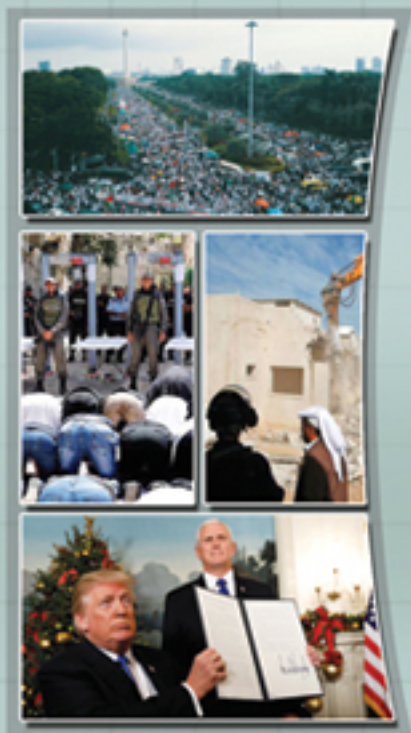


The Palestine Strategic Report 2016 – 2017



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Chapter One

The Internal Palestinian Scene

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Introduction

The years 2016 and 2017 carried over the internal Palestinian crises into 2018 without significant progress, save for the arrangements for handing over the administration of the Gaza Strip (GS) to the government in Ramallah in late 2017, amid receding hopes in a major breakthrough in the Palestinian reconciliation dossier.

The Palestinian representative institutions continued to be in crisis when it came to their ability to represent the people and their aspirations, and they continued to lack effective leadership and executive frameworks, suffering from policy and priority confusion. The current Palestinian leadership bore a major responsibility for obstructing the work of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), failing to actualize the Unified Leadership Framework and preventing the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) from convening.

At the same time, the Palestinian national project suffered from crises linked to the contradictory paths of the peace process and resistance, the identification of the priorities of the Palestinian national project, and the management of the conflict with Israel. The Palestinian national project has also been affected by the failure to draft a unified political program compatible with the current stage, and by its inability to assimilate and operationalize the capacities and capabilities of the Palestinian people at home as well as in the Diaspora.

First: Palestinian Representative Institutions

The problems found in Palestinian representative institutions is one of the chronic problems of the modern Palestinian experience. It reflects the general weakness of democratic and consultative culture in the contemporary Arab landscape. The key problem is the “encroachment” of the executive leadership frameworks on the jurisdictions of the legislative frameworks, and the dominance of one Palestinian faction on political life throughout the past five decades. Although the Palestinians bear the main responsibility for these problems, the Arab and international landscape, and the circumstances of the occupation and the

dispossession of the Palestinian people, have all exacerbated internal Palestinian problems, and have weakened the Palestinians' ability to address the flaws in the structure of Palestinian institutions.

Thus, 2016–2017 passed with the Palestinian National Council (PNC) still in paralysis. Additionally, the Palestinian Central Council (PCC) did not convene in this period, and the PLC continued to be obstructed. The PLO leadership, which is also the leadership of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the Fatah movement, continued to dominate all real power without the legislative branch being able to hold it accountable and monitor its work, and impose the popular will on its agenda. For this, not only have the Palestinian people and their national project pay the price, but Fatah itself, as it has become burdened by challenges and problems.

The PLO Executive Committee continued to hold meetings in 2016 and 2017, and its decisions did not deviate from previous routine ones pursuant to its adherence to the peace process, the two-state solution, and “international legitimacy.” The committee’s general policy concerning the work of the PA and the relationship with Hamas is very similar to that of Fatah. There’s no mention of the need to activate the PLC, nor any criticism of the sanctions imposed by PA President Mahmud ‘Abbas on the GS. Although the committee acknowledged the weakness of the PLO’s institutions, it warned against convening the Popular Conference for Palestinians Abroad in Istanbul, away from PLO oversight, despite the fact that the PLO had failed to undertake the bare minimum of its responsibilities and had for a long time turned its back on Palestinians in the Diaspora. Interestingly, on 4/5/2016 the Executive Committee decided to “immediately begin” the implementation of PCC decisions, especially in relation to defining political, economic, and security ties with Israel,¹ more than a year after it had convened on 4–5/3/2015 and decided to “end” security coordination with Israel. The PA only partially implemented the decision in the summer of 2017, but even then, it eventually backed down, reflecting the weak influence and inefficacy of the Executive Committee, PCC, and the PNC.

In 2016 and 2017, the PNC did not convene at all. However, the preparatory committee held a meeting in the Palestinian embassy in Beirut on 10–11/1/2017, headed by the president of the PNC Salim al-Za'noun and attended by members of the Executive Committee and the general secretaries of Palestinian factions, as well as members of the PNC in Lebanon, and the Palestinian ambassador to Lebanon

Ashraf Dabbour. The preparatory committee agreed to convene the PNC to include all Palestinian factions and decided to convene again in February 2017 with the participation of “all Palestinian factions until the council convenes again.” It stressed the need to embody national unity within the PLO framework, and to make this happen, the conferees agreed to convene the PNC to include all Palestinian factions pursuant to the Cairo Agreement of 2005 and the Reconciliation Agreement signed on 4/5/2011, through elections where possible and consensus when elections were difficult to hold.² However, at the time of writing (January 2018), the preparatory committee had not convened. The Fatah movement Central Committee, which met under the leadership of Mahmud ‘Abbas on 9/8/2017, recommended holding a session of the PNC to elect a new Executive Committee and PCC, and to approve a political program for the coming phase.³ Fatah leadership sources also spoke of the possibility of the PNC convening in Ramallah in September 2017 or before the end of that year. This raised concerns and drew objections from Palestinian factions such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine (PIJ), and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), who said they were against convening the council in the old form, and under occupation in Ramallah, away from national consensus.⁴ However, the year 2017 ended without the council convening.

In 2016–2017, the PCC did not convene, however, it convened its 28th session on 14–15/1/2018, to deal with the fallout from the United States of America (US) President Donald Trump’s decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem, as well as to discuss the future of the peace process. The council convened with the attendance of the PLO factions, but Hamas and PIJ both declined to participate, being outside the official membership of the council. The two factions objected to convening the council under occupation in Ramallah. They also said they did not sense any serious change in the conduct of the PLO and PA leadership, which avoided convening the Provisional Leadership Framework, which enjoys a broader national representation and has a greater ability to execute policies on the ground. In its statement declining participation, PIJ asked the leadership “How do you besiege and starve me in Gaza, prosecute and arrest me in the West Bank, and want me to be a false witness in the name of national interest, in Ramallah?”⁵

In its final statement of the 28th session, the PCC resolved that the transitional period stipulated in the agreements signed in Oslo, Cairo, and Washington and the commitments it covered were no longer valid. The council decided to task the

PLO Executive Committee with suspending its recognition of Israel until Israel recognized the state of Palestine along the borders of 1967, repealed the decision to annex East Jerusalem, and end settlement activities. The PCC reiterated its decision to suspend all forms of security coordination with Israel and disengage from the relationship of economic dependence established by the Paris Protocol, to achieve independence for the national economy and asked the PLO Executive Committee and the institutions of the State of Palestine to implement these motions. The Council condemned Trump's decision and sought to thwart it, saying the US administration's eligibility as a mediator had ended and it could therefore no longer be a partner in the peace process except if the decision is repealed.⁶ The PCC decisions were met with widespread Palestinian criticism, especially from Hamas, PIJ, and the PFLP, who considered them below expectations and incommensurate with the level of the challenges.⁷

President 'Abbas continued to obstruct the work of the Hamas-dominated PLC in the two years studied by this report, refusing to allow the PLC to convene. Meanwhile, the PA presidency continued to exercise its full powers, supplanting the PLC's role in passing decrees and legislations. The "National Consensus" Government in Ramallah also continued to work without the credibility of a vote of confidence in the PLC, which was unable to hold it accountable or even observe its work. The climate of division cast more shadows on this issue, when the PA government in Ramallah suspended the salaries of 37 members of parliament (MPs) of the Change and Reform bloc (of which Hamas is the dominant party) in West Bank (WB) in June, with the Ministry of Finance refusing to give an explanation. Ahmed Bahr, PLC deputy speaker, said this was "a declaration of war" against his council.⁸

However, Hamas continued to convene the PLC as the holder of the majority of its seats in GS, passing some laws for example on 2/3/2016 when it adopted an administrative dispute resolution bill from the second reading.⁹ On 8/3/2017, the PLC passed an amended Judiciary Authority Law, and a law banning encroachment on government land from the first reading.¹⁰

Other disputes erupted in April 2016, when President 'Abbas ordered the establishment of the first Supreme Constitutional Court, which Hamas saw as a disastrous violation of the constitution itself.¹¹ On 27/4/2016, the PLC convened a special session to discuss 'Abbas's decision, and the deputies argued the court was

unconstitutional and illegal and had purely political objectives. They also argued that the establishment of the court contravened Article 103 of the Basic Law, adding that Law No. 3 of 2006 regarding the court had been repealed following a decision by the PLC in March 2006.¹² The dispute escalated on 23/3/2017, when the Administrative Court in GS annulled ‘Abbas’s decision to establish the Constitutional Court, with support from the Legal Committee in the PLC.¹³

When the Constitutional Court granted ‘Abbas the power to revoke the immunity of any PLC deputy, Deputy Speaker Ahmed Bahr led the objections, saying the ruling was unlawful and unconstitutional.¹⁴ The constitutional dispute escalated when the PLC rejected ‘Abbas’s decision on 12/12/2016 to lift the immunity of five PLC deputies, Muhammad Dahlan, Najat Abu Baker, Ashraf Jum‘ah, Jamal al-Tirawi, and Shami al-Shami, in preparation for their interrogation. The PLC deemed the move to be an encroachment on its own jurisdictions.¹⁵

On 21/1/2016 Hamas rejected the Supreme Media Council law enacted by ‘Abbas, saying it reinforced the Palestinian division.¹⁶ In March 2017, Hamas deputies in GS approved amendments to the Administrative Committee law, which empowered it to manage government institutions in GS,¹⁷ causing an immediate backlash from the PA and Fatah leadership.

Second: The National Consensus Government

The National Consensus Government formed by Rami Hamdallah was ostensibly established to capture the state of inter-Palestinian accord, especially between the two sides of the divide/ unity, Hamas and Fatah. However, this government effectively became the government of the PA president. In 2016 and 2017, it became a crucial part of the president’s toolkit that he used to pressure his supposed partners in the government under cover of “accord.” The government took remarkably harsh measures against GS, issuing sharply worded and bellicose statements and accusations against Hamas. This government seemed “reassured,” while carrying out these policies, because the PA president had obstructed the Hamas-dominated PLC, the only authority able to give confidence to, hold accountable, and vote down the government. In other words, the government operated in a climate in which the Palestinian legislature was paralyzed, despite it being the parallel pillar to the executive branch.

Tension dominated relations between the government and GS run by Hamas, in the period covered by this report until the signing of the Reconciliation Agreement between Fatah and Hamas in October 2017, in Cairo. The Hamdallah government accused Hamas of obstructing the handover of power and exercise of its duties in GS, claiming that Hamas was still running GS through a de-facto government, at a time when the PA government had spent up to *\$17 billion on GS, since the schism happened until 2017.¹⁸ The Hamdallah government called on Hamas to hand over all administrative functions and crossings, and allow it to exercise its full duties in GS.

But Hamas contested the figures cited by the government on spending in GS, saying it was a reversal of the facts meant to mislead the public. Hamas said the government's budget received up to \$100 million a month from taxes levied on goods that enter GS, while the value of the taxes imposed by the government on the diesel used in GS's power plant had exceeded double the cost of the fuel.¹⁹

In conjunction with the sanctions imposed by the PA on GS in mid-2017, the government accused Hamas of changing its sacred, fundamental principles to serve failing agendas.²⁰ PA Spokesperson Tariq Rishmawi claimed that the PA had spent \$125 million a month in GS, while Hamas and the de-facto administration there imposed illegal taxes on Palestinian citizens, and collected other taxes and all revenues, without transferring them to the treasury, thus stealing the money.²¹ Based on these allegations, the government imposed collective punishment on the people of GS, saying its condition for lifting them would be for Hamas to hand over full powers and jurisdictions in GS.

