassador to Algeria Sami bin Abdullah al-Saleh, in which he described Hamas as a “terrorist movement,” caused wide controversy in Algeria, with two local parties, the Movement for Social Peace, and National Building Movement, calling on the government to summon him. Hamas spokesperson Fawzi Barhoum called on the Saudi ambassador to retract his statements, saying Hamas is a resistance movement defending the entire Arab nation.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Site of Hamas, Press Release Issued by Hamas Concerning the Statements of Saudi FM, 7/6/2017, <http://hamas.ps/en/post/783/press-release-issued-by-hamas-concerning-the-statements-of-saudi-fm> (in English)

<sup>211</sup> *Okaz* newspaper, Jeddah, 8/6/2017, <http://bit.ly/2tKokhq>

<sup>212</sup> Donia al-Watan electronic newspaper, 11/6/2017, <https://www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/news/2017/06/11/1058942.html>

<sup>213</sup> Aljazeera.net, 12/7/2017, <https://bit.ly/2pd1JWn> (in Arabic)



However, KSA welcomed developments towards Palestinian reconciliation in October 2017. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed the hope that the end of schism and Palestinian unity would “enable the Palestinian brothers to achieve their legitimate rights, in accordance with international resolutions and the Arab Peace Initiative.”<sup>214</sup>

At the financial level, Saudi funding for the PA declined relative to previous years, from \$20 million per month (early 2013) to \$7.7 million (December 2016). At the same time, the regularity of payment of these funds also declined. Previously, Saudi Arabia would consistently transfer its contributions every three months. However, the kingdom stopped sending its contribution for seven months in 2016, waiting until December 2016 to transfer \$61.6 million covering the period between May and late November 2016.<sup>215</sup>

After that, KSA announced the transfer of its next two contributions in March and August 2017, each worth \$30.8 million or an average of \$7.7 million per month.<sup>216</sup> Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia remains the largest Arab contributor to the PA budget, with a total value of about \$244 million from the beginning of 2016 until the end of October 2017. By contrast, none of the other Gulf Arab states granted budgetary support to the PA during that period.<sup>217</sup>

As for UNRWA’s budget, KSA remains the third largest donor after the US and the EU and provided \$148 million directly to the agency in 2016. At the same time, Riyadh gave \$1 million to UNRWA through the King Salman Relief and Humanitarian Center, and together, these funds accounted for 12% of the total grants given to UNRWA.<sup>218</sup>

Concerning Qatari-Palestinian relations, Doha sought to resume its mediating role in Palestinian reconciliation by hosting meetings between Hamas and Fatah delegations in February 2016<sup>219</sup> and June 2016.<sup>220</sup> In addition, the Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh

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<sup>214</sup> Site of Al Arabiya News, 13/10/2017, <http://www.alarabiya.net/>

<sup>215</sup> See Monthly Reports of the Ministry of Finance in the Palestinian Authority 2013–2017, <http://www.pmf.ps/en/41>

<sup>216</sup> *Asharq al-Awsat*, 30/3/2017 and 22/8/2017. (in Arabic)

<sup>217</sup> See Monthly Reports of the Ministry of Finance in the Palestinian Authority 2016 and 2017.

<sup>218</sup> UNRWA, “2016 Pledges to UNRWA’s Programmes (Cash and In-kind) – Overall Donor Ranking,” 31/12/2016, [https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/donor\\_ranking\\_with\\_un\\_agencies\\_overall.pdf](https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/donor_ranking_with_un_agencies_overall.pdf); and Press Release, King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre Contributes US\$ 1 Million for Food Assistance for Palestine Refugees in Syria in First Cooperation Agreement with UNRWA, 7/12/2016, <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/king-salman-humanitarian-aid-and-relief-centre-contributes-us-1-million-food>

<sup>219</sup> WAFA, 8/2/2017.

<sup>220</sup> PIC, 18/6/2016.

Mohammed bin ‘Abdulrahman Al Thani hosted a working lunch in Doha in October 2016, bringing together PA President Mahmud ‘Abbas and the then Hamas Politburo Chief Khalid Mish‘al and his deputy Isma‘il Haniyyah.<sup>221</sup> The meeting was unsuccessful.

Politically, in 2016 and 2017 Doha maintained its relationship with Hamas and remained the only Gulf Arab country to maintain a friendly position to the Palestinian resistance group. In May 2017, Doha hosted a press conference during which Mish‘al launched Hamas’s new political document, causing some controversy in the US. This was evident in a number of opinion pieces in prominent American media outlets,<sup>222</sup> and the bill put forward by US Congress members “to impose sanctions with respect to foreign support for Palestinian terrorism,” specifically after “Hamas has received significant financial and military support from Qatar.”<sup>223</sup> The bill was endorsed by the House Foreign Relations Committee in mid-November 2017.<sup>224</sup>

The bill coincided with the Arab American Islamic Summit in Riyadh, during which US President Donald Trump emphasized the need to work to cut off sources of funding for “terrorist organizations” a category in which Trump included, al-Qaeda, Hizbullah, and Hamas.<sup>225</sup> This took place a few days before KSA, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt imposed a blockade on Doha citing a number of allegations, led by Doha’s support for “terrorism,” as described by those countries.<sup>226</sup>

Doha’s relations with Hamas emerged as a key point of contention with Qatar in the few days that followed the start of the blockade. For example, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir proclaimed that Qatar should end support for Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, as a condition for restoring relations with Doha, adding that Qatar was

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<sup>221</sup> Wafa, 27/10/2016.

<sup>222</sup> See for example, Richard Minitzer, “Why Is Our Ally Qatar Hosting Terrorists Like Hamas?” site of Forbes, 28/4/2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/richardminiter/2017/04/28/why-is-our-ally-qatar-hosting-terrorists-like-hamas/#5d6eb25e21bd>.

