

The Palestine Strategic Report 2018 – 2019



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Chapter Four

*The Courses of Aggression, Resistance
and the Peace Process*

The Courses of Aggression, Resistance and the Peace Process

Introduction

While Israeli aggression and repressive measures persisted throughout 2018–2019, Palestinians continued with their resistance against the Israeli occupation, embracing all possible popular and armed forms. Despite the impediments facing the resistance in the WB due to security coordination between the PA and the Israeli army, individual resistance operations continued, parallel to unrelenting daily confrontations and retaliation against Israel’s measures, incursions and arrest campaigns. In GS, resistance forces developed their combat and field capabilities, as well as the performance of the Joint Operation Room, while undergoing several military confrontations that demonstrated high efficiency and deterrent strength. The issue of the Palestinian refugees and the GS siege were brought to limelight again thanks to the Marches of Return that presented a new, creative popular resistance. As for the peace process, it was clear that this track had reached a dead end, as the US and Israeli sides tried to liquidate the Palestine issue through the “Trump Deal,” which is faced with a Palestinian consensus on rejecting and foiling it.

First: Israeli Aggression and Palestinian Resistance

Resistance operations increased throughout 2018–2019 as the *Shabak* recorded 3,006 attacks in 2018 compared to 2,682 in 2019 in the WB including East Jerusalem, the GS and the 1948 occupied territories. With this, the monthly rate in 2018 was slightly less than that in 2019. The *Shabak* recorded 1,153 attacks in the WB (excluding Jerusalem) in 2018 compared to 1,050 in 2019, while in East Jerusalem it recorded 198 attacks in 2018 compared to 247 in 2019. It also recorded five attacks in 2018 in the 1948 territories and the same number was recorded in 2019. Interestingly, most attacks in the two years in the WB consisted of throwing

stones and Molotov cocktails.¹ In GS, the Shabak recorded 1,650 attacks in 2018 compared to 1,380 in 2019, while only 39 attacks were recorded in 2017, taking into consideration that the Shabak reports count attacks launched from Sinai with those of GS, although they remain very few compared to the latter's.²

Due to increased confrontations with the Israeli army and the events accompanying the Marches of Return, GS witnessed a sharp surge in Palestinian rockets launched towards Israeli towns and cities in the 1948 occupied territories. According to Shabak, 754 rockets and mortar shells were launched in 2018 compared to 1,020 in 2019.³

Security coordination reached advanced levels throughout 2018–2019, during which Israeli security forces announced the foiling of Palestinian resistance attacks and the detection of resistance cells, in coordination with Palestinian security forces. Several Israeli security and military sources, including Gadi Eisenkot, Army Chief of the General Staff, said that security coordination had prevented Hamas from returning to its operations in the WB.⁴

Speaking to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Security Committee on 6/11/2018, Shabak Head Nadav Argaman said that during 2018, the Shabak thwarted 480 attacks, arrested 219 Hamas cells and prevented 590 potential lone-wolf attacks.⁵ On 20/1/2020, Argaman revealed that his Agency thwarted 560 attacks in 2019, most of which were planned to take place in the WB, including ten bombings, four kidnappings, and more than 300 shooting attacks.⁶ He credited these successes to specialized technologies used by the service, its cooperation with other Israeli security forces and its "synergy with our counterparts around the world."⁷

Walla!'s correspondent Avi Issacharoff claimed that Israel foiled 60% of resistance operations in the WB saying, on 20/3/2019, that the PA security forces in Ramallah thwarted around 30% of those operations. Issacharoff revealed that 100 attacks were foiled in the first quarter of 2019, 600 in 2018, 400 in 2017, 350 in 2016 and 200 in 2015.⁸

Table 1/4: Geographical Distribution of Palestinian Resistance Operations 2018–2019⁹

Year	WB (Jerusalem excluded)	East Jerusalem	The 1948 occupied territories	GS*	Total
2018	1,153	198	5	1,650	3,006
2019	1,050	247	5**	1,380	2,682
Total	2,203	445	10	3,030	5,688

* Including the Sinai Peninsula.

**Including two resistance operations inside the prison.

Jewish settler violence—under the cover of the Israeli army—continued to target Palestinians in WB, recording 378 attacks in 2018 and 256 up to mid-December 2019.¹⁰

1. Marches of Return and Breaking the Siege

In January 2018, via social media platforms, Palestinian groups proposed holding popular marches simultaneously in GS and WB along with the Palestinian Diaspora. Their objective was to have an actual and peaceful return of Palestinian refugees, under the Palestinian flag, to their homeland and to the houses they were expelled from in the 1948 war. Palestinian Land Day was the date chosen to launch these marches.

The International Coordination Committee for the Great March of Return was formed, and it stressed that the idea was a non-factional one, wanted by the masses to mobilize refugees and gradually progress towards borders. However, when the Palestinian factions in GS joined the marches, on 17/3/2018, it added a resistance dimension. Then, the “Supreme National Authority of the March of Return and Breaking the Siege” was formed as the new framework of the marches, thus adding a local objective to the marches, which is breaking the siege.¹¹ The Marches of Return started on Friday 30/3/2018, and received wide response, thus becoming one of the most important developments that raised the Israeli army concerns, who despite pursuing measures and policies could not prevent them from taking place. In GS, the marches embodied the objectives most, as there is a pro-resistance environment, people are suffering from the siege, and the population are mostly refugees.