Hamas's Spokesperson, Sami Abu Zuhri, responded by saying that "nothing is stopping Hamdallah from working in Gaza," adding that Hamdallah's remarks about "allowing his government to work in Gaza" were a pretext to cover up his "ugly role against the people of the Strip."²² After the dissolution of the Administrative Committee in September 2017, Salah al-Bardawil, member of Hamas's politburo, said, "The National Consensus Government has received all its functions in Gaza and is governing the Strip. Talk about a parallel government by Hamas is baseless." He added, "All the issues we had agreed on in the Cairo Agreement, from the government and civil servants to communal reconciliation and others, are being implemented. The factions that took part in the Cairo meetings

* US Dollar.

and the Egyptians themselves can bear witness to this.” Al-Bardawil also noted that “the Palestinian reconciliation is stumbling once again because of US, Israeli, and Arab pressures.”²³

The electricity crisis continued to ravage the GS, with Hamas accusing the government of engineering it and deliberately causing the suffering of GS’s residents and services. In early 2016, the Energy Authority in GS said that the maneuvers by the General Directorate of Petroleum in Ramallah, and its refusal to transfer shipments to operate the main power plant in GS, was the main cause of the crisis, saying it had paid for 900 thousand liters of fuel without receiving any quantity.²⁴ In early March 2017, signs emerged of a near solution to the electricity crisis, through efforts led by the national and Islamic forces in GS, who presented a formula for a consensual resolution. However, Hamas later said the efforts failed, that the government had obstructed them despite the fact that Rami Hamdallah had agreed to the demands. The government denied the accusations, instead blaming Hamas for the continuation of the crisis.²⁵ On 28/5/2017, the Energy Authority in GS said it had sent a written reply to the Energy Authority in Ramallah, in which it complied with all conditions set by the government to resolve the electricity crisis, but to no avail.²⁶

In June 2017, the Consensus Government launched a series of punitive measures against GS, including suspending Israeli-supplied electricity, by ending the transfer of taxes allocated to cover energy costs to Israel.²⁷ Despite the signing of the Reconciliation Agreement between Hamas and Fatah in October 2017, the electricity crisis remain unresolved at the end of the year. In early 2018, the PA resumed supplying around 50 megawatts to GS.²⁸

The GS Administrative Committee and the Government’s Punitive Measures

The management of the Administrative Committee—formed by Hamas in GS—of government agencies and departments in March 2017, caused a lot of controversy and a war of words between Hamas, and the PA and Fatah and their allies. It is notable that there were no harsh reactions when Hamas had formed an unofficial Administrative Committee headed by Ziad al-Zaza to run government agencies following the Israeli war on GS in the summer of 2014. The work of the previous Consensus Government was obstructed in GS following sharp differences between Fatah and Hamas regarding mechanisms for the implementation of the Reconciliation Agreement signed in Cairo in 2011, and all this had not caused

negative reactions. However, the re-establishment of the committee in late March 2017, headed by ‘Abdul-Salam Siyam, former secretary of the Haniyyah government, was met with a backlash.

Apparently, the previous Administrative Committee headed by al-Zaza was criticized for its performance, after facing challenges beyond its capabilities. It could not find satisfactory solutions to the myriad crises ravaging GS. In the recent case, with the continuation of the blockade and the refusal of the Consensus Government to discharge its duties in GS, amid worsening living and economic conditions that have exacerbated the suffering of Gazans to unprecedented levels, a new Administrative Committee was formed.

Yet many also attributed the move to Hamas’s internal elections. Indeed, these elections produced new leaders, most notably Yahya al-Sinwar, who was elected chief of Hamas in GS. Al-Sinwar has since been keen to end the cycle of recession and paralysis, reduce the effects of the blockade and alleviate the suffering of GS’s residents.

Despite the short period of its work, not lasting more than six months, the Administrative Committee quickly became the dominant news headline on the internal Palestinian scene, particularly concerning relations among Palestinian factions, marked by sharp disputes, wars of words, and loud accusations.

Analysis of the circumstances surrounding the re-instatement of the Administrative Committee headed by Siyam reveals the divergent views and interpretations between the leaders of Hamas in GS and their counterparts abroad. On 15/3/2017, Doha-based Hamas leader Hussam Badran denied, the existence of any committee for administering GS, saying that all talk about it was speculation by the media.²⁹ However, on 16/3/2017, the PLC in GS, dominated by Hamas’s bloc, passed amendments to the law forming the Administrative Committee that had been approved in the past, settling the debate regarding the matter, and granting the committee the necessary legitimacy to carry out its work despite objections from Fatah and the PA.³⁰ Ahmed Bahr, deputy speaker, said the Administrative Committee would be temporary, and was designed to provide services to the citizens following the failure of the Hamdallah government to assume its responsibilities. Hamas figure Musa Abu Marzuq said the committee would be dissolved automatically as soon as the government assumed its duties and commitments. The PA responded to the decision on 27/4/2017 with a number of sanctions on GS.³¹

Hamas said the committee was merely a government committee and not an alternative to the National Consensus Government, stressing its formation was the result of a need to plug the vacuum left by the government and its reluctance to provide services to Gazans. On 23/3/2017, the committee officially began its work.³²

As soon as that committee was announced, Fatah lashed out against Hamas. Fatah Spokesperson Usama al-Qawasmi said it was a move towards the secession of GS from the WB.³³ However, Hamas's Musa Abu Marzuq stressed the Administrative Committee formed by the movement was nothing new, having been established in the wake of Israel's war on GS in 2014, indicating that the Administrative Committee was reinstated because of the Consensus Government's relinquishing of its responsibilities and commitments vis-à-vis GS.³⁴

After the announcement, the government took harsh punitive measures, causing destruction to what was left of GS's economy. However, these measures were not necessarily strictly a response to the committee formation. Indeed, a month before the move, Fatah Central Committee member Jibril Rajoub threatened Hamas with "firm decisions to end the hijacking of Gaza."³⁵ Therefore, the sanctions could also be read in the context of Trump's rise to power and increasing hostility to Islamic movements and resistance groups in the region.

On 4/4/2017, the Hamdallah government implemented pay cuts to civil servants in GS. Arif Abu Jarad, head of the union representing PA employees in GS, stated that the PA forced nearly 11 thousand military staff to retire early, describing it as a "crime," and stressing that the government's pretext of financial difficulties was a lie.³⁶ Palestinian leaders denounced that move, which they deemed to have violated Palestinian values and moral and humane principles.³⁷ Khalil al-Hayyeh said Hamas did not accept threats, adding that the PA's measures against GS had exacerbated the division.³⁸

On 27/4/2017, the PA asked the Israeli side to stop deducing the cost of electric supply to GS from tax transfers. On 6/5/2017, President 'Abbas issued a decree exempting Gazans from paying taxes and fees for government services.³⁹ The PA suspended medical transfers from GS and stopped issuing passports for Gazans. Hamas subsequently condemned the PA for precipitating an electricity and fuel crisis, and deliberately exacerbating suffering in the enclave, further denouncing the punitive measures taken against GS, saying 'Abbas's actions amount to crimes

against humanity.⁴⁰ This was denied by Fatah, which instead blamed Hamas for the difficult conditions in GS.⁴¹ On 4/6/2017, the PA stopped paying the salaries of 277 prisoners freed from Israeli prisons. On 4/7/2017, the PA forced 6,145 civil servants in GS into early retirement,⁴² prompting a warning from the Ministry of Health in GS, whose Spokesperson Ashraf al-Qadra said early retirement affected 40% of his ministry's specialized and experienced cadres, which could cause dire effects on health services.⁴³

On 9/7/2017, the PA suspended the salaries of 37 Hamas-aligned MPs for the month of June 2017. Ahmed Bahr, PLC deputy speaker, said the move violated the Palestinian Basic Law and obstructed the work of PLC, with a view to monopolize Palestinian decision-making, deeming it a declaration of war on the PLC and its members. On 14/8/2017, 'Abbas decided to resume paying the salaries of freed prisoners but only in the WB. On 26/8/2017, Hamdallah decided to allow health and education workers forced into early retirement in GS to return to their posts, "in order to secure services to the citizens of the Strip."⁴⁴ However, Hamas Spokesperson Fawzi Barhum said that the move was not enough and called for the reversal of all early retirement decisions affecting civil servants.⁴⁵

The Health Ministry Spokesperson Ashraf al-Qadra stated, on 10/9/2017, that as a result of the PA's measures, 40% of medicines and medical consumables were depleted in GS's hospitals. 30 patients at least had died as a result of the PA's measures, while three thousand patients needed to travel urgently to the Palestinian territories occupied in 1948 or to Egypt for treatment.⁴⁶

In June, Israel began reducing the electricity supply to GS by more than a quarter, after the PA decreased its payments for electricity. Mohammad Shtayyeh, head of the Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction (PECDAR), criticized how Egypt facilitated the supply of diesel to GS based on agreements between Hamas and Egypt on one hand, and Hamas and Muhammad Dahlan on the other.⁴⁷

In an attempt at de-escalation, delegations from Fatah and Hamas met in GS on 18/4/2017 in a consultative meeting that was unpublicized. It was agreed that the government would resume its functions in GS, with the dissolution of the Administrative Committee as soon as the government took its full responsibilities.⁴⁸ However, it seems the outcome of that meeting was not sufficient to convince President 'Abbas to go ahead with reconciliation, and tensions again dominated

the relationship between the two movements. Fatah Central Committee member ‘Azzam al-Ahmad threatened to suspend spending in GS and addressed Hamas leaders by saying “Either Hamas dissolves this committee and hands over administration of Gaza Strip to the National Consensus Government, or bear the responsibility and the full expenses of government.”⁴⁹

With the negative repercussions of the punitive measures imposed by the PA against GS to force Hamas to hand it over to the National Consensus Government, Fatah demonstrated a stern attitude vis-à-vis Hamas. ‘Azzam al-Ahmad of Fatah said his movement would not hold any reconciliation meetings with Hamas before the dissolution of the Administrative Committee.⁵⁰ On 28/6/2017, President ‘Abbas chaired an emergency meeting of the government, calling on Hamas to dissolve the Administrative Committee and empower the Consensus Government in to alleviate the suffering of the residents of GS.⁵¹

On 5/7/2017, Isma‘il Haniyyah, the head of Hamas’s politburo, made several conditions for the dissolution of the committee, including: lifting the sanctions on GS; forming a national unity government; holding comprehensive elections; and re-forming the PNC pursuant to the Beirut Accords.⁵² After that, a delegation from Hamas and the Administrative Committee headed by Rawhi Mushtaha went to Egypt, in a visit described as successful by Egyptian former assistant foreign minister Hussein Haridi, who said that the two sides discussed securing the Egyptian border with GS and other issues.⁵³

A delegation from Hamas in the WB visited President ‘Abbas in August 2017, with Fatah Central Committee member Jamal Muhaisen saying the meeting had focused on the need to dissolve the Administrative Committee in GS, adding that ‘Abbas had told the Hamas delegation he would not reverse his measures against GS until the Consensus Government was empowered there.⁵⁴ However, Mahmud al-Zahhar, head of Hamas’s PLC bloc, conditioned the dissolution of the committee on the government’s reversal of the punitive measures against GS.⁵⁵ Amid the continuation of the punitive measures imposed by the government, and reports the PA intended to force thousands of civil servants in health and education into early retirement, Administrative Committee Head ‘Abdul-Salam Siyam said Hamas was ready to confront these decisions, which he described as a crime and political corruption.⁵⁶

Things escalated further in mid-August when President ‘Abbas issued threats affirming the escalation of his measures against GS if Hamas insisted on refusing to dissolve the committee.⁵⁷ Fatah Spokesperson Usama al-Qawasmi, demanded that Hamas dissolve the Administrative Committee in order to invite it to the PNC meetings, which were due to be held in mid-September 2017.⁵⁸

Following a visit by a Hamas delegation headed by Haniyyah to Cairo, on 12/9/2017, Hamas left the decision regarding the committee with Egypt, in case President ‘Abbas agreed on the reconciliation. However, Majed al-Fityani, secretary of Fatah’s Revolutionary Council, reiterated the condition that Hamas must immediately dissolve the committee and allow the Consensus Government to operate freely in GS.⁵⁹ To encourage Egypt’s efforts to achieve reconciliation and end the division, on 17/9/2017 Hamas announced it would dissolve the Administrative Committee, inviting the government to return to GS to carry out its duties immediately and agreed to holding elections.⁶⁰

In response, President ‘Abbas and the Consensus Government welcomed the announcement, expressing relief at the dissolution of the Administrative Committee. PA Spokesperson Yusuf al-Mahmud said that the government was ready to go to GS and assume its full responsibilities there, confirming the fact that the government had a comprehensive plan to exercise its duties and alleviate the suffering of the people of GS.⁶¹ Then the Administrative Committee announced that it was officially ending its operations, stressing it would not be an obstacle to the implementation of the agreements made in Cairo.⁶²

According to press sources, the Administrative Committee held a final meeting with ministry officials in GS to hand over its duties, pending the start of the Consensus Government’s duties in accordance with the Cairo agreements.