<sup>223</sup> 115th Congress, Bill H. R. 2712, Palestinian International Terrorism Support Prevention Act of 2017, site of Congress.gov, 25/5/2017, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/2712/text>

<sup>224</sup> 115th Congress, All Actions, Bill H. R. 2712, Palestinian International Terrorism Support Prevention Act of 2017, site of Congress.gov, 15/11/2017, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/2712/all-actions>

<sup>225</sup> President Trump’s Speech to the Arab Islamic American Summit, Statements and Releases, Foreign Policy, The White House, 21/5/2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-trumps-speech-arab-islamic-american-summit/>

<sup>226</sup> Site of British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 5/6/2017. (in Arabic)



undermining the PA with its support for Hamas.<sup>227</sup> In parallel, the UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash said the presence of Hamas leaders in Doha was “a problem for the region.”<sup>228</sup> The Qatari Ambassador to Washington, Meshaal bin Hamad Al-Thani, responded to these accusations by saying, “We are not financing Hamas. We are working in Gaza on reconstruction efforts, building houses and hospitals in coordination with the Palestinians and Israel.” The ambassador revealed, “We were requested by the Americans to engage with Hamas in the context of the peace process. That doesn’t mean we are...on the same political or ideological path.”<sup>229</sup> Later, the Qatari foreign minister said that Hamas is seen by the Arab countries as a legitimate resistance movement. Despite Hamas being on the US list of terror organizations, it wasn’t designated as such by the GCC, the minister said, expressing his surprise at how ties to Hamas were becoming used as accusations thrown by Arab states. He added that Hamas’s presence in Qatar was for the political representation of the movement, adding that Qatar was tasked by its international partners to mediate in Palestinian reconciliation, which is why Hamas was present in Doha.<sup>230</sup>

Financially, Qatar stopped supporting the PA budget from the beginning of 2015. Its support for UNRWA was limited to \$1 million in 2016.<sup>231</sup> Qatar focused its aid on GS reconstruction projects, through the Qatari National Committee for the Reconstruction of Gaza. The total value of the projects implemented by the committee in Gaza during the last five years amounted to about \$500 million, which included 100 projects in various sectors,<sup>232</sup> according to the Qatari Ambassador Mohammed al-Emadi, who said that the committee would continue to work in the Strip despite the blockade of Qatar.<sup>233</sup> In early 2017, Qatar paid the costs of providing electricity to Gaza for three months, following the

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<sup>227</sup> *Asharq al-Awsat*, 7/6/2017. (in Arabic)

<sup>228</sup> Arabi21 and Donia al-Watan, 7/6/2017; and Sama News Agency, 8/6/2017, <http://samanews.com/ar/GulfNews> newspaper mentioned that Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash stated that “severing ties with Doha is the result of several years of destructive Qatari policies and its support for extremist and terrorist organisations,” adding “It has to stop playing the role of the main promoter of extremism and terrorism in the region.” *Gulf News* newspaper, 8/6/2017, <http://gulfnews.com/news/uae/government/qatar-must-stop-promoting-terror-gargash-1.2040180>

<sup>229</sup> Site of The Daily Beast, 6/6/2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/qatar-ambassador-to-trump-whats-with-the-hate-tweets?ref=topic>

<sup>230</sup> *Al-Sharq*, 10/6/2017.

<sup>231</sup> “2016 Pledges to UNRWA’s Programmes (Cash and In-kind) – Overall Donor Ranking,” op. cit.

<sup>232</sup> Anadolu Agency, 11/7/2017. (in Arabic)

<sup>233</sup> *Al-Sharq*, 23/8/2017.



electricity crisis there, and called for international cooperation to study that crisis and come out with a radical solution.<sup>234</sup> In March 2017, Doha hosted a The Humanitarian and Development Forum for Palestine, organized by Qatar Charity, attended by 75 regional and international humanitarian organizations. The participants then pledged to allocate approximately \$27 million to finance development projects in Palestine.<sup>235</sup>

The UAE's role in brokering a reconciliation between the Muhammad Dahlan faction in Fatah and Hamas in GS highlighted its activities and political relations with the Palestinians. In this context, Hamas leader Salah al-Bardawil said in August 2017 that the UAE had hosted a meeting earlier between leaders from Hamas and Muhammad Dahlan, with a view to discussing the accords reached between the two sides.<sup>236</sup> The UAE also provided financial support to the social reconciliation committee, which handed the families of 14 casualties killed during the clashes of 2006 and 2007 compensation of \$50 thousand each, during a community reconciliation rally held in September 2017.<sup>237</sup>

As for financial support, the UAE did not support the PA budget in 2016 and 2017. In 2016, however, the UAE gave UNRWA \$16.8 million in direct support, and \$13.1 million through the Emirati Red Crescent Authority and humanitarian institutions based in Dubai and Abu Abu Dhabi.<sup>238</sup>

The relations of the other Gulf countries, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain, with Palestine did not see any significant developments in 2016 and 2017, with the exception of an Arab League conference hosted by Kuwait in November 2017, titled "The International Conference on the Palestinian Children Suffering Under Israel's Violation (The Occupying Power) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child" under the patronage of the Kuwaiti Emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah, attended by PA President Mahmud 'Abbas.<sup>239</sup>

None of these countries provided support to the PA budget. But the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development announced in April 2016 the transfer of \$100 million to the

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<sup>234</sup> Aljazeera.net, 16/1/2017. (in Arabic)

<sup>235</sup> Aljazeera.net, 12/3/2017. (in Arabic)

<sup>236</sup> *Alquds*, 10/8/2017; Salah Bardawil stated on 20/1/2015 that a meeting between Hamas and Dahlan took place in UAE two years ago, i.e., it can be concluded that it took place in the beginning of 2013, see Arabi21, 20/1/2015, <http://bit.ly/1CPMnF6>

<sup>237</sup> Site of Felesteen Online, 14/9/2017, <http://www.felesteen.ps/>

<sup>238</sup> "2016 Pledges to UNRWA's Programmes (Cash and In-kind) – Overall Donor Ranking," op. cit.