The Marches of Return, with their simple and creative tools, continued on a weekly basis throughout most of the period covered in this report, with 86 marches held, up to the end of 2019. The Palestinian people have marched, confronted the Israeli army, stormed their positions, and launched incendiary kites and balloons into Israeli settlements. Friday Marches continued, culminating on 14/5/2018, when the US celebrated the transfer of their embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, where 58 were killed and 2,771 injured in GS. On 26/12/2019, the Supreme National Authority of the Marches decided to suspend the marches until 30/3/2020, and to hold them on monthly basis in 2020.¹²

On 20/12/2019, Al Mezan Center for Human Rights reported that the Israeli army had killed 364 Palestinians in GS since launch of the Great Marches of Return on 30/3/2018, noting that Israel continues to withhold the bodies of 15 Palestinians. The Center revealed that 215 civilians were killed during their participation in the peaceful marches, including 47 children, two women, nine persons with disabilities, four paramedics and two journalists. The Center stated that 19,173 Palestinians, including 4,987 children and 864 women, were injured during their participation in the marches, while thousands suffered suffocation. Medical personnel were targeted 281 times, with 225 paramedics injured; of whom 43 were injured multiple times. Al Mezan reported the targeting of press crews 249 times, injuring 174 journalists, with 42 injured multiple times.¹³

The most important achievements of the Return Marches to date are the following:¹⁴

- Wide popular participation, especially in GS, and the interaction of all social groups.
- The marches showed the Palestinian people's honest and strong commitment to the right of return and shed more light on the right of refugees to return to their lands.
- Marches manifested national unity, where civil society organizations, popular figures, and Palestinian factions converged and agreed.
- Durability, with the marches being held on most Fridays. Their continuation demonstrated the patience and resilience of participants.
- The marches were characterized by creativity, where marchers were innovative, using kites, balloons and night confusion.
- The strong marches confused the plans of the "Deal of the Century," and were one of the reasons for the postponement of its announcement.

- The Marches of Return forced the easing of the GS siege, and the separation of the humanitarian side from the political, albeit temporarily. Thus, some living conditions related to electricity, the entry of goods and the opening of crossings were improved.

However, the Marches of Return were criticized for several reasons, including:¹⁵

- The costs were higher than the gains, given the high numbers killed and wounded.
- The marches deviated from their strategic goal of achieving return to the 1948 occupied territories, and embraced tactical goals, such as easing the blockade and achieving a conditional truce.
- The marches lost their essence and impact.
- The activities of the marches were limited to GS, while they were initially meant to be launched equally in the WB, GS and abroad.

Still, the Marches of Return remain one of the most important demonstrations of Palestinian creativity in the context of popular and peaceful resistance. They were an important aspect of the period covered by this report, 2018–2019.

2. The GS: Between Aggression and Calm

More than 10 rounds of fighting and escalation were witnessed throughout 2018–2019. Rounds ranged between a few hours and two to three days, killing six and wounding 46 Israelis. According to Shabak figures, during this period, 1,774 rockets and mortars were launched from GS.¹⁶ The Marches of Return were behind some of these rounds, and the Israeli army repeatedly warned Hamas of a harsh military response if sending incendiary kites and balloons into Israel continued.¹⁷

The Israeli Army announced that the Palestinian response during that period was the hardest since the 2014 Israeli war on GS, where the intensity of rocket shelling from GS increased reflecting the strategy “bombing will be met by bombing and blood for blood,” while Israel’s Iron Dome failed to intercept most of these rockets.¹⁸

In 2018 and 2019, the Palestinian resistance strategy in managing the conflict with Israel evolved, based on a joint and coordinated defense strategy. The Joint Operation Room of the Palestinian Resistance Factions, established in GS on 23/7/2017, developed and continues to manage the confrontation with Israel, particularly during Israeli escalations. The Joint Operation Room has controlled the

frequency of resistance response, thus overcoming the negative repercussions of individual retaliation to Israeli attacks. It has unified the decision and coordinated field resistance action, making the Joint Operation Room more like “the staff of the Resistance.”

Activating the Joint Operation Room was one of the most important achievements of the “Marches of Return and Breaking the Siege.” The Room included main resistance factions: Ezzedeen al-Qassam Brigades (Hamas), al-Quds Brigades (PIJ), Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades (PFLP), the National Resistance Brigades (DFLP), al-Nasser Salah al-Din Brigades (the Popular Resistance Committees), in addition to small armed formations affiliated with several factions, and al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades whose members belong to the Fatah Movement but are not officially affiliated with it.¹⁹

The conflict has witnessed a qualitative escalation by the Palestinian factions, the most prominent of which, as announced by the Israeli Army on 27/5/2018, was Hamas’ use of an explosive-laden drone, infiltrating Israel, albeit one that did not explode.²⁰ The Israeli Army also claimed that it has targeted a collection of “advanced maritime weaponry,” on 29/5/2018, which “Hamas planned to use for sea-based terror attacks.” The Times of Israel newspaper said that Hamas has been suspected of possessing remote-controlled submarines for over a year, yet the Israeli Army had never publicly acknowledged this capability until 30/5/2018.²¹ The period also witnessed the launching of Kornet anti-tank guided missiles on 12/11/2018 and 5/5/2019.²²

a. Khan Yunis Operation/ Operation Sword’s Edge

In one of the most important confrontations, on the security, military and political levels, al-Qassam Brigades, along with the Joint Operation Room of the Palestinian Resistance Factions, executed the Khan Yunis Operation dubbed by al-Qassam Brigades Operation Sword’s Edge; its impact and repercussions persist more than a year later.

