

The Palestine Strategic Report

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Chapter Six

The Palestine Issue and the Arab World

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Introduction

The Palestine issue remains a major concern in the Arab world. Despite the prevailing impression that it has been overshadowed by the internal concerns of different Arab countries, developments on the official and popular levels reveal otherwise, with Palestine maintaining its importance although it has declined as a priority. The Palestine issue continues to intersect with the daily developments of Arab peoples and regimes, and it is still employed, negatively or positively, by different actors in the region. Notably, we do not see a unified Arab position, as the official Arab system, and its stance on the Palestine issue, practically collapsed around a decade ago.

This chapter displays the most prominent developments related to the Palestine issue and the Arab world, and how each has influenced the other, in addition to analyzing these events and discussing their future. They are divided under four main titles: First, the positions of the League of Arab States (LAS) and the Arab Summit; Second, the stances and roles of some major Arab countries, most importantly Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, KSA, and the Gulf states. This section will outline the positions of these countries, the effect of changes and Arab uprisings on the Palestine issue, the development of their political relations and diplomatic activity as well as their stances regarding the internal Palestinian division, Palestinian reconciliation, the peace process, the resistance and relations with Israel. The third title tackles developments related to normalization with Israel and the fourth addresses the Arab public opinion.

First: LAS Positions and the Arab Summit

In 2018–2019, the LAS continued to function but was inefficient due to the deep divisions between Arab countries and the crises of others, particularly Syria, Yemen and Libya, which negatively affected the Palestine issue and the interest in it. Although the Palestine issue topped the agendas of the Arab summits in Dhahran

in 2018 and Tunisia in 2019, and was included in the statement of the extraordinary summit, held in Mecca in 2019 to discuss the missile attack on Saudi Arabia by Houthis, the decisions reached remained within verbal objection (denunciation and condemnation) regarding Israeli aggression and US moves to liquidate the Palestine issue through the plan dubbed the “Deal of the Century.” Furthermore, the Arab reaction to the US recognition of Jerusalem as the capital for Israel and moving its embassy there, was holding the Dhahran Summit in 2018 under the title “Jerusalem Summit.”¹

The LAS reaction to the US Jerusalem move was limited to verbal objections, while no actual measures were taken. This encouraged the US administration to continue its quest to implement its “peace” vision, as it called for an economic peace workshop titled “Peace to Prosperity,” which was held in Bahrain on 25–26/6/2019 to encourage investment in the Palestinian territories. Although the “Jerusalem Summit” decisions clearly stipulated the rejection of any deal or initiative to resolve the conflict inconsistent with international references of the Middle East peace process,² major Arab countries, such as the KSA and Egypt, attended the workshop, while the Palestinians boycotted it believing it paved the way for imposing the so-called “Deal of the Century.”

In another move, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced on 18/11/2019 that Washington no longer considered Israeli settlements in WB as a violation of international law. As usual, the stance by the LAS was limited to verbal condemnation, and its Secretary-General described the US declaration a very negative development, whose long-term consequences had not been considered by the US administration. He pointed to the “negative impact” of this declaration on any opportunity to achieve “peace” in the future, saying that it was an implicit recognition of the occupation, thus stripping the Palestinians of the right to negotiate over the land, which is no longer occupied according to the US administration.³

The only two steps the LAS took to confront the “Deal of the Century” were: Reaffirming the Hashemite custodianship over the holy sites in Jerusalem and stressing UNRWA’s mandate regarding providing services to Palestinian refugees. The Jordanian custodianship was emphasized in the Dhahran⁴ and Tunisia⁵ Summits, in response to leaks indicating that the “Deal of the Century” included transferring custodianship of holy sites from Jordan to KSA, as was confirmed

by the PLO Ambassador Farouq al-'Azza.⁶ As for UNRWA, the LAS stressed the mandate granted by the UN General Assembly to the Agency to provide services for refugees until reaching a just and comprehensive settlement, according to UN Resolution 194 and the Arab Peace Initiative.⁷ Also, the LAS called on donors to pay their financial obligations to UNRWA,⁸ in response to the US decision to halt its UNRWA funding in order to liquidate the issue of the refugees.⁹ LAS Secretary-General Ahmad Abu al-Ghait responded by stating that the Arab countries would not allow the dismantling of UNRWA or the replacement of it with other bodies.¹⁰