<sup>239</sup> Aljazeera.net, 12/11/2017. (in Arabic)



Palestinian government in Ramallah, representing the first batch of the Kuwaiti grant for the GS reconstruction after the Israeli war in 2014, whose total value was \$200 million.<sup>240</sup> In 2016, Kuwait provided UNRWA with \$5 million in direct aid and \$3.8 million through government funds, while Oman provided \$768 thousand to the agency.<sup>241</sup>

### **c. Position on the Peace Process**

The Gulf Arab states continued to reiterate their official position on the Arab Peace Initiative as the only way to implement a peaceful settlement with Israel, as stated in particular by the Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir. On the sidelines of the Paris Conference in June 2016, the top Saudi diplomat said the basis of any peace plan remained the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, adding that the initiative could be amended as it already contained all the elements required to achieve a final settlement.<sup>242</sup>

Although no official position contradicting this has been issued, the last few months of 2017 saw increasing talk of US-Saudi coordination on the so-called “Deal of the Century,” the details of which remain unclear at the time of writing. This led to a lot of speculation about the substance of the deal, and of the talks held between ‘Abbas and Saudi Crown Prince MBS, after the Palestinian leader was invited suddenly to Riyadh in November 2017.<sup>243</sup>

KSA condemned Trump’s decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem, however, the Saudi interaction with the issue was weak with disproportionate media coverage. It was noted that the Friday sermon of Mecca’s Imam, following the US decision, did not mention the decision, and instead focused on “dutifulness to parents.”<sup>244</sup>

### **d. Position Towards Israel**

The years 2016 and 2017 carried many indicators and statements suggesting a convergence between a number of Gulf countries, especially the UAE, KSA and Bahrain, with Israel. While the reports related to the UAE and Bahrain contained overt and direct signs of this, those related to KSA came mostly from either Israeli or American sources.

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<sup>240</sup> *Al-Seyassah* newspaper, Kuwait, 14/4/2016.

<sup>241</sup> “2016 Pledges to UNRWA’s Programmes (Cash and In-kind) – Overall Donor Ranking,” op. cit.

<sup>242</sup> *Asharq al-Awsat*, 4/6/2016. (in Arabic)

<sup>243</sup> See Anne Barnard, David M. Halbfinger and Peter Baker, “Talk of a Peace Plan That Snubs Palestinians Roils Middle East,” *The New York Times*, 3/12/2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/03/world/middleeast/palestinian-saudi-peace-plan.html>

<sup>244</sup> Reuters, 7/12/2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-israel-saudi-capital/saudi-arabia-condemns-trump-decision-to-recognize-jerusalem-as-capital-of-israel-idUSKBN1E103Y> (in English)

This indicates that Saudi Arabia is still at least reluctant to make such a rapprochement, with Israeli and American leaks meant to encourage or push it forward.

The most prominent Saudi moves towards Israel took place during the deal to transfer the islands of Tiran and Sanafir from Egypt to KSA. Correspondence between Egypt and Israel revealed that Riyadh pledged to maintain Israel's freedom of navigation in the Strait of Tiran, a move that was welcomed by Israel and marked the first official Saudi commitment to Tel Aviv.<sup>245</sup>

A key overt step highlighting Saudi-Israeli convergence were remarks by Saudi former intelligence officer General Anwar Eshki calling for normalizing ties with Israel,<sup>246</sup> which he had visited at an earlier time and met with Foreign Ministry Director-General Dore Gold.<sup>247</sup> However, Eshki was keen to say his visit was a personal initiative, while the Saudi foreign minister said it did not reflect the official position of the kingdom.<sup>248</sup> Moreover, former Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni Tweeted a picture of herself and Prince Turki al-Faisal at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, highlighting the same issue again.<sup>249</sup>

In addition, the apparent convergence between Saudi Arabia and Israel focused mainly on Iran and curbing its expanding influence in the region. Signs of this rapprochement initially came with Israel stating that its relations with Arab countries in general were improving as a result of the convergence of their interests, without specifically mentioning Saudi Arabia. However, following the election of Donald Trump, the Arab-American Islamic Summit in Riyadh and the outbreak of the Qatari crisis, there has been increased speculation about Saudi-Israeli relations.

In this context, US President Donald Trump flew directly from Riyadh to Tel Aviv following that summit. After his meeting with Netanyahu in Jerusalem, he said: "I just left Saudi Arabia... We had an amazing two days and their feeling towards Israel is really very positive," adding, "I could see a much deeper path to friendship with Israel, and I think a lot of that's spurred on whatever it takes, but a lot of it's spurred on by what's

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<sup>245</sup> Quds Press, 17/4/2017.

<sup>246</sup> See *The New Arab*, 28/6/2017. (in Arabic)

<sup>247</sup> *The Times of Israel*, 24/7/2016, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-israel-ex-saudi-general-says-palestinian-state-would-curb-iran-aggression/>

<sup>248</sup> *Al-Hayat*, 27/6/2016.

<sup>249</sup> @Tzipi\_Livni, site of Twitter, 20/1/2017, [https://twitter.com/Tzipi\\_Livni/status/822439551864078336](https://twitter.com/Tzipi_Livni/status/822439551864078336)



happening with Iran.” For his part, Netanyahu said, “I hope one day an Israeli prime minister will be able to fly from Tel Aviv to Riyadh.”<sup>250</sup>

Later, Israeli Minister of Communications Ayoob Kara pointed out that “There’s a very good chance that we will soon have relations with what we call the Saudi coalition.” In an interview he told Bloomberg that “through U.S. mediators, Israel and Saudi Arabia have discussed a variety of potential actions that would show their intention to develop open diplomatic relations once the conflict with the Palestinians is resolved.” Kara also said that Israel was trying to persuade KSA to allow it to send special Hajj pilgrimage flights from Israel.<sup>251</sup> Further remarks quoted by AFP, and apparently made by an Israeli official, claimed that MBS had visited Tel Aviv in September 2017, were the culmination of those reports on the development of Saudi-Israeli relations. However, the Saudi Foreign Ministry denied those reports, saying the kingdom has always been clear in its movements and contacts and has nothing to hide in this regard.<sup>252</sup>