Local Elections

Local elections in Palestine saw some dramatic developments, from the acceptance of Hamas and other factions to participate in them, to them being obstructed, which prompted Hamas and the factions to withdraw, before they were held exclusively in WB.

On 3/5/2016, the government announced that elections would be held on 8/10/2016, instructing the Palestinian Central Elections Commission (CEC) to prepare for them,⁶³ according to Local Government Minister Hussein al-A‘raj,

who said the elections would be held in accordance to the list system based on proportional representation.⁶⁴ On 23/6/2016, the CEC published the timetable of the elections. CEC Head Hanna Nasir said that the government pledged to abide by the results of the GS round.⁶⁵ In a step aimed at reassuring Hamas and other Palestinian factions, Nasir met with a Hamas delegation and confirmed he had obtained additional guarantees from all sides to respect the results of the elections.⁶⁶ The commission then started accepting candidacies on 16/8/2016.⁶⁷

The decision by Hamas to run in the municipal elections in the WB and GS however caused concerns of the Israeli Security Agency—ISA (*Shabak*), which predicted Hamas candidates would capture most council seats in the towns and villages, and pave the way for their domination of the PA. Alex Fishman, writing in Israel's *Yedioth Ahronoth* newspaper, said that the assessment in Israel was that Hamas would win the elections in Hebron and surrounding localities, including those south of Mount Hebron, Jenin, Nablus, and Qalqiliya. Fishman said the “results in Tulkarm remain uncertain, but many other bad surprises are expected.”⁶⁸ Similar concerns were expressed by the Fatah movement.

At the end of August 2016, the CEC published the preliminary schedule of lists running in the elections, numbering 787 in WB and 87 in GS, and said would allow all sides to challenge them pursuant to the laws in force.⁶⁹ Election preparations continued according to plan, amid official reassurances by ‘Abbas who stressed the need to hold the elections on time and reinforce the political process.⁷⁰

The predictions were that Hamas would win in several major towns and localities, so the PA arrested around 70 Hamas activists, in an attempt to head off any election victory by the movement.⁷¹

Avi Issacharoff, Palestinian Affairs analyst at Israel's Walla! news website, reported that the Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories Major General (Maj. Gen.) Yoav Mordechai, had warned the PA leadership that holding elections could prove to be a dangerous bet. *Haaretz*'s military analyst Amos Harel also wrote that Israeli officials warned PA counterparts that they were too optimistic about winning the elections, cautioning that Hamas might take advantage of the elections to increase its influence in the WB and undermine the PA and its aging president.⁷²

Hamas-affiliated parties filed several challenges against some candidate lists, including some associated with Fatah. The commission accepted four challenges

in GS, disqualifying four lists in Beit Hanoun, Umm al-Nasr, al-Zahraa, and al-Nusairat, including three Fatah-affiliated lists.⁷³ The decision by the CEC elicited an immediate objection from Fatah, but the commission said one or more candidates had been disqualified due to not meeting the legal requirements, based on the law governing local council elections (No. 10 of 2005) and its amendments. In response, Fatah-affiliated parties appealed the decisions of the CEC with the Supreme Court of Justice in Ramallah, seeking to reinstate the Fatah lists that had been disqualified, arguing that Gaza's courts lacked the legitimacy to issue decisions.⁷⁴ On 8/9/2016, the Supreme Court (in turn accused by some Palestinians of being influenced by Fatah) decided to suspend local elections until the appeal filed by five disqualified lists was considered. The CEC subsequently said it would immediately suspend all its preparations for local elections. On 21/9/2016, the commission said the date of the local elections, set for 8/10/2016, was no longer feasible, after the Supreme Court of Justice complied with the prosecutors from the Palestinian government who requested an adjournment to 3/10/2016 in order to prepare a defense. For its part, Hamas, which had seemed in a strong position, accused the government of obstructing the elections. Fatah and Hamas accused each other of seeking to thwart the elections and exclude rival candidates. Yoni Ben Menachem, an Israeli analyst, said that 'Abbas had come under pressure from Egypt and Jordan to postpone the elections, fearing a Hamas victory.⁷⁵

On 3/10/2016, the Supreme Court of Justice decided to hold local elections in WB but not in GS and said it would set the date within a month.⁷⁶ Hamas, PIJ, PFLP and Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) rejected the decision. This was while the CEC expressed its respect for the decision, despite saying it would deepen the division, and harm public interest and democracy. The Commission recommended to 'Abbas to postpone the elections for six months, to give more time for internal Palestinian arrangements to be made.⁷⁷ But, on 1/11/2016, in a move that appeared to be a prelude to holding the elections, the government of Rami Hamdallah dissolved several municipal councils in WB, and approved the formation of committees that would take over their functions until elections were held.⁷⁸ Hamas rejected the new local elections law passed by the PA in early November 2016, calling on it to stop tampering with laws and undermining the democratic process.⁷⁹

On 3/1/2017, the government approved a bill to establish an Electoral Court to consider all appeals, violations, and other legal issues related to local council elections. At the end of January, the government decided to hold elections in all governorates on 13/5/2017.⁸⁰ Hamas also rejected this decision, and its Spokesperson Fawzi Barhum explained that “the decision to hold elections on 13 May serves the policy of the Fatah movement, and is tailored to fit its interests at the expense of the interests of the Palestinian people and the unity of its institutions.” Hamas stressed that “the government works for the benefit of Fatah, and does not serve the interests of all Palestinians equally,” adding that “the decision comes on the heels of spoiling the electoral process by Fatah which has backtracked from all that has been agreed upon.”⁸¹ However, in early February 2017, the CEC announced the elections schedule, with the government later deciding to hold them in WB only, claiming it was not possible to hold them in GS after the failure of a meeting between a Hamas delegation and the Commission Chairman Hanna Nasir.⁸²

On 13/5/2017, elections were held in WB only, with Hamas, PIJ, and the PFLP boycotting the vote that they said entrenched the division and consecrated the political and geographical division between WB and GS. Hanna Nasir announced that the turnout was 53.4% across 145 localities, while 181 local councils were won by default. Independents accounted for 65% of winning candidates, while partisan lists got 35%,⁸³ reflecting the weak performance of Fatah despite the boycott by its rivals.

On 30/5/2017, the government decided that run-off elections in 66 local councils in WB would be held on 29/7/2017, and to hold the second phase of local council elections in GS due on 14/10/2017.⁸⁴ However, Hamas rejected this decision, stressing that no elections could be held in GS while the government continued to tamper with laws and electoral mechanisms.⁸⁵ Subsequently, on 11/7/2017 the government decided to postpone elections in GS until suitable conditions were met.⁸⁶

With the signing of the Palestinian Reconciliation Agreement, it seems that the dossier of local elections and elections in general was a function of Palestinian national reconciliation criteria. Indications suggest it is difficult to hold elections in the foreseeable future, due to various political and factional considerations.

Third: Developments Related to Putting the Palestinian Political House in Order and National Reconciliation

In 2016 and 2017, national reconciliation efforts suffered a major setback, despite the many meetings, efforts, and attempts aimed at healing the divide between the main factions in Palestine.

Reconciliation efforts did not meet any success until late 2017, when Hamas dissolved the Administrative Committee in GS, which was followed by the signing of the Cairo agreement, which practically allowed the government in Ramallah to assume administration of GS. The PA and Fatah continued to obstruct the PLC and took no measures to ensure effective partnership in the government especially in WB. In general, many hurdles and risks were left that will continue to threaten the prospects for reconciliation.

On 3/1/2016, the Islamic and national forces proposed an initiative to reach an agreement regarding the Rafah crossing and its handover to the National Consensus Government, in preparation for its reopening to passengers—the crossing was closed permanently except for intermittent periods. However, the initiative stalled as Hamas raised queries it said were fundamental about it.⁸⁷ Although Hamas said it would form a steering committee to follow up the ideas and proposals made, President ‘Abbas accused the movement of ignoring the initiative he had approved. Hamas later met with a committee from the factions to discuss the initiative and welcomed the prospect of the government assuming its responsibilities with the crossing and other matters, stressing it had no objection to a national inter-factional committee overseeing the crossing. However, the inter-factional committee rejected Hamas’s proposal, while the Palestinian government said Hamas’s proposal was an attempt at “stalling and evasion.”⁸⁸ Fatah’s Usama al-Qawasmi said Hamas’s proposals on the crossing were meant to invalidate the substance of the Palestinian factions’ initiative.⁸⁹

With the stalling of inter-factional efforts to resolve the Rafah crossing crisis, and the failure to reach a consensual formula acceptable to both Fatah and Hamas—amid reports of a meeting between the two in Doha, Qatar—on 2/2/2016 the PLC launched a national initiative to achieve reconciliation and end the division. It tackled six main issues: PLO; the formation of a government; convening the PLC; elections; social reconciliation; and the Palestinian political program. The

initiative put forward by the deputy speaker, Ahmed Bahr, called for quickly convening the PLO Provisional Leadership Framework, to draft a national strategy to tackle challenges, and called for forming an inclusive national unity government before re-convening the PLC to hold a vote of confidence and monitor its work. In addition, the initiative called for agreeing on a specific date for legislative, presidential, and PNC elections.⁹⁰

In April 2016, Fatah leader in captivity Marwan Barghouti proposed a charter based on political partnership, with the goal of unifying Palestinian ranks and building a strategic relationship with Hamas. Barghouti put forward a ten-point initiative to delineate the strategic relationship with Hamas and end internal division. Barghouti called for “an honest, frank, and straightforward dialogue between the Fatah Central Committee and Hamas’s politburo in their entirety and not between delegates.”⁹¹

On 21/10/2016 PIJ Secretary-General Ramadan ‘Abdullah Shallah, proposed a ten-point initiative to end the crisis of the Palestine issue, including: ‘Abbas declares Palestinian withdrawal from the Oslo Accords; reforming the PLO; withdrawing recognition of Israel; declaring the current stage of the Palestinian people’s life as “national liberation from occupation”; reviving resistance; and pursuing the Jerusalem *Intifadah*. Shallah called for drafting a national program to reinforce the steadfastness of the people on their land, while the program also called for “comprehensive national dialogue” among all the constituencies of the Palestinian people to push for a new track, end the division, restore unity, and develop a new national program.⁹²

Shallah indicated that adopting these measures remained primarily the task of President ‘Abbas, calling on him to act to save the people and the cause, before he leaves his post. Fatah however quickly snubbed the initiative, describing it as unrealistic. Hamas, the PFLP, the DFLP, and the Palestinian People’s Party (PPP)—as well as Muhammad Dahlan—welcomed the initiative, stressing the importance of several of its clauses.⁹³

In an attempt to de-escalate the internal situation in Palestine, the PNC preparatory committee held meetings at the Palestinian embassy in Beirut on 10–11/1/2017, chaired by PNC Chairman Salim al-Za’noun, with the participation of Executive Committee members and secretary generals of the factions, as well as delegations from Hamas, PIJ, al-Sa’iqah, and the PFLP-General Command (GC).