On 11/11/2018, an undercover military unit comprising 15 operatives, part of the Sayeret Matkal unit, sneaked into GS to plant listening devices on Hamas’ private communications system. However, al-Qassam Brigades thwarted the operation. Apparently, the Israeli unit left behind what al-Qassam Brigades saw as a strategic information treasure trove, as the Brigades were able to carry out many secret operations after Operation Sword’s Edge, the details of which have not been

revealed.²³ According to *Maariv*, the exposure of the Israeli undercover unit in GS has caused Israel's security profound and serious damage that cannot be detailed.²⁴ On 8/1/2019, Palestinian Ministry of Interior and National Security Forces in GS revealed that its security forces had arrested 45 collaborators with Israel after the Khan Yunis Operation.²⁵

A statement by al-Qassam Brigades mentioned that Israeli operatives infiltrated into the east region of Khan Yunis in a civil vehicle, at three kilometers depth, where a firefright broke out killing al-Qassam leader Nour Baraka. The statement added that Israeli warplanes pounded the Khan Yunis area with air attacks to give the unit cover to escape back into Israel, where they were evacuated by helicopter, and pounded the vehicle they left behind to cover up the "special and dangerous" security mission.²⁶ On 22/11/2018, al-Qassam Brigades website showed the pictures of eight people, including two women, stating that they were the operatives who had infiltrated the GS, in addition to the pictures of the vehicle and truck used by this force.²⁷ The Israelis admitted the death of one of their officers and to the serious injury of another.²⁸

An Al Jazeera Arabic program titled *Ma Khufia A'tham* (The Hidden is More Immense), premiered on 1/12/2019 and revealed the details of Operation Sword's Edge, showing that it had entailed an Israeli intelligence operation executed by undercover agents in the Zuwaida area, and had been foiled by the Resistance. Al-Qassam engineers were able to eavesdrop on the Israeli unit and control its recordings, identify its members as well as their training places and specific roles. Investigations by Hamas found that the Israeli unit used spyware and drilling equipment that entered GS under the cover of an international humanitarian organization.²⁹

On 27/11/2018, the Israeli Army announced the formation of a military team to assess the special Khan Yunis Operation, and Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot appointed Maj. Gen. Nitzan Alon to head the general assessment committee to present his findings and subsequent recommendations.³⁰

The botched operation led the commander of the elite "*Sayeret Matkal*" reconnaissance Unit to resign on 19/2/2019, making him the first Sayeret Matkal commander in 23 years to leave the military immediately after serving in the position, according to *Yedioth Ahronoth*.³¹ Also, two senior Israeli officers were toppled in addition to the commander of the Special Operations Division of the

Military Intelligence Directorate (Aman). The latter was replaced by his predecessor who was asked to rejoin the division.³² Following the operation, Defense Minister and Head of Yisrael Beiteinu Avigdor Lieberman, announced his resignation from his position; his party pulled out from the coalition government on 14/11/2018.³³

The Israeli Army said that, during Operation Sword's Edge, Palestinian factions in GS fired at least 460 rockets and mortar shells at the settlements, claiming that the Iron Dome missile defense system intercepted over 100 of them. The Army also announced that it had targeted about 160 sites in GS.³⁴ A report published in *Israel Hayom* on 18/11/2018, said that direct damage to Israel following its escalation exceeded expectations, adding that the damages caused were still on the rise and that, as of the date of the report, 406 compensation requests had been submitted to the Property Tax Authority in Israel, of which 317 were for homes and apartments, 81 were for vehicles, and four for agricultural fields.³⁵

On 4–6/5/2019, GS witnessed a violent escalation between the Palestinian factions and the Israeli army, who killed 27 Palestinians, including children and women, and wounded more than 170 others, some of whom sustained critical wounds.³⁶ On the Israeli side, four were killed and eight were wounded.³⁷ Israeli Channel 2 said that, during escalation, the Palestinian factions in GS launched 690 rockets towards several areas in Israel, destroying 21 homes and leaving several vehicles damaged, adding that the Iron Dome intercepted only 240 rockets. As for Israeli attacks on the Strip, the Channel reported that the Army attacked 350 targets in GS, killed two field military commanders and targeted six houses, several towers and one tunnel.³⁸ One day of fighting during the escalation was estimated to cost the army more than 90 million shekels (about \$25.25 million).³⁹

The Compensation Fund of the Israel Tax Authority published data concerning the damages during the escalation round, in which Ashdod and Ashkelon were the most affected. In the former, 166 buildings and 90 vehicles were directly damaged, while in the latter 182 buildings and 50 vehicles were damaged. The Compensation Fund has received 754 compensation requests for the damages caused by the rockets, mostly from Ashdod and Ashkelon.⁴⁰ The Palestinian Ministry of Public Works and Housing said the escalation destroyed more than 700 housing units, including 100 units that were completely destroyed.⁴¹

On 12/11/2019, the Israeli army assassinated Baha' Abu al-'Atta, the commander of PIJ's al-Quds Brigades in northern GS, causing a military escalation

leading to the deaths of 34 Palestinians, including six children and a woman, and the wounding of 113 Palestinians⁴² and four Israelis.⁴³ The Government Media Office in GS announced that during the aggression, the Israeli Army had launched 90 air and artillery strikes on separate areas of GS, with more than \$3 million direct material losses incurred, in addition to indirect losses. The Office added that 500 housing units were partially, severely or totally damaged, with an estimated cost of \$2 million.⁴⁴ The Israeli economic newspaper *Globes* reported 10 billion shekels (about \$2.8 billion) estimated losses inflicted on Israeli economic facilities during the escalation, excluding security/military expenses.⁴⁵

The Israeli army sought a long-term ceasefire with the GS resistance factions brokered by Egypt, in exchange for easing restrictions on the movement of foods and goods. Hamas denied reports that it was in contact with Israel and was seeking a long-term ceasefire, while the Israeli cabinet held a lengthy secret session, on 29/12/2019, to discuss the “calm with Hamas.”⁴⁶

b. Gaza Tunnels

The tunnels dug in GS by the Palestinian resistance factions in general, and Hamas’s military arm al-Qassam Brigades in particular, played an important role in the retaliation against Israeli aggression on GS. The Palestinian resistance sought to expand and increase these tunnels, taking advantage of the calm period. Eighteen fighters were killed in GS in 2018 compared to five in 2019, during preparations, training operations and the digging of the tunnels.⁴⁷

Throughout 2018–2019, the Israeli army sought to find the tunnels and limit their effectiveness. It revealed, on 18/1/2018, the details of a large subterranean concrete barrier built around the GS to curb the efficacy of the tunnels. An Israeli military official explained that the subterranean wall was being built using similar construction techniques to those used for the foundations of skyscrapers or large underground car parks, and added that a new eight-meter-high security fence would be built over the underground wall to prevent Gazans’ infiltration into Israel. The Israeli Army said a technological laboratory had been established for tunnel detection and location, benefitting from the cooperation between scientists and experts in several fields.⁴⁸