For Abu Dhabi, international organizations and events hosted by the UAE constituted the most public channels for Israeli officials to visit the country. The Israeli Energy and Water Minister Yuval Steinitz visited Abu Dhabi to participate in an energy conference in January 2016, according to Israel’s Channel 2, which broadcasted pictures of the minister in the Emirati capital.<sup>253</sup> In November 2016, the Israeli Ambassador to the United Nations also participated in an international conference in Dubai, as Chairman of the Legal Committee of the United Nations, according to a report by the same channel.<sup>254</sup> It should be noted that in November 2015 Israel announced the opening of an official diplomatic office in the United Nations Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) in Abu Dhabi, but the UAE Foreign Ministry said that this would not affect its official position or its

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<sup>250</sup> PM Netanyahu meets with US President Donald Trump, Press Room, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 22/5/2017, <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2017/Pages/PM-Netanyahu-meets-with-US-President-Donald-Trump-22-May-2017.aspx>; @netanyahu, Twitter, 22/5/2017, <https://twitter.com/netanyahu/status/866627390268735489>

<sup>251</sup> Bloomberg Business, 20/6/2017 and 12/7/2017.

<sup>252</sup> The New Arab, 23/10/2017. (in Arabic)

<sup>253</sup> i24 news, 18/1/2016, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/middle-east/99651-160118-israeli-minister-yuval-steinitz-visited-abu-dhabi-report>

<sup>254</sup> Reuters, 14/6/2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-un/israel-elected-to-head-permanent-u-n-committee-for-first-time-idUSKCN0YZ2FT> (in English)

relations with Israel, as the functions of missions-based IRENA was limited to the affairs of the agency.<sup>255</sup>

The other indication of an Emirati-Israeli rapprochement was revealed through the leaked emails belonging to the UAE ambassador to Washington, Yousef al-Otaiba. One of these emails included correspondence between al-Otaiba and Israeli General Uzi Rubin, the “father” of Israel’s Iron Dome missile defense system during the war on GS. Other emails revealed a close relationship between the UAE and the pro-Israel, neoconservative think tank Foundation for Defense of Democracies, which yields considerable influence over the Trump administration.<sup>256</sup>

Bahrain’s positive attitude toward Israel took a more overt form. In a tweet, Foreign Minister Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa mourned former Israeli president Shimon Peres, writing, “Rest in peace President Shimon Peres, a man of war and a man of the still elusive peace in the Middle East.”<sup>257</sup> Bahrain’s King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa held meetings with Jewish figures close to Israel on more than one occasion, under the guise of fostering interfaith relations. In March 2016, King Hamad received the Jewish Rabbi Marc Schneier, a prominent interfaith activist and president of Foundation for Ethnic Understanding based in New York at his palace in Manama. *The Jerusalem Post* quoted the rabbi as saying that he had met King Hamad on two previous occasions and that the king had expressed his conviction that Israel “had the power to defend not only itself but the voices of moderation and the moderate Arab states [in] the region.” “It is just a matter of time before some Arab countries begin opening diplomatic ties with Israel,” he added.<sup>258</sup>

In September 2017, the King of Bahrain launched a Declaration of Worldwide Religious Tolerance from the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, in an event attended by his son, Prince Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa, with the Bahrain National Orchestra playing the Israeli national anthem there. Rabbis Abraham Cooper and Marvin

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<sup>255</sup> *The New York Times*, 27/11/2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/28/world/middleeast/israel-to-open-diplomatic-office-in-united-arab-emirates.html>; and CNN Arabic, 27/11/2015.

<sup>256</sup> Exclusive: UAE Sought Gaza War Assessment From ‘Father’ of Israel’s Iron Dome, MEE, 16/8/2017, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/exclusive-uae-pursued-talks-father-israels-iron-dome-system-425899134>; and Hacked Emails Show Top UAE Diplomat Coordinating With Pro-Israel Think Tank Against Iran, site of The Intercept, 3/6/2017, <https://theintercept.com/2017/06/03/hacked-emails-show-top-uae-diplomat-coordinating-with-pro-israel-neocon-think-tank-against-iran/>

<sup>257</sup> @khalidalkhalifa, Twitter, 29/9/2016, <https://twitter.com/khalidalkhalifa/status/781329357562404864>

<sup>258</sup> *The Jerusalem Post*, 3/3/2016.



Hier, who preside over the Center, said the King of Bahrain had denounced the Arab boycott of Israel and said his subjects are free to visit Israel during their visit to Manama earlier in 2017.<sup>259</sup>

In December 2017, a delegation of 24 members from the Bahrain group “This is Bahrain” made a four-day visit to Israel. The visit was met with strong condemnation in the Arab and Muslim worlds for attempting to normalize Israel’s occupation. The visit coincided with Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. According to Israel’s Channel 2, the Bahraini delegation met with Israeli government officials. The Bahraini delegation toured the occupied city of Jerusalem. According to Channel 2, the Bahraini delegation, which included both Shia and Sunni figures, came with instructions from the King of Bahrain, who sent a message of tolerance to Israeli officials to promote interreligious dialogue. Channel 2 said “The King of Bahrain will allow Israelis to enter his country from now on and repair all synagogues in Bahrain.”<sup>260</sup> The Bahrain News Agency reported that the delegation from “This is Bahrain” which visited Israel did not represent any official body in Bahrain, and made the visit on its own initiative.<sup>261</sup> The visit was met with a wave of popular anger among Bahrainis. A number of Bahraini activists launched a hashtag #Bahrain\_Rejects\_Normalization to protest the visit.<sup>262</sup>

The crisis with Qatar and the decision of the three Gulf countries mentioned above to boycott it were an opportunity for Israel to reaffirm shared interests with these countries. Shortly after the blockade, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman said that cutting ties with Qatar opened many possibilities in the war on “terror”, and stressed that his country was open to cooperating with the blockading countries.<sup>263</sup> The former Israeli ambassador to Washington, Michael Oren, commented on these developments by tweeting, “New line drawn in the Middle Eastern sand. No longer Israel against Arabs but Israel and Arabs against Qatar-financed terror.”<sup>264</sup>

In contrast to all these signs of convergence between a number of Gulf States with Israel, the President of the National Assembly of Kuwait Marzouq al-Ghanim, during a conference of the Inter-Parliamentary Union in Russia, attacked the Israeli delegation and

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<sup>259</sup> *The Jerusalem Post*, 17/9/2017.