The committee agreed to convene the PNC to include all Palestinian factions in accordance with the 2005 Cairo Agreement and the 2011 Reconciliation Agreement, through elections. Should this prove impossible, the members could then be selected through consensus. The conferees agreed on the necessity of forming a national unity government, unifying the institutions, resuming the reconstruction of, and making preparations to hold presidential, PLC, and PNC elections. The committee called on President ‘Abbas to immediately initiate consultations with all political forces to agree on forming a National Unity Government. The conferees agreed on the preparatory committee resuming its work, and holding meetings regularly with the participation of all Palestinian forces until the PNC was convened. The committee asked al-Za‘noun to complete the necessary measures to accomplish an electoral system for the PNC.⁹⁴

However, the dispute over the formation of a new national unity government obstructed holding any new meetings for the preparatory committee. Hamas declared its rejection of holding a PNC session to elect a new Executive Committee and PCC and approve its political program, before renewing the PNC itself. PIJ and PFLP refused convening the council in Ramallah. On 12/8/2017, the PLO Executive Committee decided to continue consultations to convene the PNC as soon as possible. If Hamas and the PIJ were to continue refusing to participate in the council session, a way would be found to convene it without them. By mid-October 2017, no new PNC session was convened, as the factions asked for further consultations and more time to persuade Hamas to participate.⁹⁵

It seemed that a new crisis was about to erupt in the Palestinian landscape when the Popular Conference for Palestinians Abroad was held on 25–26/2/2017 in Istanbul. Six thousand Palestinian participated, and a final statement urged for “unity on the basis of commitment to the program of resistance and the Palestinian National Charter of 1964, and the Palestinian National Charter of 1968.” Although Munir Shafiq, chairman of the Congress’ secretariat, said the event did not seek to supplant the PLO “but to reform and rebuild it,” the PLO and Fatah boycotted the conference, believing it was “deviating from the unity of Palestinian ranks” and called for preempting anyone “attempting to tamper with the PLO.”⁹⁶

Arab, Regional, and International Initiatives

Egypt, Qatar, and Turkey played key roles in mediating between Fatah and Hamas to achieve national reconciliation. In January 2016, Fatah and Hamas held unofficial meetings in Doha and Ankara, where the two sides drafted an unofficial

document that would act as a “political and resistance program for the coming phase and pave the way for the formation of a national unity government to prepare for general elections.”⁹⁷

These meetings were held with Qatari sponsorship. On 7–8/2/2016, a delegation from Fatah headed by ‘Azzam al-Ahmad met with a delegation from Hamas headed by Musa Abu Marzuq in Doha for two days of talks about mechanisms for implementing reconciliation.⁹⁸ The meeting led to—after Hamas agreed to participate in PLO sessions—a specific practical vision and arrangements for the formation of a national unity government that would govern both WB and GS, prepare for legislative and presidential elections, and convene the PNC and prepare for elections at its level. The two sides agreed to implement what was agreed upon in Cairo in 2011 regarding the security forces, and to form a supreme security committee via the League of Arab States (LAS). However, the outcomes of the meeting were not enough to rebuild trust between the two movements, as they remained theoretical and no tangible action was taken to implement them on the ground. This was reflected in the statements of Musa Abu Marzuq, who stressed that the implementation of reconciliation was in the hands of Mahmud ‘Abbas, calling for isolating external pressure from the Reconciliation Agreement as a necessary condition for its success.⁹⁹

The gradual improvement in the relationship between Egypt and Hamas (beginning in the Spring of 2016) had a positive effect on Palestinian reconciliation. The Sinai security issue was the main impetus that drove the development of ties between the two sides. 2016 witnessed a shift in relations, when senior Hamas leaders made repeated visits to Cairo. On 12/3/2016, a delegation from Hamas met with Egyptian General Intelligence Service (EGIS) officials in Cairo several issues, and discussions were concerned with the security issue in the Sinai desert, border control with GS, Palestinian reconciliation matters, and the Rafah crossing. Hamas delegations then made repeated visits to Cairo, with Hamas stressing its readiness to comply with Egyptian requests regarding border control and vowing GS would not be the source of any security risks for Egypt. For its part, Egypt expressed its readiness to help move the Palestinian reconciliation issue forward. On 17/5/2016, Egyptian President ‘Abdul Fattah al-Sisi called on Palestinians to reunite and overcome their differences. However, Egypt’s Foreign Minister Sameh Shukri later linked the issue of lifting the GS siege to the restoration of the PA’s role

and its control over GS crossings.¹⁰⁰ Despite these Egyptian overtures, conditions had not yet ripened to enable the reaching of a resolution to the division.

In Doha, a third round of dialogue was held between Fatah and Hamas on 26/3/2016. According to ‘Azzam al-Ahmad, the two sides finalized a number of outstanding issues, predicting that Qatar would invite President ‘Abbas to oversee the final touches of the reconciliation process.¹⁰¹ At the same time, Isma‘il Haniyyah said that Hamas had made significant progress in recent reconciliation talks with Fatah, but stressed that senior leaders and relevant institutions had to be consulted too.¹⁰² It seemed that there were two key obstacles hindering the talks related to the political program of the National Unity Government, and the mechanisms for reintegrating the employees of the dismissed government in GS.¹⁰³ Hamas leader, Salah al-Bardawil said a new meeting was needed between the two factions in Doha to continue consultations regarding the reconciliation.¹⁰⁴ Thus, this phase of talks was characterized by purely procedural discussions, without the political space to move into implementation on the ground. The efforts appeared closer to “managing” the dialogue and various issues of contention, without any concrete breakthrough.

Before the end of May 2016, ‘Azzam al-Ahmad accused Hamas of not being ready to finalize the reconciliation, prompting a sharp response from Hamas which in turn accused Fatah of backing down from implementing reconciliation agreements, after President ‘Abbas objected to the outcomes of the Doha talks between the two sides.¹⁰⁵ In an attempt to defuse the tensions between the two sides, PIJ leader Abu ‘Imad al-Rifa‘i said his movement was in contact with the Egyptian leadership to conclude Palestinian reconciliation and reduce the suffering resulting from the GS blockade.¹⁰⁶

Upon the return of media wars between Fatah and Hamas, attempts to bring the two sides closer and achieve a breakthrough and prevent full escalation returned. On 6/6/2016, Musa Abu Marzuq said a meeting would be held between the two sides in Doha to tackle outstanding issues, stressing that there were no obstacles hindering reconciliation.¹⁰⁷ A few days later, a delegation from Fatah led by ‘Azzam al-Ahmad arrived in Cairo to discuss reconciliation efforts with Egyptian officials, before travelling to Doha to resume reconciliation talks with Hamas. ‘Abbas Zaki, Fatah Central Committee member, said Fatah’s delegation would present its vision for a “shortcut” to reconciliation, especially in the wake of a speech by

‘Abdul Fattah al-Sisi expressing his desire to sponsor and activate the reconciliation issue. For his part, Mohammad Shtayyeh said Fatah would work hard to achieve reconciliation and alleviate the suffering of Gazans.¹⁰⁸ On 15/6/2016, a third round of the dialogue between Fatah and Hamas was held in Doha. President ‘Abbas said the key to reconciliation was the elections.¹⁰⁹ On 18/6/2016, the two sides both acknowledged the talks had failed, exchanging blame for the outcome.¹¹⁰

After the Fatah Central Committee member and prisoner in Israel, Marwan Barghouti, called for the redoubling of efforts to restore national unity, sources close to Fatah said Egypt had been applying pressure to prevent the signing of the Reconciliation Agreement in Qatar in order to take control of the reconciliation issue themselves, to revive the Egyptian role in the Palestinian arena.¹¹¹

Despite the initiative undertaken by the Supreme Follow-up Committee in the Palestinian Territories Occupied in 1948 to end the division in mid-August 2016, the reconciliation dossier remained in a stalemate, in spite of some statements being made, aiming to manage the dialogue, such as remarks by President ‘Abbas in September 2016, stressing his willingness to form a National Unity Government and extending his hand to Hamas to end the division.¹¹²

On 27/10/2016, President ‘Abbas met with Khalid Mish‘al and Isma‘il Haniyyah in Doha, in the presence of Qatar’s top diplomat Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani. They discussed ways to achieve reconciliation and agreed that it was the only way to protect the Palestinian national project. Hamas said that its leadership had presented ‘Abbas with a full vision for the implementation of reconciliation, stressing the importance of national partnership in various positions and responsibilities, whether in a national unity government, PLC, or PLO.¹¹³

However, sources close to the two parties said the meeting did not achieve any serious breakthrough concerning the schism. An informed source said the cause of failure was ‘Abbas’s rejection of any concessions and intractable positions on the key issues of contention.¹¹⁴

Thus, reconciliation talks between Fatah and Hamas moved on into a phase of “managing the failure,” with each side blaming the other. In mid-November 2016, Musa Abu Marzuq announced that the talks had stopped, while ‘Azzam al-Ahmad said there was nothing new in terms of the reconciliation dossier sponsored by the Qatari Foreign Ministry.¹¹⁵ On 5/1/2017, ‘Azzam al-Ahmad met with

Khalid Mish'al, Isma'il Haniyyah, and several Hamas leaders in Doha, to reactivate the reconciliation issue and discuss Hamas's participation in the meeting of the preparatory committee of the PNC meeting on 10/1/2017. However, that meeting transpired like previous rounds without any result, with one Palestinian source attributing this to the entrenched positions of the two sides and the insistence of President 'Abbas on his conditions that hindered the implementation of reconciliation on the ground.¹¹⁶

In mid-January 2017, representatives from Fatah, Hamas, and other factions held informal talks in Moscow concerning reconciliation and met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. They agreed on the need to form a national unity government before holding elections, however this agreement was not received positively by President 'Abbas.¹¹⁷

In 2017, relations between Hamas and Egypt continued to improve. This had a positive effect on expediting reconciliation talks. On 23/1/2017, Haniyyah held a meeting with the EGIS Chief Maj. Gen. Khaled Fawzi, discussing the future relationship with Egypt as well as reconciliation with Fatah.¹¹⁸

Amid statements made by Fatah and PA leaders regarding the necessity of convening the PNC as soon as possible, in order to reform and reactivate the PLO, Fatah Central Committee member Jamal Muhaisen announced his movement would convene the PNC if Hamas refused to participate and abide by the Beirut agreement (10–11/1/2017).¹¹⁹

With brewing tension between the two sides, on 10/3/2017 Salah al-Bardawil stated that Hamas was looking for a new formula to manage government work in GS considering the failure of the National Consensus Government to assume its duties. This prompted a sharp rebuke from Fatah which claimed Hamas was preparing to split GS from the WB.¹²⁰ Hamas's formation of an Administrative Committee in late March 2017 poured fuel on the fire of the differences between the two sides, with President 'Abbas vowing to respond in an unprecedented manner to this step. Hamas's Spokesperson Hazem Qassim said this was an obstruction of reconciliation, calling on the National Consensus Government to assume its responsibilities vis-à-vis the people of GS.¹²¹

In response to Rami Hamdallah who called on Hamas to hand over GS to the "legitimate government," Hamas's Spokesperson Fawzi Barhum said the movement was ready to hand over ministries and government institutions in

GS on the condition that the government abided by its full duties towards the Gazans. However, this answer was met with a negative reaction from ‘Azzam al-Ahmad, who claimed Hamas was not ready to implement reconciliation.¹²² In late April 2017, Salah al-Bardawil accused President ‘Abbas of discarding the Qatari reconciliation initiative, saying the Palestinian people had many important relationships internationally that ‘Abbas was ignoring.¹²³

In this phase, Fatah and the PA executed their threats against GS in an attempt to force Hamas to hand over the Strip to the National Consensus Government. On 26/4/2017, Fatah Central Committee member Hussein al-Sheikh said that Fatah had taken a strategic decision to pursue all means to end the division,¹²⁴ in reference to the sanctions that were being prepared for GS. Hamas saw the sanctions as collective punishment, but President ‘Abbas justified the sanctions by invoking the need to pressure Hamas to achieve unity and end the division.¹²⁵

In an attempt to overcome the blockade and the sanctions, a delegation from Hamas headed by the movement’s leader in GS Yahya al-Sinwar visited Cairo in June and held talks with the EGIS chief. He also met separately with a delegation from the “reformist movement” in Fatah led by Muhammad Dahlan, meeting four times including two meetings attended by Dahlan personally. These meetings led to accords meant to alleviate the blockade on GS and the crises affecting its beleaguered residents, including measures to bring in fuel to ease the electricity crisis. For its part, Fatah expressed concern over the accords reached between Hamas and Dahlan, claiming this would reinforce the bid to separate GS from WB.