In return, some measures were announced to support the Palestine issue through diplomatic moves and financial support for the Palestinians, yet these moves included threatening to boycott countries that might approve the US decisions, and issuing statements of condemnation rather than applying genuine pressure on the US administration. This encouraged Turkey's Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, to criticize the deterioration of stances and the hesitation of the Muslim countries especially the LAS, saying that the decline in the united front could be due to fear of the US.¹¹ In response, the LAS spokesperson Mahmud Afifi expressed regret at the Turkish minister's insistence on targeting the Arab League "in a negative way and with a condescending approach." Afifi noted that measures had been taken against some countries, which announced their intention to move their embassy to Jerusalem, in addition to countering the attempts by Israel to obtain membership in the UN Security Council and increase its influence in Africa. He also highlighted the financial support of the Tunis Summit to the PA, which activated a monthly \$100 million economic safety net,¹² to address the financial crisis resulting from Israel's control of tax returns.

The LAS called on Brazil to reconsider its intention to relocate its embassy and warned that such a move could be a setback to its relations with Arab countries.¹³ At the same time, it warned Guatemala, Hungary and Australia that it would take appropriate political and economic measures against their illegal moves.¹⁴ As a result, an MoU with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Guatemala signed in 2013 was cancelled, and it was informed that any cooperation with it would be put on hold.¹⁵ According to the LAS Secretary-General, the Arab League has succeeded in stopping Costa Rica from moving its embassy to Jerusalem "when we suggested boycotting the Arab trade relationship with it."¹⁶

The LAS formed a ministerial committee to confront the Israeli attempt to run for a non-permanent seat in the UN Security Council, for the 2019–2020 period, and highlighted its status as an occupying power violating international law. In addition, the Arab League formed a ministerial committee to address the holding of African conferences with the participation of Israel, by reminding them that Israel is an occupying power practicing apartheid toward the Palestinians.¹⁷ The ministerial committee, in partnership with the Arab Parliament, addressed the parliaments of Zambia and Rwanda urging them to pressure their governments not to host or participate in an African-Israeli summit before Israel respects international law.¹⁸ The two messages yielded positive results, with the two countries giving up on hosting Israel at the summit.

1. The Position on the Internal Palestinian Conflict and Reconciliation Efforts

The LAS acted as a mere observer regarding Palestinian reconciliation under the pretext of respecting Egyptian efforts as stated by Ambassador Hossam Zaki, head of the LAS Secretary-General's office,¹⁹ who stressed that Egypt was playing a satisfactory role suitable for both sides. In the Dhahran and Tunis Summits, the Arab League renewed its support of the PA presidency, reiterating that Palestinian national legitimacy is headed by Mahmud ‘Abbas, whose reconciliation efforts were appreciated, while calling on the factions to proceed in accordance with the 2011 Cairo Agreement and the 2017 Cairo understandings. However, the LAS was inclined towards adopting the stance of one side of the conflict (the PA presidency) by calling for the empowerment of the government of national reconciliation to be able to assume its responsibilities in GS²⁰ despite the fact that the PA has undermined Hamas's ability to govern GS. Hamas's spokesperson, Sami Abu Zuhri, said that the PA government had adopted a factional perspective and refused to deal with its employees in Gaza.²¹

2. The Position on the Peace Process

The LAS held on to its stance regarding the “peace process,” with the same decisions repeated in the Dhahran and Tunis Summits. Thus, it reiterated the centrality of the Palestine issue, adherence to “peace” as a strategic option, and the adoption of the two-state solution based on international legitimacy and the Arab Peace Initiative. What might have been new was the implicit indication

that the LAS had lost its confidence in the US role as a sponsor of the “peace process.” It called for establishing, along with international actors, a multilateral international mechanism under the UN umbrella, to sponsor the “peace process,” including holding an international conference to re-launch a credible process, within a defined timeline, and based on the decisions of international legitimacy, the principle of land for peace, and the two-state solution based on the borders of June 4, 1967.²² As usual, these calls were not supported by any practical measures to put them into practice.