<sup>260</sup> *Arabs 48*, 9/12/2017, <http://bit.ly/2p7ocDU>

<sup>261</sup> *i24 News*, 11/12/2017, <http://bit.ly/2Do5uMG>

<sup>262</sup> *Arabs 48*, 10/12/2017, <http://bit.ly/2Hwz7hw>

<sup>263</sup> *The Jerusalem Post*, 5/6/2017.

<sup>264</sup> @DrMichaelOren, Twitter, 5/6/2017, <https://twitter.com/DrMichaelOren/status/871646906753134592>

called them representatives of the occupation, and killers of children and perpetrators of war crimes and terrorism. Ghanim demanded they leave the hall,<sup>265</sup> forcing the Israelis to do so, amid applause from the participants.

## 6. Other Arab Countries

The remaining Arab countries continued to be preoccupied with their internal crises in 2016 and 2017, most obviously Iraq, Yemen, and Libya, which have also become arenas for regional conflicts like Syria.

The referendum on the independence of the Kurdistan region in Iraq was one of the most prominent issues affecting the deep Arab strategic environment of the Palestine issue, with Israel being almost the only country in the world backing the referendum. Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu expressed support for the "legitimate efforts of the Kurdish people to achieve their own state."<sup>266</sup> The Israeli Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked had previously called on Israel to declare explicitly its support for the aspirations of the Kurdish people to self-rule in northern Syria and Iraq, and said that the Kurdish people were a partner of the Israeli people.<sup>267</sup> According to Clipperdata, a US company tracking global oil shipments, about half of the crude oil extracted from Kurdish oil fields in 2017 went to Israel, which was the top importer of crude oil from the Kurdistan region in Iraq.<sup>268</sup>

For its part, Sudan was preoccupied with its internal affairs especially lifting of US sanctions on Khartoum. Interestingly, the relationship with Israel was one of the issues addressed in international deliberations in Sudan. But despite calls for normalizing ties with Tel Aviv, the official Sudanese position remained opposed to any such move and affirmed Sudan's continued support for the Palestine issue.

As for the countries of the Arab Maghreb, they continued their official engagement with the Palestine issue primarily through the Arab League. In 2016 and 2017, their official positions on the issue did not see any prominent developments or shifts.

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<sup>265</sup> Aljazeera.net, 18/10/2017. (in Arabic)

<sup>266</sup> *Haaretz*, 13/9/2017, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/netanyahu-supports-establishment-of-independent-kurdistan-1.5450316> (in English)

<sup>267</sup> *The Jerusalem Post*, 20/1/2016.

<sup>268</sup> i24 News, 9/10/2017, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/middle-east/157303-171009-israel-and-iraqi-kurdistan-the-oil-connection>



The most prominent events related to the Palestinian issue in the Arab Maghreb countries included the assassination of Tunisian pilot and engineer Mohamed Zouari in Tunisia. Zouari was a member of the Ezzedeen al-Qassam Brigades (the armed wing of Hamas), who supervised a project to produce drones for the resistance dubbed “Ababil.” Hamas accused the Israeli Mossad of carrying out the assassination on 15/12/2016.<sup>269</sup> The assassination was met with a strong official and popular response in Tunisia. The Tunisian Interior Ministry hinted at Mossad’s involvement without explicitly naming it, saying a foreign intelligence agency may have been involved. The Tunisian parliament convened an emergency session to question the interior and foreign ministers regarding the assassination. The prime minister dismissed the governor of Sfax and two security officials in the state, where the assassination took place.<sup>270</sup>

In Algeria, official and popular engagement with the Palestine issue continued along the same broad lines. Algeria maintained its political and financial support for the Palestinians, and its position on relations with Israel remained unchanged. Concerning Algerian-Palestinian relations, one of the highlights was the official visit by Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah to Algeria for three days in April 2016, at the official invitation of Algerian Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal, where he met Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and a number of Algerian officials.<sup>271</sup> In addition to continuing political support for the PA, Algeria remained the only Arab country alongside KSA providing financial support to PA budget through the mechanism approved by the Arab League. However, the value of this support fell by half compared to previous years, from \$52.5 million in 2015 to \$26.7 million in 2016, then in 2017 it returned to \$52 million.<sup>272</sup> At the same time, Algeria maintained good relations with Hamas, and the Algerian government’s formal approval of the opening of a representative office for Hamas at the end of September 2016 was the most significant development in this context.<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Site of Ezzedeen al-Qassam Brigades, 17/12/2016. (in Arabic)

<sup>270</sup> Aljazeera.net, 20 and 23/12/2016. (in Arabic)

<sup>271</sup> Site of Palestine Cabinet, 19/4/2016. (in Arabic)

<sup>272</sup> See Monthly Reports of the Ministry of Finance in the Palestinian Authority 2014–2017.

<sup>273</sup> Arabi21, 29/8/2016.



As for Morocco, its engagement with the Palestine issue remained formal, with a focus on the issue of Jerusalem, as the Moroccan King Mohammed VI chairs a special committee formed by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The king's positions on the developments witnessed in the holy city and *al-Aqsa* Mosque in 2016 and 2017 were through correspondences and phone calls. Interestingly, the king did not attend the emergency summit held by the OIC in Istanbul in December 2017 to discuss responses to Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. In addition, Morocco's representation at the summit was weak and was even below the ministerial level.<sup>274</sup> Rabat's official relations with the Palestinians was confined to the PA and its representatives. Concerning relations with Israel, there was no significant change in the Moroccan position, as Rabat continued to maintain a fine thread of diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv. According to official Israeli data, a limited economic relationship continued between the two sides (which will be discussed later), despite Morocco's denial of any official trade between the two countries, and stressing its goods were imported to Israel through intermediate channels.<sup>275</sup> In September 2016, Morocco sent diplomats to attend the funeral of Israel's late prime minister Shimon Peres, with the king's advisor André Azoulay,<sup>276</sup> representing the Moroccan monarch. In June 2017, the Moroccan king refused to attend a West African summit in Liberia after Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu was invited to attend,<sup>277</sup> indicating Morocco is still not ready to develop its political relations with Israel.