According to *Yedioth Ahronoth*, the wall being built along the borders of the GS would become “the world’s longest concrete wall,” extending over 65 kilometers to cover the land and maritime borders of the Strip. Also, the land wall include an

underground barrier at a depth of tens of meters, equipped with sensors that can detect any drilling of tunnels by land or any movement of divers across the sea while the maritime wall would include intelligent waves for early warning.⁴⁹

In the same context, during a cabinet meeting on 14/10/2018 the Israeli Army recommended Israel refrain from any military confrontation in GS before the end of 2019 when the construction of the “obstacle” was due to be completed. According to a senior military official quoted by *Haaretz*, the wall will neutralize Hamas’s tunnels.⁵⁰

Army Minister Avigdor Lieberman claimed that the Israeli Army had taken a “strategic weapon” away from Hamas. “Attack tunnels have become burial tunnels,” he added, vowing to destroy all tunnels owned by the Palestinian resistance in GS by the end of 2018,⁵¹ which the army failed to achieve. According to Yoav Mordechai, the Coordinator of the Israeli government’s operations in the Palestinian territories, “the Israeli genius along with the Jewish brain has come up with a solution to all of the terrorists’ tunnels.”⁵² However, a senior officer in the Israeli Army admitted that the “technological” obstacle would not eliminate the risk of tunnels permanently, and that Hamas constantly learns, noting that there was a whole world of tunnels under the ground in GS.⁵³ On 7/10/2019, Gaza Division Commander Brigadier-General Eliezer Toledano stated that since the 2014 war the Israeli Army had discovered and destroyed 18 tunnels on GS’s borders.⁵⁴

Throughout 2018–2019, the Israeli army repeatedly committed grave violations that affected all aspects of Palestinian life: barriers were erected, towns and villages besieged, and movement was restricted or controlled by more than 705 permanent obstacles in WB and Jerusalem.⁵⁵ Other forms of Israeli aggression included unwarranted killing at checkpoints (including youths and children including girls), arrests and intimidation, land confiscation, house demolitions, and the displacement of hundreds of Palestinians.

The Palestinians foiled several Israeli attempts to close *al-Aqsa* Mosque, prevent worshippers from entering and evict the *Murabitat* and *Murabitun*. They staged sit-ins at its gates, forcing the Israeli army to open it and withdraw from the area. These Israeli attempts to violate the Mosque recurred on 27/7/2018, 17/8/2018, 14/1/2019, 18/2/2019, 22/2/2019, 12/3/2019, 17/3/2019, during the month of Ramadan in May 2019, on 2/6/2019, and during *al-Adha* prayers on 11/8/2019.⁵⁶

3. The Killed and Wounded

A total of 314 Palestinians were killed by Israelis in 2018 (see table 2/4), including 57 children and three women,⁵⁷ while a total of 149 Palestinians were killed in 2019, 74% of whom were from GS governorates. Of those killed, there were 33 children and 12 women, who were shot by either the Israeli army or settlers in both GS and WB, including Jerusalem.⁵⁸ 31,603 Palestinians were wounded in 2018, compared to more than 15,287 in 2019,⁵⁹ and this figure was due to the high rate of casualties resulting from gunfire and tear gas targeting peaceful demonstrators participating in the Marches of Return near the perimeter fence between GS and Israel, in addition to invading Palestinian towns, villages and RCs in WB and Jerusalem.

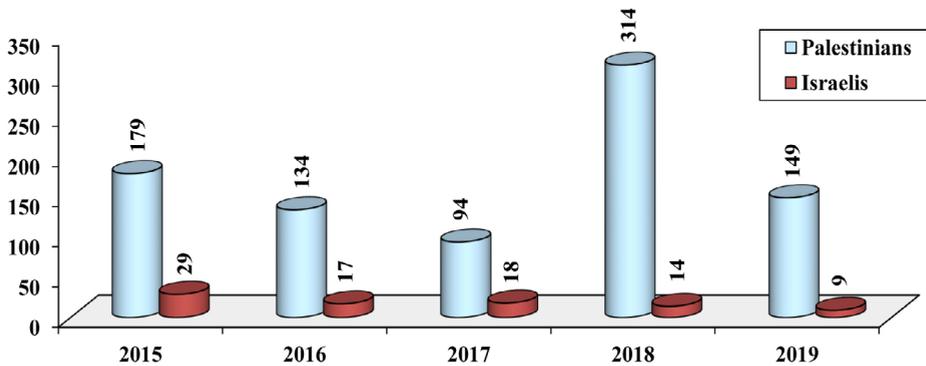
The Shabak recorded the killing of 14 Israelis in 2018, and nine in 2019, because of Palestinian attacks. 77 Israelis were wounded in 2018, compared to 65 in 2019 (see table 2/4).⁶⁰

The Israeli army continues to withhold the bodies of 15 Palestinians at the time of writing.⁶¹ The collective punishment policy of the Israeli army resulted in the punitive demolition of nine houses in 2018 compared to 14 in 2019. These houses belong to the families of those killed or imprisoned, accused of carrying out attacks against Israel.⁶²