Second: Positions and Roles of Some Key States

1. Egypt

Egypt has regained some of its regional soft power clout as a result of the relative stability of the regime, but this power has not been translated in practice in favor of the Palestine issue, whether in confronting liquidation projects, such as the “Deal of the Century,” or by pressing for reconciliation. Egypt’s soft power has been limited to its mediation between the resistance factions in GS and Israel to reach understandings and achieve calm.

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

Most observers thought that the al-Sisi regime had imposed its control over Egyptians and aborted any opposition, as there were no protests following the death of ousted President Muhammed Morsi in prison. However, the apparent stability has hidden a simmering landscape as was seen in the September 2019 demonstrations, which took place following the calls of Egyptian actor and dissident contractor, Muhammed ‘Ali, and the subsequent arrest of nearly 1,500 Egyptian citizens, most of whom were political opponents of the MB movement.²³ This development caused alarm in several circles, including among the Israelis who considered the protests a worrying sign, where INSS described the protests as the gravest public crisis facing ‘Abdul Fattah al-Sisi since he took office. The Institute suggested that the Israeli government could, “alongside additional countries, participate in efforts to support Egypt’s security, stability and economic prosperity and encourage essential reforms.” It can provide “quiet diplomatic support in the international sphere to some of Cairo’s positions, for example in the counter-terrorism realm;

and to the extent possible, avoid steps liable to add fuel to the Egyptian fire, mainly vis-à-vis the Palestinians” in GS and around Jerusalem’s holy sites.²⁴

b. The Development of Egypt’s Political Relations and Diplomatic Activities

Egypt has maintained its relationship with the main Palestinian actors to ensure its influence and consolidate its position as an “older brother,” while holding on to its position regarding President ‘Abbas as a representative of Palestinian legitimacy. However, this did not prevent it from reaching out to other parties and employing its points of strength (mainly its control of the Rafah crossing) to influence the peace process and ensure Egyptian national security. Thus, Egypt has urged the Palestinians to maintain their calm, not to seek confrontation and engage in the political process. President ‘Abdul Fattah al-Sisi “advised” the Palestinians, during the escalations of the Marches of Return, “not to assume protest positions that would increase victims in their ranks.”²⁵

Cairo used Rafah as a tool for controlling the situation in GS; thus, it opened the crossing throughout Ramadan 2018 to avoid a possible outburst of public anger and allowed a convoy of medical and food aid to enter the Strip. It included medical supplies for Gaza’s hospitals, which had been facing shortages of medicine and food for distribution during Ramadan.²⁶ At the same time, Egyptian intelligence promised to continue to facilitate and impose measures that would alleviate the humanitarian situation in GS,²⁷ in order to convince the Palestinian factions not to escalate the situation with Israel and prevent the evolution of the Marches of Return into open confrontations. According to *The Jerusalem Post*, Cairo, along with Riyadh, pressured Hamas to stop the Marches of Return. It quoted an Egyptian Foreign Ministry official saying that Egypt has offered, in return for stopping the marches, to guarantee the opening of the Rafah border crossing, albeit under Saudi supervision.²⁸

c. The Position on the Internal Palestinian Conflict and Reconciliation Efforts

Cairo maintained its monopoly of the reconciliation file, not allowing any other side to play a pivotal role in this regard. This was clear in the aforementioned position of the LAS, as well as in what media sources mentioned regarding Russia’s lowering of the level of its conference on Palestinian reconciliation, in February

2019, in order to appease Egypt.²⁹ Simultaneously, Cairo has repeatedly called for the activation of reconciliation efforts; on 31/5/2018, after the trilateral meeting held in Cairo, with Jordanian, Egyptian and Palestinian participation, it emphasized the importance of implementing the agreement of ending the Palestinian schism, and the need to empower the Palestinian government to administer the GS.³⁰