### ***Third: Developments Concerning Normalization***

In 2016 and 2017, there were unprecedented indicators suggesting an increase of official Arab normalization with Israel. However, the majority of these indicators remained in the realm of undeclared secret relations, with the Arab countries in question keen to deny any official change in their positions on Israel. On the other hand, the US and Israel tended to exaggerate the development of relations between Tel Aviv and Arab "moderate" countries, in order to promote normalization as something inevitable and push these countries to make further steps in that direction. However, this secrecy indicates that the barrier that

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<sup>274</sup> Site of Hesperess, 14/12/2017.

<sup>275</sup> *Alrai*, 19/6/2016.

<sup>276</sup> *Raialyoum*, 30/9/2016.

<sup>277</sup> See *Raialyoum*, 2/6/2017.



prevents Arab regimes from going all the way in normalizing ties or even publicizing existing contacts with Israel has not yet been breached, the Palestine issue continuing to be a knot in the regional equation that is hard to bypass.

Indeed, there were many Israeli statements claiming Tel Aviv had established secret relations with Arab countries, the most prominent of which were remarks by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. First, Netanyahu claimed that the “the Mossad has a role that is becoming increasingly central...in forging links with many more countries, including in the Arab world.”<sup>278</sup> Netanyahu also claimed there “has been a revolution in our relations with important Arab states,” as a result of the convergence of their views “against the rising threat of Islamic extremism as embodied in the Islamic State movement.”<sup>279</sup> Netanyahu later told Israeli reporters that he had direct personal relations with a number of leaders of Arab countries that do not have diplomatic relations with Israel.<sup>280</sup> At the UN General Assembly, Netanyahu claimed that the biggest change in attitudes towards Israel is taking place elsewhere: “It’s taking place in the Arab world...many other states in the region recognize that Israel is not their enemy,” adding, “I believe that in the years ahead we will work together to achieve these goals, work together openly.”<sup>281</sup> While opening the winter session of the Knesset he said the Arab world will drag the Palestinians to peace and not vice versa.<sup>282</sup>

The Foreign Ministry Director-General Dore Gold said there was a dramatic change underway in the Arab world as it had become open to secret relations with Israel, describing those relations as “warm water under the ice”.<sup>283</sup>

Isaac Herzog of the Israeli Labor Party also praised what he described as the “bold and courageous leadership” of a number of “moderate” Arab countries that had shown interest in diplomatic cooperation with Israel and finding a path to a regional peace. He singled out Egypt, Jordan, KSA, UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Kuwait.<sup>284</sup> This was

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<sup>278</sup> PM Netanyahu's Remarks at the Start of the Weekly Cabinet Meeting, Press Releases, Prime Minister's Office, 10/1/2016, <http://www.pmo.gov.il/English/MediaCenter/Spokesman/Pages/spokestart100116.aspx>

<sup>279</sup> *Haaretz*, 13/7/2016, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/netanyahu-revolution-in-our-relations-with-arab-states-1.5409845> (in English)

<sup>280</sup> *Arabi21*, 25/8/2016.

<sup>281</sup> *Haaretz*, 22/9/2016, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahus-full-remarks-at-un-general-assembly/> (in English)

<sup>282</sup> *Aljazeera.net*, 1/11/2016. (in Arabic)

<sup>283</sup> *Raialyoum*, 20/1/2016 and 15/6/2016.

<sup>284</sup> *The Jerusalem Post*, 16/6/2016, <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/The-engine-has-derailed-457025>

consistent with references made by former Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni who said “moderate” Arab countries were pursuing an alliance with Israel to confront the axis of Iran and Hizbullah, but that they first wanted Israel to take measures for a breakthrough in the conflict with the Palestinians.<sup>285</sup>

Israeli Minister of Intelligence and Communications Yisrael Katz proposed linking its freight railway network with Jordan,<sup>286</sup> although the Jordanian side denied the existence of joint projects of this kind between the two countries.<sup>287</sup>

The talk about Arab normalization with Israel was not confined to the “moderate” Arab countries. In January 2016, the Sudanese Foreign Minister hinted at the possibility of normalizing ties with Israel.<sup>288</sup> Later, he indicated that during internal dialogue in his country, where 100 parties and political movements participated, some entities expressed a desire to normalize these ties.<sup>289</sup>

The head of the Islamic Center Party in Sudan, Yusuf al-Kouda, called on his country to normalize ties with Israel without conditions.<sup>290</sup> Sudanese Investment Minister Mubarak al-Fadhil al-Mahdi said later that he supported the idea of establishing relations between his country and Israel, adding that the Palestinian issue had delayed the [development of the] Arab world.<sup>291</sup> The Sudanese government distanced itself from the remarks of al-Mahdi, claiming that it was a personal opinion that did not reflect the official position of the government or the country.<sup>292</sup>

These reports prompted a warning from the PA concerning the impact on the path of the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations. In his speech at the Arab summit in Nouakchott, President Mahmud ‘Abbas warned against the notion of “regional cooperation or security,” which aims to establish security coordination between Israel and the Arab states and normalization of relations, before achieving the goal of ending the Israeli occupation of Palestinian and Arab territories.<sup>293</sup> ‘Abbas also stressed, on another

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<sup>285</sup> *Alquds*, 23/7/2016.

<sup>286</sup> *The World Street Journal*, 22/6/2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/israel-builds-railway-in-hope-of-boosting-commerce-with-arab-neighbors-1466614190>

<sup>287</sup> *Alghad*, 18/7/2016.