Despite the controversy that surrounded the Hamas-Dahlan agreements and their political implications, Hamas stressed they were purely humanitarian and social and had no political dimensions. Mahmud al-Zahhar said that the accords with Dahlan focused on three issues: Reactivating the PLC, completing communal reconciliation, and activating the National Islamic Solidarity Committee as well as projects for the poor. For his part, Dahlan said during his intervention at the PLC via video conference, “We have made joint efforts with the brethren in Hamas that may allow us to restore some hope to the heroic people of Gaza.”¹²⁶

These contacts raised a lot of concerns for ‘Abbas and the Fatah leadership, which expressed fear Dahlan was using GS to regain his influence in Fatah and the Palestinian interior. The talks also triggered a wave of objections within Hamas itself, as many segments within the movement perceive Dahlan and his

role in the Palestinian division very negatively, and because of his hostility to the “Political Islam” movements in the Arab world and his collusion in thwarting and repressing them. In early July 2017, reliable Palestinian sources revealed that indirect negotiations through three intermediaries between ‘Abbas and Hamas had taken place, with a view to convincing Hamas to reverse its agreements with Dahlan and meet the PA’s three conditions of: Dissolving the Administrative Committee; handing over power to the National Consensus Government; and agreeing to hold elections. However, Hamas rejected these conditions.¹²⁷ Isma‘il Haniyyah responded that Hamas wanted reconciliation and a national unity government as well as comprehensive elections, stressing that GS would never separate from WB.¹²⁸ As communal reconciliation efforts gathered pace pursuant to Hamas-Dahlan agreements, through the Communal Reconciliation Committee endorsed by eight out of 13 Palestinian factions, Fatah denied any participation in its meetings. In general, ‘Abbas’s efforts to circumvent the agreements through contacts with Cairo, Hamas’s limitation of contacts with Dahlan’s movement without meeting him personally, and the failure of the Dahlani camp to bring about any real difference in reducing the suffering and blockade of Gaza, led to reduced contact with Dahlan. Consequently, Hamas and ‘Abbas resumed their contact, amid a strong Egyptian desire to achieve a breakthrough in the reconciliation dossier.

In an important step, a Hamas-affiliated delegation in WB headed by Nasir al-Din al-Sha‘ir met with ‘Abbas in early September 2017, following health checks undergone by the Palestinian president. Al-Sha‘ir said the visit was to check on the health of the president, but that the issue of reconciliation was also discussed in the meeting, with positive outcomes.¹²⁹

On 5/8/2017, reliable Palestinian sources revealed that Egyptian President al-Sisi had proposed an initiative to end the Palestinian division. The sources said both ‘Abbas and Hamas had approved of its terms, but ‘Abbas would later put forward a different initiative that was rejected by Hamas.¹³⁰ Hamas confirmed receiving the terms of the Egyptian reconciliation initiative, while ‘Azzam al-Ahmad denied President al-Sisi had proposed any initiative to end the division.¹³¹

Despite the impasse in the reconciliation dossier, in late August 2017 Yahya al-Sinwar said the Palestinian national project was in grave danger because of the continued division, proposing two visions to overcome the national crisis. The first entailed the re-formation of the PNC through elections or other means, before

developing the PLO to become a framework inclusive of all Palestinians. The second vision included the formation of a national unity government with full powers, representing the main factions, and governing both the WB and GS.¹³²

On 12/9/2017, informed Palestinian sources revealed the presence of an Egyptian plan to push reconciliation forward, which came into existence following a visit by a Hamas delegation to Cairo, where Hamas said it had presented its own vision for ending the division and achieving reconciliation. At the same time, Musa Abu Marzuq claimed the US-Israeli “veto” on reconciliation had been removed.¹³³

In an indication of progress on the issue, a Fatah Central Committee delegation led by ‘Azzam al-Ahmad arrived in Cairo on 15/9/2017 to discuss reconciliation efforts. This coincided with the presence of a Hamas delegation led by Isma‘il Haniyyah in Cairo to discuss latest reconciliation developments with Egypt’s leadership. Signs of a breakthrough began to emerge on 17/9/2017 when Hamas dissolved the Administrative Committee, calling on the National Consensus Government to come to GS to exercise its duties there immediately. Hamas expressed its readiness to agree on mechanisms for the implementation of the 2011 Cairo Agreements and their annexes.¹³⁴ After the PA government and Fatah welcomed the dissolution of the Administrative Committee, ‘Abbas placed new conditions for reconciliation, including rejecting any future role for Dahlan, refraining from repeating the experience of Lebanese Hizbullah in GS, and not receiving any financial aid for GS except through the National Consensus Government.¹³⁵

For his part, the GS Hamas leader Yahya al-Sinwar said completing the reconciliation was a final strategic decision for his movement, saying the group was unified behind the decision. Al-Sinwar pledged to make “major concessions” to ensure the success of reconciliation, threatening to “break the neck of all those who do not want reconciliation, from Hamas or others.” He added “Hamas will embark on reconciliation and is very strong... the movement has built its strength not to govern Gaza, but for the sake of our people’s dream for liberation.”¹³⁶

To complete Cairo’s efforts and conclude the Reconciliation Agreement, an Egyptian security delegation arrived in GS, on 1/10/2017. At the same time, and pursuant to the initial agreements reached in Cairo in September 2017, the government decided, on 1/10/2017, to form three government committees to take over control of the crossings, security, and official departments; address the effects of the division;

and exercise legal and administrative jurisdiction over GS.¹³⁷ On 2/10/2017, Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah and cabinet members arrived in GS to take over their duties. Hamdallah convened the government and held a meeting with an Egyptian security delegation, vowing afterwards to tackle the catastrophic situation in GS and its crises and problems, and to end all manifestations and repercussions of the division.¹³⁸ On 12/10/2017, the Hamas and Fatah delegations officially signed an agreement to move ahead with reconciliation measures, with EGIS Chief Khaled Fawzi in attendance. The agreement stipulated finalizing measures to empower the National Consensus Government in Gaza by 1/12/2017 and find a solution to the public employees issue by expediting the work of the legal and administrative committees that would examine, arrange, structure, and integrate civil servants hired by the former Haniyyah government before 1/2/2018. The agreement also required finalizing procedures to hand over all of Gaza's crossings to the National Consensus Government by 1/11/2017 and convene a joint security meeting between PA security leaders and their GS counterparts, to discuss mechanisms for rebuilding the security forces. A comprehensive Palestinian dialogue session would be held on 21/11/2017 in Cairo to discuss major Palestinian issues.

Deputy Hamas politburo chief and head of the delegation to Cairo, Saleh al-'Aruri, said that both sides were committed to the Reconciliation Agreement signed in Cairo in 2011. He stressed that focus would be on empowering the government with full jurisdictions in GS and WB, stressing that Hamas would spare no effort to make reconciliation a success.¹³⁹ For his part, 'Azzam al-Ahmad, head of Fatah's delegation, said that an agreement was reached on the specifics of empowering the government in accordance with its legal and constitutional powers, and the supervision of all crossings. Al-Ahmad said the presidential guard would be deployed along the GS border with Egypt.¹⁴⁰

The signing of the Reconciliation Agreement was welcomed by Palestinian citizens and factions. However, Israel said it would not accept reconciliation unless Hamas disarmed, recognized Israel and handed over the captured Israeli soldiers in Gaza.¹⁴¹

On 16/10/2017, Minister Hussein al-Sheikh, head of the PA General Authority of Civil Affairs announced that President 'Abbas had signed a decision for open recruitment to restructure the security forces in GS. He added that a senior delegation from the security forces in WB would visit GS to arrange the security

issue in order to unify authority, laws, and armaments and build a democratic system.¹⁴² In late October 2017, ‘Abbas told an Israeli delegation that he would not appoint any minister who did not recognize Israel in the National Unity Government, which would be formed under the Reconciliation Agreement with Hamas.¹⁴³ The latter responded by saying that this contradicted the terms of the Reconciliation Agreement.¹⁴⁴

The start of reconciliation did not affect the continued sanctions on GS. Omar Shehadeh, PFLP representative in the PLO Executive Committee, revealed that President ‘Abbas had rejected a factions’ request to lift these sanctions, linking this instead to the full empowerment of the government in GS.¹⁴⁵ Despite welcoming the Reconciliation Agreement, Fatah ignored the call to lift the GS sanctions during a Central Committee meeting on 15/10/2017. The same notion was expressed in a statement by Fatah Central Committee member Hussein al-Sheikh, who stressed that the litmus test of the success of the reconciliation was the serious and full empowerment of the government in GS, just like in WB.¹⁴⁶

Various factions condemned this position. Hamas stressed that the continuation of punitive measures against GS undermined reconciliation the PFLP said it thwarted reconciliation. PIJ said the goal was to subdue the resistance project in Gaza. The DFLP said the sanctions were not justified, and that the government had no serious intention to lift them.¹⁴⁷ However, President ‘Abbas ignored these criticisms, and stressed, on 24/10/2017, that he would not expedite the implementation of reconciliation despite its progress, stressing his absolute rejection of the “militia rule” in GS, and the imperative of having one authority, one law, and one source of armaments there.¹⁴⁸

On 1/11/2017, the PA Crossings and Border Commission took over control of GS’s three crossings and announced that the Rafah crossing would be operational by mid-November. The two sides also agreed that 1/12/2017 would be the final deadline to empower the government to take over its duties in Gaza. However, the National Consensus Government, which effectively took over the running and supervision of the Rafah crossing, did not abide by the terms of the Reconciliation Agreement requiring the crossing to open in mid-November 2017. The government claimed this was due to the fact that it had not taken full control of security matters at the crossing and throughout GS—an excuse that did not find agreement among the parties.

Subsequently, Fatah and government leaders ramped up their statements claiming the government was not yet empowered to take over control of the ministries in GS. In this context, Fatah Central Committee member Hussein al-Sheikh accused Hamas of dithering over the implementation and expedition of the Reconciliation Agreement, saying that the level of empowerment of the government did not exceed 5%, at the administrative, financial, and security levels. He added that the government must take control of GS to the same extent as it has in WB.¹⁴⁹

Statements stressed that the government would not resume its duties until after the security issue was solved, and its control was restored over the security forces operating in GS. Some statements even demanded the resistance's weapons be brought under the control of the "legitimate" authority in Ramallah under the slogan of One Authority, One Law, and One Source of Arms in PA territory. Speaking to Egypt's Capital Broadcasting Center (CBC) TV, President 'Abbas said "If someone from Fatah had illegal arms, I would detain him, and this is what I am working to achieve in Gaza. There must be only one legitimate source of arms." 'Abbas stressed that all weapons must be under the control of the PA, adding, "I do not want the experience of Hizbullah in Lebanon to be repeated."¹⁵⁰ In the same gist, Hussein al-Sheikh said, "Arms are not an organizational or factional issue. We will not allow it, and there will only be one source of arms and one law. Either we go in this direction, or let's not fool each other."¹⁵¹ For his part, 'Azzam al-Ahmad said, "We have said clearly that the only arms should be the arms of the PA, meaning the legitimate authority. The government is the party responsible for security in both Gaza and the [West] Bank."¹⁵² Hamas responded by saying that the arms of the resistance were not subject to debate or negotiations with Fatah, and that Hamas would not disarm.¹⁵³

In early December 2017, Fatah and Hamas delegations met in Cairo, aiming to rescue the reconciliation process. An agreement was reached to implement all reconciliation terms, continue the process, and work to empower the government in GS.

The reconciliation process has proceeded very slowly, amid questions over issues like the PLO's future and the holding of elections, which would be the most important leap towards implementing reconciliation in the desired comprehensive manner.