At the beginning of al-Sisi's coup against President Mohamed Morsi, there was a conviction that Hamas was interfering in internal Egyptian affairs. The events revealed that part of the tension in the relationship between Cairo and Hamas was due to PA incitement against the Movement. According to the testimony of Yassir 'Uthman, Egypt's Ambassador to the PA, regarding the issue of "storming prisons" during the January 2011 revolution, the Egyptian authority relied on information it received from the PA about Hamas's involvement in the release of prisoners.³¹ This incitement prompted parties in the Egyptian system to announce Hamas as a threat to the Egyptian national security; thus, the Governor of South Sinai Major General Khaled Fouda said that Hamas was a danger to national security, and it must hand over GS to the legitimate authority represented by the PA president.³² The hostile position of some figures in the Egyptian authority did not necessarily lead to the severing of ties with Hamas, given Egypt's geopolitical interest in establishing relations with the Movement, and the prevailing view that Hamas is a pivotal player and an essential component of the Palestinian scene, factors that were difficult to overcome or ignore.³³ Hence, the participation of an Egyptian intelligence official in al-Qassam Brigades festival³⁴ should be put in this context.

Several meetings took place between Hamas and the Egyptians to reach political understandings, although their relation was primarily a security one, where the Egyptian General Intelligence Service (EGIS) is responsible for their communication rather than political sides such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Several meetings were held between Hamas and the EGIS, such as on 10/1/2019, in the presence of the PIJ, the PFLP and DFLP, discussing several files, including the understandings for the establishment of a ceasefire with Israel, Palestinian reconciliation, as well as the Rafah crossing and the suffering of the Gazans when they travel.³⁵

The meetings between Egypt and Hamas culminated in a long visit (24 days) by Isma'il Haniyyah, the head of Hamas political bureau, to Cairo on 3/2/2019, in which he expressed his optimism over relations with Cairo. He described it as



a deep relationship involving strategic dialogue, without obstacles or conditions and prices to pay. As for the security file, Haniyyah stressed that the security issue had clearly improved in light of Hamas's keenness to maintain Egyptian national security and its assurances that Gaza would not be a threat to Cairo, as Hamas had no security or military arms in Sinai or Egypt. Regarding the understandings with Israel that were being maintained under Egyptian supervision, Haniyyah indicated that the occupation had consistently evaded these understandings, including when there was a security breach in Khan Yunis, which almost led to a full-scale explosion of the security conditions.³⁶

Cairo continued to improve its relationship with Hamas by offering facilitations, such as permitting *Umrah* trips, and providing some initiatives, including the release of detainees. So, after *Umrah* trips from GS had been suspended for four years, Cairo lifted its ban and allowed their resumption.³⁷ In addition, following Haniyyah's visit to Cairo, eight Palestinian detainees held in Cairo for "security" reasons were handed over, including four kidnapped operatives from al-Qassam Brigades, whose case dated back to 2015.³⁸ Yet, this development was conditional on Hamas's consistency with Cairo's inclinations, so the rapprochement between the two sides did not signify that the Egyptians were aligned with Hamas's perspective, and whenever a conflict of interests took place, the relations returned to their original context: a relationship of convenience and necessity rather than a genuine alliance. Perhaps the clearest indication of this was Egypt's refusal to allow Haniyyah to cross the Rafah crossing in order to conduct state visits on an external tour to countries deemed by Cairo to be foes of Egypt.³⁹

Egypt saw the prevention of Haniyyah from conducting an external tour as a way of pressuring Hamas. It made Haniyyah incapable of travelling outside GS and Egypt following his election in May 2017, negatively impacting his role as a senior Palestinian leader. Haniyyah was only able to leave Egypt on 8/12/2019 to visit Turkey and Qatar, while reports said that the Egyptian side had informed Hamas that it had blocked Haniyyah's planned visits to Iran and Lebanon. Egyptians objected to his possible participation in the mini-Islamic summit conference called on by Malaysian leader Mahathir Mohamad in Kuala Lumpur on 18–21/12/2019, with the implicit threat that ignoring the Egyptian objection might lead to measures against the Movement. Hamas did not make any formal commitments to Cairo and did not comply with Egypt's wishes that Haniyyah would travel to KSA and

UAE and become consistent with their policies. However, Hamas was aware of the Egyptian weight in the Palestinian equation, especially in GS. Hence, it tried to strike a balance between its independence and resistance course on one hand, and offering the highest degree of flexibility in dealing with the Egyptian determinants, on the other hand.