<sup>288</sup> *The New Arab*, 15/1/2016. (in Arabic)

<sup>289</sup> *Aljazeera.net*, 21/3/2016. (in Arabic)

<sup>290</sup> *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 7/2/2017.

<sup>291</sup> *Arabs* 48, 22/8/2017.

<sup>292</sup> *Al-Hayat*, 24/8/2017.

<sup>293</sup> *Al-Ayyam*, 26/7/2016.



occasion, his absolute opposition to Arab normalization with Israel as long as it contradicts the Arab Peace Initiative, stressing his objection to any proposed economic and security solutions before political solutions.<sup>294</sup>

Economically, Israeli data has shown that the total trade between Israel and its three leading Arab economic partners (Egypt, Jordan and Morocco) declined by 27.8% between 2015 and 2017 (see Table 1/6). This contrasted with the previous trend of trade growth between these countries and Israel in 2012–2015.<sup>295</sup>

**Table 1/6: The Volume of Trade Between Israel and Some Arab Countries  
2014–2017 (\$million)<sup>296</sup>**

Country	2014	2015	2016	2017
<b>Egypt</b>	206.2	166.7	136.1	150.4
<b>Jordan</b>	485.9	509.2	357	340.1
<b>Morocco</b>	17.2	38.6	56.0	37.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>709.3</b>	<b>714.5</b>	<b>549.1</b>	<b>516</b>

Although trade with Jordan saw the sharpest decline between 2015 and 2017, dropping from \$509.2 million to \$340.1 million (–33.2% decrease), Jordan remains the top Arab trading partner of Israel, accounting for 66% of the total trade volume of the three Arab countries, with the trade balance continuing to favor Amman. The value of Israeli exports to Jordan between 2015 and 2017 decreased from \$98.7 million to \$58 million (–41.2% decrease), while the value of Israeli imports from Jordan decreased from \$410.5 million to \$282.1 million (–31.3%) in the same period (see Table 2/6).

Egypt’s trade with Israel declined from \$166.7 million in 2015 to \$150.4 million in 2017 (–9.8% decrease). Israeli exports to Egypt declined from \$112.1 million to \$85.1 million (–24.1%), but Israeli imports from Egypt increased from \$54.6 million to \$ 65.3 million (a growth of 19.6%) (see Table 1/6 and 2/6).

The volume of trade between Morocco and Israel decreased by –3.9% during that period, from \$38.6 million in 2015 to \$37.1 million in 2017. Israeli exports to Morocco

<sup>294</sup> *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 19/9/2017.

<sup>295</sup> Hasan Ibhais, “The Palestinian Issue and the Arab World,” in Mohsen Mohammad Saleh (ed.), *The Palestinian Strategic Report 2014–2015* (Beirut: Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations, 2016), p. 188.

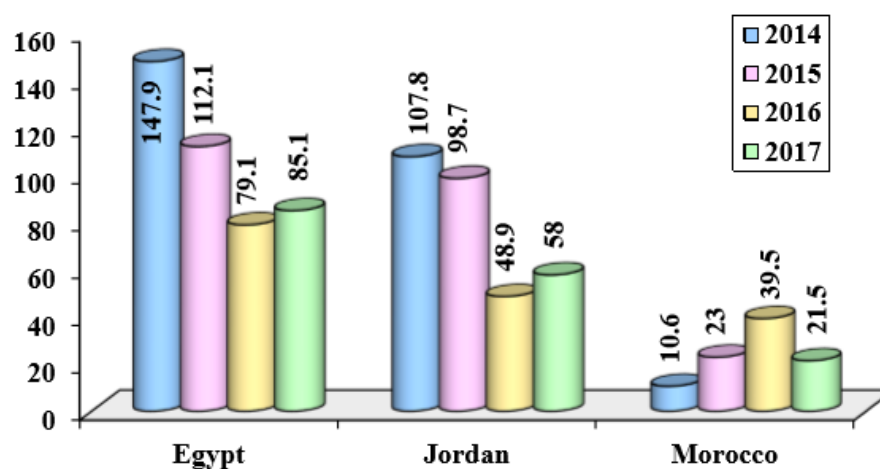
<sup>296</sup> Israel Trade Countries – October 2017, site of Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), <http://cbs.gov.il/publications17/yarhon1017/pdf/h8.pdf>

grew by –6.5%, from \$23 million in 2015 to \$21.5 million in 2017. The value of Israeli imports from Morocco did not change in the two years (see Table 1/6 and 2/6).

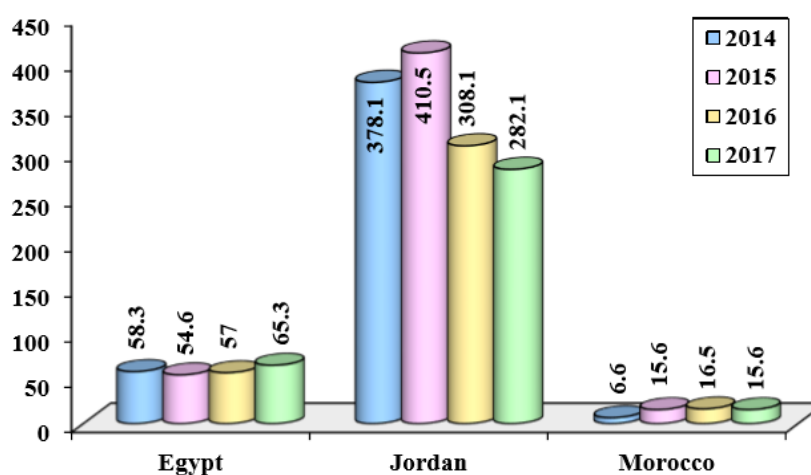
**Table 2/6: Israeli Exports and Imports to/ from Some Arab Countries 2014–2017 (\$ million)<sup>297</sup>**

Country	Israeli exports to				Israeli imports from			
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2014	2015	2016	2017
<b>Egypt</b>	147.9	112.1	79.1	85.1	58.3	54.6	57	65.3
<b>Jordan</b>	107.8	98.7	48.9	58	378.1	410.5	308.1	282.1
<b>Morocco</b>	10.6	23	39.5	21.5	6.6	15.6	16.5	15.6

**Israeli Exports to Some Arab Countries 2014–2017 (\$ million)**



**Israeli Imports from Some Arab Countries 2014–2017 (\$ million)**



<sup>297</sup> Ibid.