Fourth: Palestinian Factions

Polls conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research in the period covered by this report (2016–2017) reflect the continued polarization between Fatah and Hamas in WB and GS. More than two-thirds of respondents supported Fatah and Hamas, while the other factions collectively receive less than 10% of their support. About 25% are undecided. According to the center's other polls, Fatah in an election would receive 34–41% of the vote, while Hamas would receive 29–32%. Hamas's popularity in GS outstripped Fatah's popularity, while Fatah outperforms Hamas in WB. The polls also showed a decline in 'Abbas's popularity. In December 2017, 70% of respondents said they hoped for 'Abbas to resign, compared with 62% in July 2017 and 65% in June 2016. By contrast, Hamas outperformed Fatah in hypothetical PA presidency elections. If these were to be held (late 2017), with two candidates, 'Abbas and Isma'il Haniyyah, Haniyyah would receive 53% of the votes and 'Abbas would receive 41% (compared to 45% for Haniyyah and 45% for 'Abbas in July 2017, and 48% for Haniyyah and 43% for 'Abbas in June 2016).

There have been many changes in the internal organizational conditions of the Hamas and Fatah movements in 2016 and 2017, while the internal situations of the other factions have not witnessed any significant developments.

Fatah Movement

Fatah's internal situation was marred by tension throughout 2016 and 2017, due to the sharp polarization between 'Abbas' supporters and the movement's organizational frameworks, on the one hand, and supporters of the ousted Fatah leader Muhammad Dahlan, who formed a "reformist movement" within Fatah, on the other hand.

On 6/8/2016, President 'Abbas signed a decision to expel four Fatah leaders because of their relationship with Dahlan, namely MPs Najat Abu Bakr and Naima Sheikh 'Ali, and members of the Revolutionary Council Adli Sadiq and Tawfiq Abu Khussa. On 12/12/2016 'Abbas decided, to revoke the parliamentary immunity of five deputies in the PLC, namely: Muhammad Dahlan, Shami al-Shami, Najat Abu Bakr, Nasser Jum'ah, and Jamal al-Tirawi, in preparation for prosecution. On 14/12/2016, the Ramallah-based Anti-Corruption Crimes Court decided to jail Dahlan on charges of embezzling more than \$16 million during his tenure as

Palestinian security coordinator under the late President Yasir ‘Arafat. In early March 2017, the security forces in WB arrested a number of Fatah members who participated in a Palestinian youth conference organized by Dahlan in Cairo.¹⁵⁴

Fatah held its seventh conference on 29/11/2016 and invited the factions to participate in the opening session. Both Hamas and the PIJ sent their representatives in WB. At the opening session of the conference, ‘Abbas was re-elected as the movement’s general leader. Khalid Mish‘al sent a message to ‘Abbas during the conference, in which he stressed the readiness of Hamas to implement all the requirements of partnership with Fatah and all factions, forces and personalities, to serve Palestinian interests.¹⁵⁵ ‘Abbas announced the political program of the movement for the coming years, in a speech before the conference on 30/11/2016. At the end of the conference, elections were held on 3/12/2016 with the participation of 64 candidates for the Central Committee competing for 18 seats, while 427 candidates competed for 80 seats in the Revolutionary Council. The results were announced the following day, where Fatah’s leader imprisoned by Israel Marwan Barghouti won the highest number of votes, receiving 930 votes out of 1,300, ahead of Jibril Rajoub, who came in second with 100 votes.¹⁵⁶ The new elected members of the Central Committee were: Ahmed Halas, Muhammad al-Madani, Sabri Sidem, Rouhi Fattouh, Dalal Salamah, and Samir al-Rifa‘i.¹⁵⁷ In its closing statement, the conference stressed the need to address and end the division and achieve national reconciliation. It also stressed the necessity of convening the PNC within a period of three months.¹⁵⁸

As for Dahlan and his supporters, they opposed the convening of the movement’s seventh conference because, according to them, it would resize the movement to fit with “‘Abbas’s small ambitions,” as Dahlan phrased it. A number of Fatah leaders, most of whom had been expelled or suspended, held a press conference in Ramallah on 23/11/2016, in which they attacked the seventh conference, calling it a “circus” and disowning its organizers and outcomes. MP Ashraf Jum‘ah revealed arrangements for holding another conference for the movement, which he said would set up an alternative Central Committee and Revolutionary Council. MP Naima Sheikh ‘Ali stressed there would be “no recognition” of the legitimacy of the seventh conference, or its outcomes.¹⁵⁹

An internal crisis broke out between GS Fatah branches on one hand, and the Fatah and PA leaderships on the other, following punitive measures imposed by President ‘Abbas against GS, including the reduction of the salaries of its employees in GS, and forcing many of them into early retirement. Fatah’s Gaza branch announced on 13/8/2017 that it would freeze its activities in protest against ‘Abbas’s actions and threatened further escalation unless the PA reversed its decisions regarding the early retirement of its employees.¹⁶⁰ In mid-July 2017, a new senior leadership commission was formed by Fatah’s branch in GS, with the addition of an advisory board to rebuild the organization and bring it back to the forefront.¹⁶¹

Hamas Movement

There was no change in the structure of Hamas throughout 2016, but internal elections, held every four years, began in early 2017 to choose a new leadership and administrative bodies at different organizational levels. On 13/2/2017, Hamas announced the election of Yahya al-Sinwar as head of the movement in the GS, Khalil al-Hayyeh as his deputy, and Rawhi Mushtaha, Mahmud al-Zahhar, Fathi Hammad, Yasir Harb, and Ahmad al-Kurd, as members of the movement’s GS political bureau.¹⁶² Hamas leader Salah al-Bardawil said the election of al-Sinwar followed a sophisticated and smooth democratic electoral process, held according to the law and the regulations in force, but stressed that al-Sinwar’s election would not change Hamas’s policy line.¹⁶³

In April 2017, Maher Salah was reelected to lead the Hamas office abroad. Saleh al-‘Aruri was re-elected head of the West Bank office. The former head of Hamas’s politburo, Khalid Mish‘al, announced on 6/5/2017, the election of Isma‘il Haniyyah as his successor, as head of the Hamas politburo new electoral session. Haniyyah’s election was welcomed by the Fatah movement, PFLP, PIJ, and other factions and national figures and various segments of Palestinian society. Hamas also announced the election of the following members for the politburo: Musa Abu Marzuq, Saleh al-‘Aruri, Khalil al-Hayyeh, Muhammad Nazzal, Maher ‘Ubaid, ‘Izzat al-Rishq, and Fathi Hammad.¹⁶⁴ On 5/10/2017, al-‘Aruri was selected as deputy head of the movement’s politburo.

As for the political program, days before the end of his term, on 1/5/2017, from Doha, Khalid Mish‘al announced, Hamas’s new political document titled “A Document of General Principles and Policies.” Mish‘al said the new charter

reflected consensus in the ranks of the movement, and expressed its Islamic identity and Palestinian national character. He said the charter was based on a balanced approach between openness, evolution, and renewal yet without undermining the fundamentals and rights of the Palestinian people, mainly the Islamic and Arab identity of the Palestinian land; not relinquishing any part of it; not recognizing Israel; and affirming the Palestinian right to armed resistance, return, and full sovereignty over the land. Mish'al also stressed that Hamas believed in, and remained committed to, managing its inter-Palestinian relations on the basis of pluralism and democratic choice, partnership, tolerance, and dialogue.¹⁶⁵

PIJ

The PIJ has maintained its Islamic-resistance line, continuing to accumulate its capabilities in GS while attempting to reactivate its cells in WB. Its pursuit of an end to the Palestinian schism continued.

The PIJ put forward a ten-point initiative to rebuild the Palestinian national project. It accepted an invitation extended by Fatah to attend its Seventh Conference, and attended the meetings of the preparatory committee for the PNC held in Beirut in January 2017 “in order to establish a new National Council representing all national parties, including Hamas and Jihad.” The PIJ also congratulated Hamas on the election of Isma‘il Haniyyah as the head of its politburo, and praised his inauguration speech later for being “patriotic and unitary, expressing the authenticity of Hamas as a national liberation movement.”¹⁶⁶

The PIJ decided not to contend the local municipal elections but did give its members and supporters the freedom to vote for the candidates they chose. The PIJ condemned a decision by the Supreme Court of Justice in Ramallah to hold the elections in the WB alone without GS, saying the move deepened internal crises and distracted Palestinians from their causes.¹⁶⁷

The PIJ continued its strong criticism of the Oslo Accords, the peace process and the PA's conduct. PIJ Secretary-General Ramadan ‘Abdullah Shallah, in a speech at the Sixth International Conference in Support of the Palestinian Intifada in Tehran, stressed that the *Intifadah* was under siege not just by the occupation but also in the Palestinian home front. He asked President ‘Abbas “How will we confront the settlement, Mr. President, with an Authority that protects the occupation?!” However, these remarks prompted Fatah to attack Shallah, saying

his statements reflected “unjustified political and moral degradation.” The PIJ responded by saying Fatah had no right to use that language against Shallah, “an affront to Palestinian leaderships.”¹⁶⁸

In response to the security crackdown and violation of freedoms in WB, in early October 2017 the PIJ said this contradicted reconciliation, calling on the PA to unshackle freedoms and refrain from assaulting opinion-makers, intellectuals, and activists and guarantee human rights in WB.¹⁶⁹

PIJ boycotted the PCC meetings on 14–15/1/2018, saying they ignored and bypassed all that had been agreed upon by Palestinians in the negotiations held in Cairo, Beirut, and Gaza.¹⁷⁰

The PIJ participated in reconciliation meetings in GS, rejected sanctions imposed by the ‘Abbas government on GS, saying the goal was to subdue the resistance project in GS and target its spearhead.¹⁷¹ In the context of commenting on Hamas’s moves towards reconciliation, PIJ said, “Hamas has given everything it has for reconciliation, and the ball is now in the court of Fatah and the PA.”¹⁷²

PFLP

The PFLP maintained its anti-Oslo stance, while confining its objection within the PLO framework. It supported Hamas’s resistance platform, but criticized its political and administrative performance in GS, rejecting a Hamas proposal in January 2017 to form an inter-factional committee to oversee the crossings. It stated that the role of the factions was to present ideas and initiatives that serve the citizens, and not to be an alternative to any executive entity. The PFLP stressed the most important clause of the inter-factional initiative was for the National Consensus Government to oversee the crossing.¹⁷³

On 3/4/2016, the PFLP lashed out at ‘Abbas, urging him to resign. PFLP politburo Spokesperson Rabah Muhanna said the president had crossed all red lines and obstructed a decision by PCC to end security coordination with the occupation. Muhanna said if ‘Abbas would not resign, then all members of the Executive Committee should ensure he is held accountable for these mistakes and remove him from his post as chairman of the PLO Executive Committee.¹⁷⁴

The PFLP held the PA responsible for the case of the assassination of Omar Nayef Zayed, one of its leaders in Bulgaria, accusing the Palestinian embassy staff there of complicity in the murder, raising questions about the role of the embassy

in the assassination or its failure to protect him.¹⁷⁵ PFLP supporters burned portraits and effigies of PA President Mahmud ‘Abbas and Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki, as well as the Palestinian ambassador to Bulgaria during a protest in Gaza City on the 40th day after Nayef’s death.¹⁷⁶ In return, ‘Abbas issued an order to suspend disbursements to the PFLP from the Palestinian National Fund (PNF) of the PLO for the second time in less than two years, without consulting the Executive Committee.¹⁷⁷

The PFLP warned the already disastrous situation in GS would deteriorate to extremely dangerous levels because of the dispute between Fatah and Hamas, both of whom were warned against using the Gazans as “hostages and human shields” to achieve partisan and factional goals. It called on Egypt to put pressure towards convening the Palestinian Leadership Framework in Cairo.¹⁷⁸ The PFLP welcomed Hamas’s announcement of the dissolving of the Administrative Committee in GS, and welcomed the signing of the Reconciliation Agreement in Cairo on 12/10/2017.¹⁷⁹ It called for an end to all PA punitive measures against GS. PFLP representative in the PLO Executive Committee, Omar Shehadeh, confirmed that President ‘Abbas had rejected a request by the factions to lift the GS sanctions, during a meeting of the Executive Committee in Ramallah. The Front criticized the insistence of ‘Abbas and the Fatah leadership on continuing the sanctions.¹⁸⁰ Rabah Muhanna rejected remarks by ‘Azzam al-Ahmad claiming the factions had unanimously agreed in Cairo that there were problems facing the government’s resumption of its duties in Gaza, saying this was inaccurate and was part of a stalling tactic, and defended Hamas’s “flexibility.”¹⁸¹