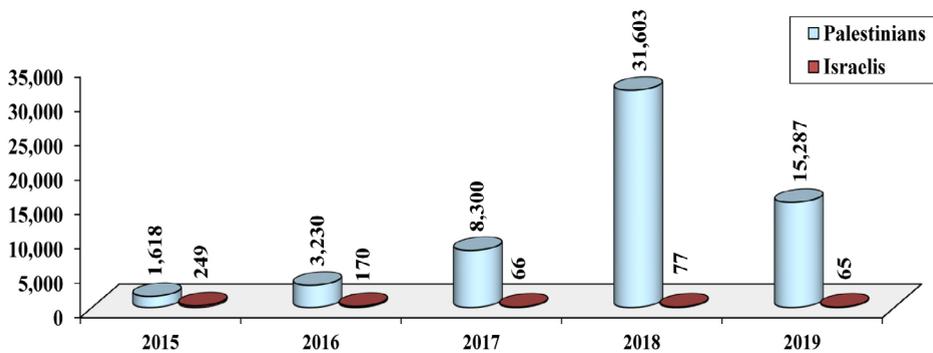
Table 2/4: The Killed and Wounded Among Palestinians and Israelis in WB and GS 2015–2019⁶³

Year	Killed		Wounded	
	Palestinians	Israelis	Palestinians	Israelis
2015	179	29	1,618	249
2016	134	17	3,230	170
2017	94	18	8,300	66
2018	314	14	31,603	77
2019	149	9	15,287	65

Palestinians and Israelis Killed in WB and GS 2015–2019



Palestinians and Israelis Wounded in WB and GS 2015–2019



4. Prisoners and Detainees

In 2018 and 2019 the suffering of Palestinian prisoners continued, with five thousand Palestinians held in Israeli prisons as of January 2020, including 41 women, 180 children, and seven PLC members. There were 4,634 prisoners from WB, including 312 from East Jerusalem, 296 from GS and 70 prisoners from the 1948 occupied territories in addition to dozens of Arab prisoners of different nationalities. 461 prisoners were classified as administrative detainees or detainees pending trial, or what Israel calls “unlawful combatants,” including four MPs (see tables 3/4 and 4/4).

At the end of 2018, there were 5,450 Palestinians in Israeli prisons, including 54 women and 215 children, as well as 8 PLC members. There were 5,082 from

WB—of which 353 were from East Jerusalem—298 from GS and 70 from the 1948 territories, in addition to dozens of Arab detainees of different nationalities. 495 of the prisoners were classified as administrative detainees including five MPs (see tables 3/4 and 4/4).

The Palestinian Prisoners Centre for Studies recorded the arrest of 5,700 Palestinians by Israel in 2018, including 980 children, and 175 women and girls. However, the frequency of arrests fluctuated throughout 2018, hitting an average of 475 cases per month and approximately 16 cases a day. Thus, the number of arrests in 2018 was slightly higher than that in 2019, which amounted to 5,500 Palestinians, including 880 children, and 153 women and girls.⁶⁴

The arrests in 2018 and 2019, as in previous years, affected all segments and groups of Palestinian society, without exception, including children, women, academics, former prisoners, patients, the elderly, human rights activists, journalists and MPs. They were carried out in ways that included storming into homes or hospitals, abduction from the street and the workplace, the kidnapping of the sick and injured, or via the “Arabized undercover security units,” or at the crossings and checkpoints, plus there were dozens of fishermen arrested at sea in GS.

The highest number of arrests during 2018 took place in Jerusalem, with 1,800 cases, while Hebron witnessed 900 cases and GS 214 cases. Of those detained, 980 were children, 175 women, 1,300 former prisoners, and 150 suffering illness or injury. Furthermore, seven PLC members were detained, two of whom were released after hours of interrogation. The same year witnessed 165 arrests, summonses, and detentions that would last for several hours, or administrative orders were issued to Palestinian journalists.⁶⁵

The highest number of arrests during 2019 took place in Jerusalem, with 1,930 cases, while Hebron saw 850 cases and GS 154. Of those detained, 880 were children, 153 women, 1,400 former prisoners and 152 suffering illness or injury. Furthermore, seven PLC members were detained.⁶⁶

In 2018, Israel issued 920 administrative orders, the majority of which were extensions of detention, while in 2019, they reached 1,022 orders. Israeli courts issued four life sentences in 2018 and another four in 2019. The Israeli Prison Service carried out 185 prison raids in 2018, while for 2019 there is no available

data at the time of writing. The number of Palestinian prisoners who died rose to 222 with the deaths of five in 2018 and five in 2019.⁶⁷

In 2018–2019, the Israeli Prison Service adopted harsh policies towards prisoners, including medical negligence, violations, administrative detention, unfair trials and the prevention of visits, consequently the prisoners held a number of hunger strikes, collectively and individually. Prisoners' strikes and "empty stomach battles" were weapons to urge the alleviation of unfair and arbitrary policies, and to restore usurped rights.

In 2018 and 2019, Israeli authorities discussed and issued a number of discriminatory laws and decisions against Palestinian prisoners, most importantly the law of deduction of allowances of prisoners and those killed paid by the PA; the exclusion of Palestinian prisoners from expanding minimum cell area per prisoner, preventing the reduction of detention periods for Palestinian prisoners, and preventing the early release of Palestinian prisoners. These laws were passed in 2018. As of the time of writing, six bills are still pending in the Knesset: execution of prisoners, preventing family visits, preventing funding of prisoners' medical treatment, allowing arbitrary naked searches with force, expelling families of Palestinians involved in attacks, preventing the release of Palestinian prisoners in exchange for the bodies of Israeli soldiers held in GS in any exchange deal.⁶⁸

Table 3/4: Prisoners and Detainees in Israeli Prisons 2015–2019⁶⁹

Year	Total no. of detainees	WB*	GS	Serving life sentences	Women	Children
2015	6,900	6,482	328	502	55	450
2016	6,500	6,080	350	459	53	300
2017	6,119	5,729	320	525	59	330
2018	5,450	5,082	298	540	53	215
2019	5,000	4,634	296	541	41	180

* Approximate numbers according to the Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association—Addameer.