It appeared that the punitive measures taken by ‘Abbas against GS were not fully coordinated with Egypt, or the Egyptian administration found that these sanctions would lead to an explosion of the situation and increased instability, and might cause harm to its national security in Sinai. Therefore, there were Egyptian attempts to stop the PA’s punitive measures, which were taken after the targeting of the convoy of the Palestinian PM, Rami Hamdallah, during his visit to GS. According to media sources, EGIS head Major General Abbas Kamel made numerous contacts with prominent PA leaders to stop the escalation of the punitive measures.⁴⁰

Egypt rejected the punitive measures because it feared their impact on the security situation in Sinai, and not because it favored Hamas over the PA. Egypt maintained its declared position of supporting ‘Abbas as the legitimate representative of the Palestinians. It was also evident when the Egyptian security delegation visiting GS in January 2019 informed the Palestinian factions that Egypt would not open the Rafah crossing permanently unless it was in the presence of the PA.⁴¹ The deep PA-Egypt relations were clear during the visit of Palestinian Prime Minister Muhammad Shtayyeh with a group of his ministers to Egypt. In their bilateral ministerial meetings, reactivating the supreme Palestinian-Egyptian Committee was discussed to enhance cooperation and exchange of expertise in all fields. The ministerial delegation accompanying Shtayyeh included a large number of important ministers, such as the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Finance, Economy, Higher Education, Public Works, Health, Agriculture, Local Government, Transport and Communications in addition to the Secretary-General of the Council of Ministers, the head of the Energy and Natural Resources Authority and the government spokesperson.⁴²

d. The Position on the Peace Process

Cairo maintained its support of the peace process, but its stance on the “Deal of the Century” was hazy. On the one hand, there was the tendency to engage in this deal and promote it as a plan sincerely aiming at resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict.

On the other hand, there was a rejection to a leaked clause in the plan, stipulating the resettlement of Palestinian refugees in Sinai, as stated by the Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry.⁴³ President al-Sisi called on the Israelis to seize the “great opportunity for peace” and solve the Palestine issue.⁴⁴

e. Relationship with Israel

Egyptian-Israeli relations developed under al-Sisi, with bilateral meetings being held and political, security and economic relations strengthened. Israel did not hide its delight over the reelection of al-Sisi for a second term, as was evident in the congratulatory note sent by the Israeli Embassy in Cairo.⁴⁵ Channel 10 revealed that Netanyahu visited Egypt secretly in May 2018 and discussed a long truce in Gaza with al-Sisi,⁴⁶ which was confirmed later by Israeli Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon.⁴⁷ It is likely that this meeting was kept secret to avoid popular Egyptian opposition to holding the meeting in Egypt. However, al-Sisi held a public meeting with Netanyahu in September 2018, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York, as al-Sisi believes in the importance of such meetings.⁴⁸ Apparently, a personal relationship developed between the two, where Netanyahu praised al-Sisi as a dear friend and colleague and said that he was “impressed not only by his leadership but also by his wisdom.”⁴⁹

As for the security issue, further strengthening of security coordination was noted, especially regarding Sinai and the GS. In February 2018, *The New York Times* revealed that for over two years, unmarked Israeli drones, helicopters and jets had carried out a covert air campaign, conducting more than 100 airstrikes inside Egypt, often more than one a week—and all with the approval of President al-Sisi.⁵⁰ Al-Sisi acknowledged this military cooperation in an interview with CBS. He said that his military was cooperating with Israel in the Sinai, in the war against “terrorist” organizations, and that this was the deepest and closest cooperation that Egypt ever had with Israel.⁵¹ The development of security coordination was evident when Israel agreed to the increase of Egyptian forces in Sinai in March 2018, and with the launching of “Sinai 2018” operations aimed at confronting armed elements in north and central Sinai. According to the peace treaty signed between Israel and Egypt, it is possible to increase the number of troops allowed on both sides by agreement between Cairo and Tel Aviv.⁵²

Intelligence meetings and information exchange continued between Israel and Egypt as part of their joint war on the so-called “terrorism,” which was confirmed

by Yisrael Katz, Israeli Minister of Intelligence Affairs, to *Yedioth Achronoth*.⁵³ In this context, Israeli Radio stated that a meeting was held in Tel Aviv in May 2018 between EGIS Head Major General Abbas Kamel and the Shabak Director Nadav Argaman, to discuss the security situation in the GS.⁵⁴ *Yedioth Achronoth* also reported that Kamel met with Netanyahu and the Shabak director to discuss the ceasefire between Israel and GS after the situation deteriorated in August 2018.⁵⁵