The PFLP had signaled its intent to contend local elections in a “Democratic Alliance” list comprised of five leftist groups in WB and GS, including the DFLP, PPP, the Palestinian National Initiative movement, and the Palestinian Democratic Union (Fida).¹⁸² However, the PFLP later decided to boycott the elections,¹⁸³ criticizing a ruling by the Supreme Court of Justice limiting the elections to WB. It called on the Palestinian government to tackle the ruling in consultation with the political forces to prepare a conducive climate for the elections away from politicization and said the ruling “deepened the division.”¹⁸⁴

On 14/8/2017, the PFLP refused to convene the PNC in Ramallah without national consensus. It stated “the Council must pursue unity and consensus in line with the outcomes of the Cairo Accords in 2011 and the meetings of the Preparatory

Committee in Beirut.”¹⁸⁵ Despite the PFLP’s attendance of PCC meetings in January 2018, it continued criticizing the conduct of the PA and PLO leadership, expressing reservations on the decisions of the council, which it described as “grey,” and lambasted it for missing the opportunity of ending “the devastating path” of Oslo.¹⁸⁶

DFLP

The political conduct of the DFLP has remained close to that of the PFLP in terms of rejecting the Oslo Accords and their commitments; and confining opposition to the PLO framework albeit in a more lenient tone compared to the PFLP. The DFLP expressed support for the resistance platform, while criticizing Hamas’s political and administrative performance in GS. The DFLP criticized the Fatah-Hamas monopoly, saying it only produced further division and subscribed to rival regional axes. The DFLP called for a comprehensive Palestinian dialogue inclusive of all factions and forces in Cairo, under the auspices of ‘Abdul Fattah al-Sisi.¹⁸⁷

In early July 2017, the DFLP criticized the performance of the PA and its president, warning against what it said were schemes by ‘Abbas to seize control of the PLO and annex it to the PA.¹⁸⁸ In April 2016, the DFLP had expressed anger over ‘Abbas’s move to suspend its disbursements from the PNF.¹⁸⁹

The DFLP called on ‘Abbas to lift the sanctions on GS, saying they were unjustified, made Palestinians cynical about the reconciliation despite negotiations, and indicated that the National Consensus Government is not serious about lifting them.¹⁹⁰

Fifth: The Questions of Freedoms and Palestinian-Israeli Security Coordination, and Their Implications on the Internal Palestinian Situation

The PA and its security forces continued security coordination and collaboration with Israel in 2016 and 2017. The two sides held a number of security-focused meetings, at a time when the PA security forces further developed their effectiveness in confronting Palestinian resistance operations, without regard for the negative repercussions their practices caused on the internal Palestinian situation.



Security Positions and Coordination Meetings

At the start of 2016, Israeli security forces praised the improvement in security coordination with their PA counterparts, saying a marked change has been observed in the way the PA dealt with the events of the Jerusalem *Intifadah* that erupted in October 2015 and the subsequent Palestinian attacks, most of which were lone knife attacks.¹⁹¹

Israeli Maj. Gen. Gadi Shamni, former head of the Israeli army's Central Command, revealed that the PA security forces were supplying the Israeli side with important intelligence to help crack down on the Jerusalem *Intifadah*, saying intelligence sharing was one of the leading facets of security cooperation between Israel and the PA.¹⁹² For his part, Israeli army Chief of Staff Lieutenant General (Lt. Gen.) Gadi Eisenkot, speaking before the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in Tel Aviv on 18/1/2016, suggested there was no reason to doubt the future of security coordination between Israel and the PA, saying it served a shared security interest. These remarks are a good summary of both sides' perspectives, favoring the continuation of security coordination, full delivery on its commitments, and future development of its mechanisms regardless of political stances and events on the ground.¹⁹³

As for the PA, on 23/1/2016 President 'Abbas confirmed that security coordination with Israel would continue, suggesting the PA security forces were preventing Palestinians from carrying out attacks against Israel. This reinforced Israeli assertions regarding the importance and continuity of security coordination with the PA to contain the Jerusalem *Intifadah* and Palestinian resistance operations.¹⁹⁴ In late January 2016, the Israeli army command warned against the escalation of the Jerusalem *Intifadah* and the deterioration of conditions in WB, and the ensuing need to maintain security coordination with the PA, thus underscoring the key determinant of the PA-Israel relations.¹⁹⁵ Subsequently, a high-level PA delegation held a security meeting with the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The meeting was described as "positive" and produced an agreement on de-escalating the situation in Jerusalem and WB.¹⁹⁶

As some PA voices called for suspending security coordination with Israel, following its repeated raids on PA territories in WB, Zeev Elkin, Israel's Minister of Jerusalem Affairs and Minister of Environmental Protection, on 11/2/2016 "emphasized that the PA's existence completely depends on the Oslo Accords, and

that security cooperation is a central part of those accords. Should it announce that it no longer keeps them, there will no longer be a basis for said existence and it would ‘evaporate,’ as he put it.”¹⁹⁷

However, other Israeli ministers downplayed the importance of those Palestinian appeals, stressing ahead of the Israeli government meeting on 6/3/2016 that the PA would not suspend security coordination because “it protected the PA and its president Mahmud ‘Abbas more than it protected Israel.”¹⁹⁸ On 18/3/2016, Fatah Central Committee member Mohammad Shtayyeh said that PA security forces had held a meeting to discuss suspending security coordination with Israel. The PA was still waiting for Israeli clarifications regarding the incursions into PA-controlled WB territories, he added, otherwise the PA would declare agreements signed with the occupation null and void.¹⁹⁹

Subsequently, a security meeting was held between PA security forces and their Israeli counterparts in late March 2016. Secretary of PLO Executive Committee, Saeb Erekat, confirmed the meeting had been held to discuss the situation on the ground, but denied that Israel had offered a final response regarding their mutual agreements. This response would be an indicator for the PA leadership to whether continue the security coordination or not.²⁰⁰

However, all indications suggested the PA was not serious about its threats to end security coordination with Israel, and that they were just part of a political maneuver. This much was confirmed by the position of President ‘Abbas, who in the context of condemning Palestinian resistance attacks stressed the importance of continuing security coordination with Israel.

On 3/5/2016, Saed Erekat confirmed the end of bilateral meetings with the Israelis, without reaching an agreement regarding the ongoing Israeli army incursions into PA territory. This was while informed Palestinian sources confirmed the suspension of bilateral meetings and said this would be followed by stopping security meetings and then security coordination with the occupation.²⁰¹

However, the Prime Minister of the National Consensus Government Rami Hamdallah confirmed later that security coordination with Israel continued unchanged, indicating that the PCC decision to suspend security coordination had not yet been followed by implementation mechanisms.²⁰² Moreover, Avi Issacharoff, The Times of Israel’s Middle East analyst, who fills the same role for Walla! website, said that security coordination between the PA and Israel was

evolving and prospering, stressing that the threats issued by the PA and some leaders regarding suspending coordination were unrealistic and were intended for media consumption.²⁰³ This much was confirmed by the new Director of the Israel Security Agency—ISA (*Shabak*) Nadav Argaman, during a meeting of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee in the Knesset on 12/7/2016. Argaman said the PA security forces and their Israeli counterparts were coordinating closely to tackle Hamas, warning that the situation in WB was on the brink of exploding.²⁰⁴ On a separate occasion, Argaman told the committee that the security coordination with the PA was proceeding excellently.²⁰⁵

In an important indication that the PA's very existence depended on security coordination with Israel, on 19/7/2016 Netanyahu said that the PA would collapse if the Israeli army and security services were to withdraw from WB. For his part, Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon said that should Israel give up its freedom to operate in WB, the PA "won't survive."²⁰⁶

In another indication to the continuation of political and security relations between the PA and Israel, the PA Supreme Court Judge and the President's Advisor for Religious Affairs and Islamic Relations, Mahmud al-Habbash, met along with a number of PA religious and political officials with Jewish rabbis at the office of the Israeli President Reuven Rivlin. The two sides said they had agreed on the need to renounce all forms of religious violence, according to a statement issued by the organizers at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Despite the apparent political estrangement and the suspension of political communications between the PA and Israel, in late December 2016, President 'Abbas addressed a message of peace to the Israeli society, saying he would continue security coordination with Israel because it served a shared interest.²⁰⁷ Throughout 2017, security coordination with Israel continued, despite statements by some PA officials, who attempted to insinuate that there was a limitation or downgrading of security coordination, however these were all unfounded assertions.

In this context, and at the end of a visit to Washington to prepare for 'Abbas's meeting with the US president, Donald Trump, in late April 2017, Head of Palestinian Intelligence, Maj. Gen. Majid Faraj stressed that the PA's crackdown on Palestinian resistance operations was an "ethical commitment" towards Israel's security. Faraj denied intentions to downgrade security coordination with Israel at any time.²⁰⁸

In light of Israeli measures against *al-Aqsa* Mosque in mid-July 2017, including closing it to Palestinian worshippers, with a ban on the call to prayer and worship there, President ‘Abbas on 21/7/2017 announced the suspension of all contacts with Israel at all levels, including security cooperation, until Israel reversed these measures.²⁰⁹ On 23/7/2017, ‘Abbas reaffirmed the suspension of security coordination with Israel, saying the situation at *al-Aqsa* Mosque was very difficult and that the PA would not gamble with the fate of Palestinians or take nihilistic decisions, but calculated decisions that would produce results.²¹⁰ For his part, in August 2017, the President’s Advisor for Foreign Affairs and International Relations, Nabil Sha‘ath, said that security coordination with Israel would not return to its previous levels unless some conditions were met, led by the reversal of measures at *al-Aqsa* Mosque, and ending daily incursions into PA-controlled territories.²¹¹ On 22/7/2017, Palestinian factions welcomed ‘Abbas’s decision to suspend security coordination, and called for reinforcing the steadfastness of the Palestinian people to confront Israeli schemes.²¹² However, they then lashed out at ‘Abbas when they discovered the lack of seriousness in his decision, after several reports of resumed coordination. In addition, Israeli Channel 2 reported that the PA had fully resumed security coordination with Israel, prompting the PIJ, Hamas, DFLP, and PFLP to issue condemnations. Hussein Mansur, member of the PFLP Central Committee, said that security coordination provided free service to the occupation, and it must be fully suspended as it harmed Palestinian national interests and Palestinian resistance.²¹³

At an event organized by the Foreign Press Association in Ramallah, PA police chief Hazem Atallah affirmed that security coordination between the PA police and Israel largely never stopped.²¹⁴ Corroborating this, a Palestinian official source said on 6/8/2017 that communications between the PA and Israel were returning to their previous state, i.e., before the events at *al-Aqsa* Mosque. The source said President ‘Abbas had decided to gradually restore contacts with Israel, after certifying that Israeli measures at the mosque had been reversed.²¹⁵ However, PA Supreme Court Judge and the President’s Advisor for Religious Affairs and Islamic Relations Mahmud al-Habbash, said on 8/8/2017 that the PA conditioned the resumption of security coordination on the return to the 2000 status quo in accordance with the mutually-signed agreements.²¹⁶

Echoing this decision, ‘Abbas said during a meeting with the Israeli Meretz Party, on 20/8/2017, that he was seeking to resume security coordination with Israel. However, he said Israel had not responded to this proposal yet, adding that he had instructed PA security forces to increase monitoring Palestinian entities that could stage attacks at Jerusalem’s holy sites.²¹⁷

Facets of Security Coordination

Security coordination between PA security forces and their Israeli counterparts includes: Preventing and foiling Palestinian resistance attacks, whether by individuals or movements; sharing intelligence with a view to preventing resistance activities; and securing borders for Israeli soldiers and settlers entering the PA areas and ensuring their safe return.