However, if Israeli gas exports to Jordan and Egypt start in the next two years, pursuant to the deals mentioned earlier, the value of trade will see a significant increase to the benefit of Israel.

#### ***Fourth: The Arab Public Position and its Directions***

The multiple and successive crises in the Arab world continued to strain the ability of the Arab street to keep abreast of the events surrounding it. Events limited popular engagement with the Palestine issue in a large number of Arab countries, especially those that were experiencing internal crises that preoccupy their people and drain their energy and time for popular movements. This was especially true after the crackdown and banishment of the forces of change from the political landscape, and the declining influence of popular attitudes on decision-makers with the return of repressive tactics against protests and popular action.

The interplay of internal crises with regional conflicts has also put the Palestine issue towards the bottom of the Arab agenda, publically and officially. This is in addition to the rift created by those crises and conflicts in each country, and in the region in general.

However, this does not in any way prevent the Palestine issue from returning to the fore for the Arab public during pivotal events. The Lions' Gate uprising in July 2017, proved that Jerusalem and the *al-Aqsa* Mosque continue to occupy a prominent position in the Arab popular conscience and consensus.

It should be noted, however, that most countries surrounding Palestine witnessed low levels of popular interaction with these events compared to previous episodes. This can be attributed to, due to wars and internal crises, and unrest and political repression. Yet Jordan remains the most prominent exception among these countries. In 2016 and 2017, Jordan maintained an advanced and steadily escalating engagement with Palestinian developments, especially in Jerusalem, with which Jordanians are unanimous in their solidarity given the city's religious status, its Arab and Islamic identity, and its status as the capital of Palestine.

The incident at the Israeli Embassy and the killing of the two Jordanians in Jerusalem increased the level of Jordanian popular engagement with the events taking place west of the Jordan River. The two Jordanians killed in Palestine, as well as campaigns of solidarity to rebuild Jerusalemites' homes in the Old City organized by the Jordanian

Engineers Association were a strong indication of Jordan's popular engagement with Palestine. However, Jordan's engagement has been declining tangibly year on year.

At the same time, Arab Maghreb countries have maintained their advanced levels of popular support for the Palestine issue. One of the most prominent signs was the assassination of Tunisian Engineer Mohamed Zouari in Tunisia, who was involved in the Palestinian resistance and supervised the development of drones for Hamas. The popular Tunisian positions following his assassination and the public participation at his funeral were an indication of Tunisians' support for Palestine.<sup>298</sup>

The results of the Arab Index for 2016 measuring the change in the Arab popular attitudes towards the Palestine issue support the previous conclusions regarding the impact of the Arab crises, regional conflicts, and the counter-revolutionary wave on these attitudes. The Index showed that those who agreed that the Palestine issue was a cause for all Arabs decreased from 84% in 2011 and 2012/2013 to 75% in the 2016 index. Those who saw that the issue belonged to the Palestinians alone rose from 9% in 2011 to 17% in 2016.<sup>299</sup> At the same time, the popular Arab position towards Israel has not changed. Attitudes opposed to the three "peace agreements" signed between Israel and Egypt, Jordan and the PA remained unchanged. The 2016 poll showed that 56–58% were opposed to those agreements, compared to 54–57% in 2011. The respondents who oppose the recognition of Israel by their countries, remained high at the same level, reaching 84% in the 2011 index and 86% in the 2016 index.<sup>300</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Since the rise of the peace process, the Arab region has witnessed a conflict between two central axes vying to define the conflict: the first between the forces of resistance and those of moderation, and the second between the forces of change and counter-revolutionary ones. While the second logic has governed the positions of political forces over the past several years (2011–2017), the Arab landscape seems to be re-aligning according to the first

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<sup>298</sup> See *The New Arab*, 19 and 24/12/2017. (in Arabic)

<sup>299</sup> Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies (ACRPS), *Mashru' Qiyas al-Ra'i al-'Am al-'Arabi: al-Mu'shshir al-'Arabi 2016* (The Arab Opinion Index Program: 2016 Arab Opinion Index) (Doha: ACRPS, 2016), pp. 321–324.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 325–332.



one, similar to the period before the Arab Spring. The counter-revolutionary forces were able to settle the outcome of the second conflict to their favor, at least for the time being.

The conflict between the forces of change and counter-revolutionary forces helped improve the strategic environment of Israel in the previous period, and the loss of the forces of change caused a decline in popular support for the Palestine issue in a majority of Arab countries. The regimes relying on foreign powers regained their primacy. However, the current re-alignment allows the Palestine issue to regain some of its lost ground, provided that the Palestinians take the initiative necessary to keep their cause near the top of the list of Arab priorities.

Based on the above, the most prominent threat to the Palestine issue at the present time would be for the regional confrontation between the Arab “moderate” countries and Iran to replace the confrontation with Israel, becoming considered the central conflict in the region. This threatens to lead to the “normalization” of the existence of Israel, and represents an existential threat to the resistance forces and the whole cause.

If the Palestinian resistance and the forces of the axis of resistance restored their relations, based on common ground and the importance attached to the question of Palestine, it could provide a protective umbrella against attempts to liquidate the resistance.

But the most prominent opportunities offered by the current landscape are that Jerusalem and the *al-Aqsa* Mosque are now the focus of Israel’s political program as well as US support for Israel. This makes normalization with Israel and building an alliance with moderate Arab states a high-cost endeavor, taking into account the latter’s public opinion. Also, direct damage could be caused to the political interests of a number of these countries, especially Jordan, whose relationship with Israel has witnessed consistent tension against the backdrop of this issue, and for the Palestinian pro-peace camp itself.



التقرير الاستراتيجي الفلسطيني

2017-2016

الفصل السادس

القضية الفلسطينية والعالم العربي

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