Administrative Detention

Although administrative detention is prohibited under international law and violates the most basic human rights, Israel continued to issue such orders in 2018 and 2019 against various segments of Palestinian society, including PLC members,

human rights activists, workers, students, lawyers, and merchants. The number of administrative detainees held by Israel without trial or specific charges reached 461 detainees in January 2020, including four PLC members compared to 495 at the end of 2018, including five PLC members; 450 by the end of 2017; 536 by the end of 2016 and 650 by the end of 2015.⁷⁰

Table 4/4: Administrative Detainees 2015–2019⁷¹

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Administrative detainees	650	536	450	495	461

5. Israeli GS Siege

Israel continued to impose a siege on GS for the 13th year in a row, the longest in modern history. It imposed further siege measures on the population, as well as persisting in imposing severe restrictions on commercial traffic passing through the crossings, in addition to its restrictions on the movement of individuals. Throughout 2018 and 2019, there were no structural changes to the siege measures, as the facilitation of greater freedoms that Israel had claimed to be implementing did not affect the restrictions on the freedom of movement of individuals and goods. Consequently, there has been a serious deterioration in the humanitarian, economic and social conditions of more than two million Palestinians living in the Strip.

Regarding the movement of individuals, Israel continued to impose severe restrictions on the movement of Gazans through the Beit Hanoun (Erez) crossing, their only access to WB. Israel permitted the passage of some groups, albeit very specific cases, such as patients with serious medical conditions and their companions, Palestinians with Israeli citizenship, foreign journalists, workers in international humanitarian organizations, merchants and businessmen, families of detainees in Israeli prisons, and persons travelling via al-Karamah border crossing.⁷² Indeed, Israel maintained its policy of systematic discrimination against the Palestinians by not allowing the residents or merchants of Gaza and their goods to leave the besieged Strip, as confirmed by Kenneth Roth, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch.⁷³ It also prevented young Christian Palestinians from GS from entering Jerusalem during the Easter holiday to perform prayers in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.⁷⁴

The Rafah border crossing, the only exit for GS residents to the outside world, has been open since May 2018, so that humanitarian cases could travel or return to GS. However, the work at the crossing was extremely limited and carried out at a very slow pace. Thousands of Palestinians who registered to travel at the Ministry of Interior were unable to travel, according to the Gaza Crossings and Border Authority.⁷⁵

International bodies and organizations have warned of the danger of the continued GS siege, and of the collapse of vital sectors, especially the infrastructure and the health and education sectors. Different organizations have called for the immediate rescue of GS, and for the lifting of the blockade before it is too late, while the UN described the situation in the Strip as “bleaker than ever.”⁷⁶ In 2018, Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, presented the work of her office at the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) 40th session held on 6/3/2019. She stated that, that the Israeli blockade of the GS had led to negative economic growth, adding that “it could be said that the major product of Gaza’s economy is despair.”⁷⁷ The OCHA-oPt coordinator called on donor states and the international community to work on lifting the GS siege.⁷⁸

Second: The Peace Process

2018–2019 was a period of stalemate in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, as no serious initiatives were put forward. US President Donald Trump talked about his intention to broker a long-term settlement, which other US presidents were unable to achieve. He announced the appointment of Jared Kushner, his son-in-law, to broker a Middle East peace deal, claiming that if Kushner “can’t produce peace in the Middle East, nobody can.”⁷⁹

The US President met with Palestinian President Mahmud ‘Abbas four times during the first year of his presidency in 2017, while Kushner and his team met with the Palestinian team more than 30 times, amidst increasing concerns that a critical change happened to the decades-old US policy vis-à-vis the Palestine issue.

1. The Trump Administration... An Accomplice to Occupation

Trump abandoned his predecessors’ commitment to the establishment of a Palestinian state, and to the notion that the territories are occupied, and that

settlement building is illegal. The Obama administration, growing frustrated with Israel, had even abstained from voting on a UN resolution condemning settlement building, and chose not to veto it, thus enabling a 14–0 vote.⁸⁰

Trump talked about the need to completely change the rules of the game and disregard international law as reference and the international legitimacy of decisions that enshrined minimal Palestinian rights (the right to self-determination that includes the establishment of a Palestinian state on the territories occupied in 1967, and the refugees' right to return to the homes from which they were displaced and their right to compensation). He called for a new reference based mainly on facts established on the ground by Israel.

As of the end of 2019, the details of the deal that Trump and his administration talked about remained unclear despite declarations by US officials that the plan was set to be revealed during the year. Postponement was mainly for Israeli reasons, including Netanyahu's fear that the announcement might urge some political parties to leave the ruling coalition and cause the collapse of the right, religious and pro-settlement government. It was delayed also until after the Knesset elections held in April and September 2019, however, these elections failed to produce a government and a third round of elections was held in March 2020.

The political scene changed completely and parts of the deal became clear when the Trump administration announced on 6/12/2017 its decision to move the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, whose opening ceremony was on 14/5/2018.⁸¹ This was, allegedly, in implementation of the Jerusalem Embassy Act approved by the Congress in 1995, which provided for moving the embassy but gave the US President the authority to postpone the implementation of the decision, a clause that was utilized by Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

In light of the Palestinian rejection of the US embassy move, the Trump administration ordered the closure of the PLO office in Washington.⁸² Then, he demanded the dismantling of the UNRWA and the redefinition of the Palestinian refugee to solely include Palestinians born in Palestine and not their children and grandchildren, which would mean reducing the number of refugees to fewer than 500 thousand. The US also stopped funding UNRWA,⁸³ as well as the PA, aside from security aid. The Trump administration also demanded the recognition of Israel as "the Jewish state," and the adoption of a solution that meets Israeli security needs.