The war on the ISIS was used to justify the security coordination between the two sides while this coordination was mainly meant to strangulate the Resistance in GS. In an early 2019 statement, the Egyptian army announced the destruction of 37 tunnels between the Sinai Peninsula and the GS in 2018.⁵⁶ An Israeli report stated that, contrary to al-Sisi's claims in the CBS interview, security coordination between the Israeli and Egyptian armies in Sinai aimed at thwarting the smuggling of weapons to Hamas in GS rather than to strike ISIS in Sinai, which had enabled Israel to destroy 15 thousand advanced rockets that were en route to GS for Hamas.⁵⁷ This security cooperation to restrict the Resistance in Gaza prompted the Israeli General Eran Lerman, Vice President of The Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, to declare that the Egyptian mediation in GS was a strategic asset, and that it was in Israel's interest to solidify the Egyptian role in GS, in the context of "conflict management" as a governing policy concept, and that Egyptian participation in the efforts to stabilize the situation in GS served as an important component in the Egypt-Israel relationship.⁵⁸

On the economic level, the Israelis boasted that economic relations with Egypt had prospered. The Israeli Embassy in Egypt published a video claiming that 250 thousand new job opportunities had been created in Egypt, mostly in the textile sector, under the "Qualifying Industrial Zones (QIZ)" agreement of 2004, and that total Egyptian exports since the signing of the agreement amounted to more than \$8 billion.⁵⁹ In the same context, there were visits by some Israeli economic delegations to Cairo. In late 2018, an Israeli economic delegation visited Egypt. It included Economy and Industry Ministry QIZ Co-Chairman Gabby Bar, Foreign Ministry Middle East Economic Relations Department Head Amira Oron, in addition to the head of the Political and Economic Department in the Israeli Embassy in Egypt Ohad Zemet, with the participation of members of the US Embassy in Cairo. According to the Israeli Embassy in Cairo Facebook page, the economic delegation participated in the meeting of the QIZ joint committee and discussed ways to enhance trade between Egypt and Israel.⁶⁰

The gas deals between the two sides had come a long way and turned into a tool for institutionalizing an economic/ political alliance between Egypt and Israel at the regional level. Gas deals indicated an improvement in economic relations between the two sides; an agreement was signed to export gas from Tel Aviv to Cairo worth \$15 billion, with Netanyahu describing the agreement as “historic” adding that it would “put billions into the state treasury to benefit the education, health and social welfare of Israel’s citizens.”⁶¹ While Egyptian activists on social media objected to the deal, al-Sisi said that Egypt had achieved a big goal by signing it.⁶² Israel’s Delek Drilling and Texas-based Noble Energy signed an agreement with Egypt’s East Gas to purchase stakes in the Eastern Mediterranean Gas pipeline. Under the agreement, the two companies, together with Egypt’s East Gas, acquired a 39% stake in Eastern Mediterranean Gas, the Egyptian company owning a pipeline running between Israel and Egypt, for \$520 million.⁶³ Developments in this context were not limited to this deal, as there were efforts to establish a forum for the Eastern Mediterranean countries including Israel. In October 2018, the sixth trilateral summit of the tripartite cooperation mechanism between Egypt, Cyprus and Greece was held on the Greek island of Crete, where the three parties agreed to establish an East Mediterranean Gas Forum to be based in Cairo so that it would later include Israel among other countries.⁶⁴ In June 2019, Israel’s Delek Drilling began tests, pumping gas from the Tamar field in the Mediterranean to Egypt through a subsea line extending from Ashkelon to al-‘Arish.⁶⁵

The improvement of economic relations between Egypt and Israel yielded a settlement regarding a gas deal, which was previously halted. The settlement with the Israel Electric Corp reached \$500 million. This agreement was previously suspended, and in 2015 the International Chamber of Commerce ordered Egypt to pay Israel Electric approximately \$8.1 billion in compensation after a deal to export gas to Israel via a pipeline collapsed in 2012 after attacks by fighters in Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula.⁶⁶ This settlement, in addition to the gas deals, paved the way for further cooperation, where Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz met al-Sisi in July 2019 to discuss cooperation concerning natural gas.⁶⁷