At the start of 2016, Head of Palestinian Intelligence, Maj. Gen. Majid Faraj said the PA had thwarted 200 operations against Israeli targets, arresting around 100 Palestinians planning such attacks, many of them having their weapons confiscated after the Jerusalem *Intifadah*, in the context of security coordination with Israel.²¹⁸

Amid a rise in stabbings and ramming attacks as part of the Jerusalem *Intifadah*, in late March 2016 President ‘Abbas revealed his agencies had been searching schoolchildren to prevent them from carrying out attacks against settlers and occupation soldiers, claiming 70 knives had been seized from them.²¹⁹ On 9/4/2016, the Israeli website Walla! said the PA, in coordination with the Shabak captured a Palestinian cell in Ramallah that was planning to carry out attacks against Israeli forces, to shoot and capture soldiers or settlers from Israeli settlements close to Ramallah.²²⁰

Confirming the major role played by the PA security forces in thwarting resistance operations against the occupation, Avi Issacharoff, Israeli analyst in Walla!, wrote in mid-April 2016 that the PA had in earlier months thwarted dozens if not hundreds of attacks against Israel in the context of its commitment to security coordination with the Israelis. Issacharoff expressed surprise that Israel was denying the major security role of the PA on its behalf.²²¹

According to data presented to government officials by senior officers in the Israel army’s Central Command, on 4/5/2016, PA security forces were responsible for around 40% of all arrests of suspected attackers in WB. This represented a

dramatic expansion of the PA security forces' security coordination effort, as three months earlier, they were responsible for only 10% of such arrests.²²²

As the PA deployed an increasing number of security agents in WB to contain the situation and prevent resistance attacks, Avi Issacharoff said on 10/5/2016 that PA police officers were conducting security operations in pursuit of anti-Israel elements in eastern Jerusalem.²²³

In turn, Israeli army Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot revealed, following a meeting of Israel's political-security cabinet, details about the mutual roles of the Israeli army and PA security forces in their war on the Palestinian resistance in WB.²²⁴

Apparently, the security cooperation between PA security forces and their Israeli counterparts has not always been smooth, and has witnessed pressures and political/security blackmail. According to a report published on 10/7/2016 on Walla! website, meetings were held between senior Israeli army officers and Palestinian security officials in which the Israeli side made threats and demanded the PA focus its efforts on confiscating arms and stepping up its security operations, or the Israeli army would increase incursions and operations in all WB areas.²²⁵

On 7/9/2016, Hamas issued a report documenting some abuses by the PA security forces against Palestinian activists and citizens in WB and GS in the context of security coordination with Israel.²²⁶

On 13/9/2016, Israeli daily *Yedioth Ahronoth* said the PA security forces handed over two Israeli female soldiers who had strayed into Tulkarm.²²⁷ On 6/11/2016, Walla! website reported that the PA had provided intelligence to Israel that helped thwart a bombing attack planned for 4/11/2016 against Israeli forces in Hebron in WB, with one Palestinian youth arrested as the main suspect.²²⁸ On 10/12/2016, PA security forces handed Israel three settlers who had snuck into Ramallah in WB.²²⁹

According to a report published on 3/1/2017, by the Arab Organisation for Human Rights in the UK (AOHR UK), PA security forces arrested and summoned 2,214 Palestinians in 2016, including 1,125 who were detained and 1,089 who were summoned for questioning. They former prisoners held by Israel and university students.²³⁰

In early February 2017, the PIJ accused PA security forces of arresting 16 of its cadres in WB, including former prisoners in Israel. It added that the PA was cracking down on its members on behalf of the Israeli army.²³¹

On 27/3/2017, PA security forces handed Israel an Israeli soldier who had driven his military vehicle into the village of Sa'ir in the Hebron district by mistake, and on 12/5/2017, handed also two settlers who had snuck into the village of Qasra south of Nablus in WB. They had been surrounded by Palestinian farmers before the PA forces interfered to rescue them.²³²

On 8/6/2017, the PA security forces rescued an Israeli bus, which Palestinian youths attacked and threw rocks at, after trespassing into Nablus in WB. The bus was then returned to Israeli authorities.²³³

On 6/7/2017, the PA's Preventive Security Service (PSS) stopped a youth conference in Ramallah. Alaa 'Abed, a coordinator for the event, said that the PSS told them that holding the conference was prohibited, citing security concerns.²³⁴

In late July 2017, Walla! website quoted a high-level Palestinian security source as saying the PSS had arrested Hamas operatives in WB, who were attempting to escalate the security situation by planning attacks against Israel. The source praised the Israeli army and Shabak's handling of the unrest at *al-Aqsa* Mosque throughout the crisis.²³⁵

In the same context, Shabak's Director Nadav Argaman met in mid-December 2017 with the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee and told them that the Shabak had thwarted over 400 attacks in WB. Argaman described the scale of defensive operations as "impressive." He added that in 2016, the Shabak stopped 344 major attacks. Reports said that the cooperation with the Israeli army, the Israel Police, and the Palestinian Authority, is what has made the effective prevention possible.²³⁶

The Impact of Security Coordination on the Internal Palestinian Situation

Security coordination with Israel has undoubtedly left deep wounds in the Palestinian public conscious. It has produced many negative effects and backlashes that further fragmented Palestinian social fabric. Indeed, it is no secret that there are oppressive and arbitrary measures demanded by security coordination with Israel, including the arrest and torture in PA and Israeli prisons equally, the restrictions

on freedoms, and the crackdown on the right to resist. All of these affect broad segments of the Palestinian people and undermine their morale and social relations. Consequently, security coordination has been met with almost universal rejection by the Palestinians, given the threats, difficulties, and hardships it creates. Various segments of the Palestinian people, led by factions and forces, have persistently condemned coordination and called on the PA to end it without delay.

Throughout 2016 and 2017, the factions that dominate Palestine's political landscape spared no occasion to express rejection of security coordination, warning the PA of the consequences of continuing to coordinate with Israel against the Palestinian resistance and freedom fighters. For example, on 10/4/2016 Hamas accused the PA and its security forces of seeking to thwart the Jerusalem *Intifadah*, foil resistance operations, arrest freedom fighters, and pursuing a revolving door policy vis-à-vis security coordination with Israel.²³⁷

Fatah Central Committee member and prisoner in Israel Marwan Barghouti, in an interview from prison on 18/4/2016, condemned in the strongest terms the PA's insistence on security coordination with Israel. Barghouti said resisting the occupation was incompatible with security coordination, with one Palestinian entity resisting the occupation and another collaborating with it.²³⁸ Barghouti urged the PA to end coordination, saying the Palestinian people wanted a national authority that paved the way for independence, not occupation and settlement.²³⁹

Responding to remarks by President 'Abbas in which he confirmed the continuation of security coordination with Israel, on 19/4/2017 Hamas said it was looking with great concern at these remarks, calling on 'Abbas to refrain from expressing positions that are at odds with the culture of the Palestinian people and their patriotic attitudes.²⁴⁰

For their part, Palestinian leftwing forces expressed extreme anger towards the PA leadership and the dominant factions in the PLO, after confirming knowledge that the PCC decision regarding the suspension of security coordination with Israel was being kept on the shelf. This was while PA security officials continued to hold meetings with their Israeli counterparts, and security coordination to thwart resistance operations also continued.

Leftist parties (PFLP, DFLP, PPP) said that the PCC decision regarding the suspension of security coordination with Israel was a maneuver that was not worth more than the ink it was written with.²⁴¹

In July 2016, PA security forces carried out a wave of arrests and raids in collaboration with the Israeli army, affecting many Hamas and PIJ members in Nablus in WB, which was followed by strong condemnations from Hamas and PIJ. ‘Abdul Sattar Qassim, professor of political science at An-Najah University, said security coordination was nothing new, adding that the PA had tied its own hands while making the occupation’s security its unassailable priority.²⁴²

On 3/7/2017, a report by the Committee of the Families of Political Prisoners in the West Bank counted 273 assaults against Palestinian citizens carried out by PA security forces in June 2017, including mass arrests targeting resistance activities.²⁴³

In the wake of the Israeli arrests of Hamas leaders and MPs in WB, on 2/8/2017, MP Jamila al-Shanti said the arrests were the fruit of security coordination with Israel, adding that that Palestinians could change the existing equation in WB and turn the tables against the occupation and its collaborators.²⁴⁴

On 11/10/2017, the AOHR UK issued a report monitoring what it said were crimes against Palestinian citizens by the PA security forces and Israeli forces in the third quarter of 2017. The organization indicated that the double suffering, coming from both forces, was deepening with the continuation of killings, arrests, torture, and collective punishment of families of Palestinian prisoners and those killed in clashes with Israel. The measures taken against Palestinians were considered to be in full harmony with the policy of security coordination and collaboration with Israel. The report added that security coordination between the PA and the occupation forces was in itself a crime that violated the Geneva Conventions.²⁴⁵

Conclusion

The years 2016 and 2017 ended in an alarming climate in which the Palestinian political structure was not able to overcome its problems. There were no significant developments at the level of rebuilding the PLO and its representative and executive institutions. The PLO left 2017 as it had entered 2016: chronically weak, ineffective, and impotent, except those times when the leadership summoned it from clinical death whenever it needed to shore up its legitimacy or fill the gaps in representation.

The PA for its part was keen to only operate one of its branches, the executive branch, and concentrate its powers in the hands of the president, while deliberately suspending its legislative branch, which was supposed to form, monitor, hold accountable, and give confidence to the government.

Even the Unified Leadership Framework, which was supposed to play an active role in the absence of representative institutions, was not spared the obstruction. Thus, there is now an executive political leadership dominated by one Palestinian faction, controlling and steering the Palestinian polity, in a matter reminiscent of reactionary Third World stereotypes of governance, and one that is incompatible with the revolutionary nature of the Palestinian liberation project against the occupation that is supposed to mobilize the potentials and energies of its people.

Instead of revolution, the National Consensus Government preoccupied itself with the implementation of tough sanctions on a Palestinian territory, the Gaza Strip, in order to punish and subdue the other party to this “consensus.” The reconciliation dossier was “managed” rather than pursued to conclusion, in line with the policy of the dominant faction in government and the continuation of security coordination with Israel, despite strong opposition from an overwhelming number of Palestinians.

The closing weeks of 2017 carried signs of a breakthrough in the reconciliation track, following Hamas’s dissolution of the Administrative Committee, and the government taking control of the crossings and ministries in GS, the optimism receded as new demands were made against Hamas concerning the security forces in the strip and the arms of the resistance.

The PLO and PA leaderships did not seem to be interested in real national partnership and a transparent democratic process. In part this was due to their own composition and mindset; however, the Arab and international landscape, ever hostile to “political Islam” and resistance movements, has also made it difficult for these latter to be included in the Palestinian polity. Furthermore, there remains an urgent need to delineate the paths and priorities of the Palestinian national project (especially settling the issues related to the peace process and resistance), in order to build a formula for effective operation of Palestinian institutions. Moreover, there is a need for a confidence-building program between the rival Palestinian parties, led by Fatah and Hamas.



Perhaps Trump's decision to transfer the US embassy to Jerusalem, and therefore the failure of the peace process in accordance to the Oslo parameters for the minimum requirements of the two-state solution, and the loss of hope regarding the transition of the PA into a fully-fledged state will all prompt the Palestinian leadership to reconsider its commitment to Oslo. Hence, it would pave the way for rearranging the Palestinian home front on bases that take into account the higher interests of the Palestinian people, accommodate the people's energies, and manage the struggle against the Israeli occupation in a more effective manner.

Endnotes

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This Report

Al-Zaytouna Centre is pleased to present to its readers the Palestine Strategic Report (PSR) 2016–2017, the 10th PSR to be published.

With an academic methodology and comprehensive, objective approach, the report comprehensively details developments concerning the Palestine issue and provides the latest information and data available at the end of 2017, along with analysis and forecasts running into 2018.

This report is the result of collaborative work between 14 experts and researchers. In eight chapters, it addresses the internal Palestinian scene; Palestinian demographic and economic indicators; the situation in Jerusalem and the holy sites; the specifics of Israeli aggression, Palestinian resistance and the peace process; the complexities of Israeli-Palestinian dynamics, including the internal situation in Israel; and Palestine's Arab, Islamic, and international relations. This tenth PSR volume features an advanced research map and forecasts the most prominent scenarios of relevance to the Palestine issue in 2018 and 2019.

The PSR now occupies a prominent position as an indispensable reference document, integral to Palestine studies and research. Al-Zaytouna Centre hopes the PSR will continue to make valuable contributions in this field.

Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh

The Palestine Strategic Report 2016 – 2017



Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies & Consultations

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ISBN 978-9953-572-75-8



Al-Zaytouna Centre For Studies & Consultations