The Trump administration did not address the 1967 territories as occupied territories, and in November 2019 it decided to recognize the Israeli settlements in WB, stating that their establishment is not, “per se, inconsistent with international law.”⁸⁴

2. “Trump’s Deal” and the Regional Solution

Trump announced his peace plan, known as the “Deal of the Century,” on 28/1/2020, in a ceremony attended by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu but boycotted by the Palestinians and all Arab states, except for three countries: the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Oman. The 181-page document, contains 22 sections and four appendices, with two conceptual maps illustrating the geography of Israel and the proposed Palestinian state besides the distribution of settlements, as follows:⁸⁵

First: The Proposed Palestinian State

The US-proposed state is characterized by the following:

1. A completely demilitarized state in WB and GS, constitutionally committed to the prohibition of any armed organization, and on condition that Gaza be governed by forces other than Hamas, PIJ or other armed organizations.
2. The Palestinian capital would be in the suburbs adjacent to East Jerusalem, where the US would open an embassy, while Jerusalem would be “Israel’s undivided capital.”
3. Israeli settlements in WB would be annexed to Israel.
4. No return to the 1967 borders, while the borders of the Palestinian state would remain undefined for four years, during which a contiguous territory within the future Palestinian State would be established and settlement building would be frozen. This would be achieved provided that the Palestinian state:
 - a. Does not pose any risk to Israel’s security, where the definition of a “security risk” is decided by the Israeli government.
 - b. Gives up its weapons, a matter insinuated in Trump’s statement that the Palestinian state must have a “firm rejection of terrorism.”
 - c. Reject Iran and work to counter its activities.
 - d. Allows its laws to be directed to restricting “terrorist” activities, where Israel has the right to destroy any Palestinian facility it deems dangerous.

- e. During negotiations, the PA refrains from joining any international organization without the consent of Israel.
 - f. Recognizes Israel as the “Jewish state.”
5. Israel will not uproot any settlement, and the Israeli enclaves located inside the contiguous Palestinian territory will become part of Israel and be connected to it through an effective transportation system. The Palestinian population located in Israeli enclaves will have access routes connecting them to the PA territories.
 6. The Jordan Valley will be under Israeli sovereignty. Agricultural enterprises owned or controlled by Palestinians shall continue without interruption or discrimination, pursuant to appropriate licenses or leases granted by Israel.
 7. Israel will retain sovereignty over Gaza’s territorial waters.
 8. The Triangle communities (Kafr Qara, Ar‘ara, Baha al-Gharbiyye, Umm al Fahm...) shall become part of the State of Palestine, and the land swaps will provide the State of Palestine with land reasonably comparable in size to the territory of pre-1967 WB and GS.
 9. The borders of the State of Palestine will remain monitored by Israel, and the US will recognize Israeli sovereignty over occupied lands (the Jordan Valley and the settlement enclaves in the WB, which was reiterated by Netanyahu in the joint statements).

Second: The Refugees

The “Deal of the Century” linked the issue of Palestinian refugees to Jewish refugees who fled Arab countries. The deal indicated that Israel deserves compensation for lost assets and the costs of absorbing Jewish refugees from those countries. As for the options for Palestinian refugees seeking a permanent place of residence, it includes:

1. Absorption into the State of Palestine.
2. Local integration in current host countries.
3. Resettling the remaining refugees in individual Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) member countries.
4. Expanding the GS to improve refugees’ living conditions through neighboring areas in the Negev, where industrial zones would ease some of the demographic pressure in GS.

Third: Regional Economic Integration

Section three of the document is entitled “A vision for Peace between the State of Israel and the Palestinians and the Region,” which would be implemented by:

1. Promoting normalization between Israel and Arab countries and sharing normal relations with Europe.
2. Connecting WB and GS with fast-track transportation system, subject to Israeli control.
3. Allowing the State of Palestine to use and manage earmarked facilities at both the Haifa and Ashdod ports.
4. Facilitating mobility across the Palestinian-Jordanian border with the right of Israel to control transported goods.
5. Establishing a free-trade zone between the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the State of Palestine.
6. Israel, the State of Palestine and the Arab countries will work together to counter Hizbullah and Hamas.
7. The US wants, over time, to reduce the Palestinians’ dependence on aid and funds donated from the international community.

Fourth: The Prisoners

The deal stipulates for the release of Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli prisons except those “convicted of murder or attempted murder”; thus, members of the resistance forces will not be released.

The US stance and proposed measures were dangerous as they came in tandem with pushing the Arabs to normalize their relations with Israel, regardless of the stalemate in the peace process. The US administration even tried to persuade Arabs to change the “Arab Peace Initiative” so that it would start from its end, i.e., by normalizing relations with Israel. However, this attempt failed when it was presented at the Arab summit held in April 2018, in the Saudi city of Dhahran, as the summit affirmed “the illegality of the American decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel,” reaffirmed “that the Palestine cause is the entire Arab nation’s main priority,” while stressing “the importance of a comprehensive and lasting peace in the Middle East as a strategic Arab option embodied in the Arab Peace Initiative.”⁸⁶

In addition to its normalization efforts, the US pushed the Arabs to threaten the Palestinians that they would replace them at the negotiating table, which matched what Netanyahu had called for: the priority of a regional solution over a solution with the Palestinians. Moreover, in an attempt to rearrange the priorities of the regional conflict, there were calls to form a US-Arab-Israeli alliance to counter the Iranian threat, although the Palestine issue has been always the central Arab and Islamic issue, and Israel the main threat to the entire region.

It is not possible to deny the success of the US administration and the Israeli government in their above endeavors; however, they were not as extensive as Trump and Netanyahu have suggested in their public utterances. They were dangerous but limited, since the Palestine issue was again stressed as an important one to Arab and Muslim countries, and to the whole world. It is true that its prioritization lessened, but it has not lost its importance, and this fact made the Trump administration place the Palestine issue at the top of its priority list.

In addition to its shuttle diplomacy, the US called for holding a conference to discuss “peace and security” in the Middle East. On 13/2/2019, Warsaw hosted the event Ministerial to Promote a Future of Peace and Security in the Middle East, with the participation of the Israeli prime minister and Arab foreign ministers, although boycotted by the PA.⁸⁷ Also, on 25/6/2019, White House senior adviser Jared Kushner launched the Peace for Prosperity workshop in Manama, Bahrain and unveiled his economic plan, part of the “Deal of the Century.”⁸⁸ It turned out to be ideas copied from previous academic initiatives, equipped with no Palestinian legitimacy or adequate Arab and international support. Noticeably, the economic aspect did not entail any obligations, and provided less grants and more loans as well as an aspiration for large contributions from the private sector, which cannot be relied upon.