2. Jordan

a. The Impact of Changes and Revolutions on the Palestine issue

Increased political and social activity in Jordan was exemplified at the beginning of September 2019, by a teachers’ strike to improve their living conditions.⁶⁸ The

teachers' demands were fulfilled, suggesting that some of the Arab Spring's momentum was still present. Although these protests aimed to improve living conditions, they had a political dimension focused on protesting mismanagement, and their success encouraged the public to adopt political issues, including the support of the Palestine issue. Still, this type of movement is governed by many considerations, foremost among which is that the security forces in the Arab countries fear that social movements might spin out of their control, which may have prompted the Jordanian authorities, at an earlier time, to prevent hundreds of children from "launching kites" in solidarity with GS.⁶⁹

b. The Development of Jordan's Political Relations and Diplomatic Activity

To counter Israeli ambivalence towards Jordan's guardianship of *al-Aqsa* Mosque, the latter expanded the role of the PA, where the Ministry of Awqaf formed a "crisis cell" to track Israeli violations in *al-Aqsa* Mosque, particularly when the falling of a stone from the western wall of the Mosque raised fears regarding the impact of excavations. The crisis cell included Yusuf Abu Snaineh, the director and imam of *al-Aqsa* Mosque, and Najeh Bkeirat, the director of Islamic education at the Mosque.⁷⁰ The Jordanian government increased the members of the Awqaf Council in Jerusalem from 11 to 18, and for the first time the Council included PA officials and religious leaders, while it used to be limited to members close to the ruling regime in Jordan. This change has meant that the PA now shares the responsibility of opposing Israeli violations in *al-Aqsa* Mosque.⁷¹

Jordan confirmed its support of UNRWA, and its Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, Ayman Safadi, announced his country's mobilization of political and financial support for the Agency.⁷² A report published in *Foreign Policy* magazine in October 2018 warned that the US administration's efforts to strip the Palestinian refugees of their legal status would threaten the stability of countries in the region, including Jordan, which hosts the largest percentage of refugees. The report revealed that King Abdullah II rejected offers by White House Senior Advisor Jared Kushner to hand Jordan the millions the US gives annually to UNRWA in exchange for absorbing full responsibility for Palestinian refugees.⁷³

Jordan provided the GS with humanitarian and medical aid to alleviate the suffering caused by the blockade, and the King ordered the evacuation of those critically injured in the Marches of Return to receive treatment at the Royal Medical



Services hospitals.⁷⁴ Jordan also sought to improve the conditions of Palestinians, who were born in GS and living in Jordan. The Cabinet decided to allow heads of Gazan families, holding a two- or five-year Jordanian passport and not entitled to citizenship, to own an apartment in a building or an independent house built on a plot of land not exceeding one donum, or to own an empty plot of land to build a house, not exceeding a donum. The Cabinet also allowed Gazans to register diesel vehicles in their names.⁷⁵ Furthermore, the Jordanian parliament approved the exemption of children of Jordanian women married to foreigners, as well as Gazans living in Jordan, from having to obtain permits to work in the country.⁷⁶

c. The Position on the Palestinian Internal Conflict and Reconciliation Efforts

Jordan has approved LAS policy of leaving the reconciliation file to Egypt, however, this did not stop it from supporting the Egyptian efforts. It launched a joint call with Egypt to activate the reconciliation, when the trilateral (Jordanian, Egyptian and Palestinian) meeting that was held in Cairo on 31/5/2018, emphasized the importance of implementing the agreement to end the Palestinian division, and empowered the government to manage GS.⁷⁷

d. The Position on the Peace Process and the Resistance Project

Jordan's position regarding the peace process remained the same, and was based on two main determinants: supporting the political solution of the Palestine issue based on the two-state solution, in light of internationally legitimate decisions; and maintaining Jordanian national security by rejecting the resettlement of refugees in an alternative homeland. Within this context came the assertion of Jordan's King, in his meeting with US Vice President Mike Pence, that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict remained a major source of threat to the stability of Jordan and the region.⁷⁸ The King reiterated Jordan's position when he received a US House of Representatives delegation, reaffirming that the subject of Jerusalem must be settled as part of final status issues on the basis of the two-state solution.⁷⁹