3. The Palestinian President and the Lost “Peace”

The period covered by this report saw (on 20/2/2018) President Mahmud ‘Abbas’s proposal of a peace plan at the UN Security Council. He called for “holding an international peace conference in mid-2018 based on international resolutions and with wide international participation” including all concerned parties. The outcomes of the conference were to include “the mutual recognition of statehood between Palestine and Israel on the borders of 1967, [and] the formation of a multilateral international mechanism that aids the two sides in negotiations to solve

all permanent status issues according to the Oslo Accords.” The initiative included refraining from all unilateral moves during negotiations, the implementation of the “Arab Peace Initiative” as adopted, and “signing a regional agreement when reaching a peace deal between the Palestinians and Israelis.”⁸⁹

The most important feature of this initiative was that it reflected ‘Abbas’s continued faith in a negotiated peace settlement, while rejecting the unilateral US sponsorship of the “peace process.” This stance came at a time when this process and developments on the ground suggested that the “peace process” would not resume; rather a US-sponsored Israeli solution would be imposed. It is believed that the internal Palestinian situation (mainly characterized by schism and strategies reaching dead ends) and the Arab condition (which suffered weakness, civil conflict, tyranny, the division into axes and the absence of an inclusive Arab project) provided an historic opportunity to the Zionist Movement to achieve its colonial, expansionist, and settlement goals. It relied on a right-wing populist US president whose primary base combines the followers of the Evangelical Church and the neocons, who are just as extreme as the Zionists.

Besides this initiative, President ‘Abbas has repeatedly sought to meet with Benjamin Netanyahu under French and Russian mediation. However, Netanyahu spurned these attempts, for he was able to maneuver and achieve further gains without the need to negotiate or hold meetings with ‘Abbas. Such meetings could open the possibility for Netanyahu to be asked to give something in return, and to be pushed to resume the peace talks. Netanyahu believes that what he wants can be achieved and imposed without negotiations, for he has reduced the PA to being a service provider of an authority with no political role.

President ‘Abbas also demanded the Quartet to hold a new “peace” conference, reiterating adherence to the strategic option of a just and comprehensive “peace.” He believed that the US “peace” plan was meant to liquidate the Palestine issue, and denied accusations that the Palestinians had wasted all the previous chances of securing “peace.”

One can conclude that Palestinian-Israeli relations have deteriorated, with the political aspect marginalized, leaving only the security, administrative and service levels. This fits with the Israeli plans that excludes the establishment of a Palestinian state and encourages Palestinian leaders to settle for a permanent self-rule, with or without being called a Palestinian state.

The developments of 2018–2019 confirmed the fact that, without changing the Palestinian and Arab approaches, adopted since the signing of the Oslo Accords, it will be impossible to stop the progress of this settlement colonial project, whose current goals are focused on reviving the establishment of “Greater Israel” on all historic Palestine. The creeping annexation slowly and progressively turns into a legal annexation of sparsely populated lands, especially in the Jordan Valley and the Israeli settlements. As for the populated and discontinuous areas, their linkage under any US-brokered deal would be under complete Israeli control, while retaining only the façade of a state.

Conclusion

The years 2018–2019 have seen the continuation of Israeli repression against the Palestinian people. They also witnessed the perseverance of the Palestinian people, the growth of their resistance, the development of their armament and field capabilities, as well as a diversification of armed and popular forms of resistance.

Resistance in WB continued, mostly through individual attacks, amidst exceptional circumstances of security coordination between the PA and the Israelis. In GS, resistance activity demonstrated qualitative development, as resistance forces fought ten of rounds of conflict with the Israeli side. The resistance forces in GS developed their field work, where the Joint Operation Room of the resistance factions was largely able to control the frequency of resistance action, and manage the confrontations with Israel.

The failure of the Israeli military security operation in Khan Yunis on 11/11/2018 was a manifestation of the development of Palestinian resistance. In that operation, an Israeli elite unit failed to plant listening devices on Hamas’s private communications system, but left behind what al-Qassam Brigades called a strategic information treasure, consequently most of its operatives were exposed and 45 collaborators with Israel were arrested. The military confrontations, in May and November 2019, also showed the qualitative development of resistance weapons and their ability to inflict greater damage on the Israeli side, with enhanced accuracy and explosive capacity of Palestinian missiles.

The Marches of Return have proven that Palestinian national unity is still intact, and that popular resistance can be creative, while reiterating the right of return of refugees. In 2018–2019, the Marches were effectively managed in GS, making Israel alleviate its blockade.

Palestinian prisoners were yet another example of determination and resilience, with more than five thousand prisoners facing repressive Israeli measures. They proved to have an unrelenting will to restore their rights and freedom through all possible means, including the “empty stomach battles.”

The peace process has reached an impasse amidst the attempts to market the “Trump Deal” as an alternative to the Oslo process. This deal remains an attempt to liquidate the Palestine issue, end the “two-state solution” and establish “Bantustans” for Palestinian enclaves under Israeli sovereignty. It seeks to integrate Israel into the region and reset the conflict compass towards sectarian and ethnic battles. Despite the attempts to impose the deal on the ground, Palestinians have been united against it, and were supported by the Arab and Muslim peoples. It even lacked international support, thus making its chances of success very slim.

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This Report

Al-Zaytouna Centre is pleased to present to its readers the Palestine Strategic Report (PSR) 2018–2019, the 11th PSR to be published.

With an academic methodology and comprehensive, and objective approach, the report comprehensively details developments concerning the Palestine issue and provides the latest information and data available at the end of 2019, along with analyses and forecasts running into 2020–2021.

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.

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.

Prof. Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh

The Palestine Strategic Report 2018 – 2019



Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies & Consultations

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ISBN 978-9953-572-99-4



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