Jordan confirmed its rejection of the settlement of refugees or the alternative homeland, as well as any proposal for a Jordanian confederation with Palestinians. This position was reiterated by Jumana Ghneimat, State Minister for Media Affairs and government spokesperson, who rejected a proposal, allegedly floated by US administration officials, calling for the creation of a Palestinian-Jordanian

confederation.⁸⁰ Jordan's rejection of the confederation came in the context of rejecting the "Deal of the Century," which was meant to end the Palestine issue through the settlement of refugees in the Arab countries and the improvement of the living conditions of Palestinians in the territories occupied in 1967. This prompted the Jordanian King to unequivocally affirm Jordan's rejection of the idea of the confederation and to emphasize that this issue was a "red line for Jordan."⁸¹ The King reiterated this position on several occasions and stated directly during his meeting with the Supreme Commander of the Jordan Armed Forces-Arab Army that the "future of Jerusalem and Palestine is a red line for Jordan," and that "the position of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and all Jordanians is unwavering on Jerusalem and on any attempts to create an alternative homeland for the Palestinians in Jordan."⁸²

Hamas was aware of the great pressure Jordan was facing regarding the peace process, and expressed its appreciation for Jordan's stance in rejecting the "Deal of the Century." It supported Jordan's position and reassure it that the weapons of Palestinian Resistance would only be used against the occupation. Isma'il Haniyyah, the head of Hamas' political bureau, stated that his Movement "stands with Jordan with a heart and a sword, especially when it comes to the Kingdom's security, and its internal and external interests." In a meeting with prominent Jordanian figures in Istanbul, Haniyyah stressed that his Movement stood against the idea of the alternative homeland in Jordan.⁸³

e. Relations with Israel

Jordan's relationship with Israel was strained by repeating the idea of the alternative homeland, and by Israel's disrespect of Jordanian guardianship of *al-Aqsa* Mosque. The tension was demonstrated in the killing of Jordanians at the border crossings, in addition to the arrest of others. Israel tried to ease tensions by paying compensation to the families of the killed Jordanians, however, the tension re-escalated again as the termination of al-Ghamr and al-Baqura Agreements approached. Nevertheless, despite this tension, Jordan continued to deepen its economic and security relations with Israel.

When the Israelis tried to defuse the tension with the Jordanians by paying compensation to the families of the killed Jordanians, Jordan responded, with approving the appointment of Amir Weissbrod as Israeli ambassador, who previously worked at the Israeli Embassy in Jordan between 2001 and 2004.⁸⁴

This was after six months with no Israeli ambassador in Amman. The return of the Israeli ambassador sparked protest across several popular sectors, and a memorandum signed by 25 Jordanian MPs was issued, rejecting the return of the Israeli ambassador to Jordan, and demanding the severance of diplomatic relations with Israel.⁸⁵ The anger at Israel's behavior was not limited to the MPs, but was also witnessed among parties within the Jordanian government, as State Minister for Media Affairs Jumana Ghneimat stepped on the Israeli flag when entering a trade union complex in Amman, sparking official Israeli protest through the summoning of the Jordanian ambassador in Tel Aviv.⁸⁶ Minister Ghneimat was supported by a group of Jordanian MPs who received her with applause upon entering the Jordanian parliament.⁸⁷ The incident with the Israeli flag indicated a state of frigidity in relations between Jordan and Israel, and a decline in diplomatic relations between the two sides. The deterioration of relations could also be sensed in Israel's disregard of Jordanian interests and its insistence on serving its own interests even if that conflicted with the interests of Jordan with whom it has a peace agreement. This trend in Israeli behavior was demonstrated when the Israelis ignored Jordan's objection to the establishment of the Ramon Airport in Eilat near the Jordanian border, given that it violated international standards regarding respect for airspace and sovereignty.⁸⁸ Notably, Israel ignored the Jordanian objection although it already had many airports and alternative sites.

In addition to the Israeli rightist stances against Jordan and the demands for an alternative homeland for the Palestinians there, tensions between the two sides increased with the Israeli targeting of the Marches of Return in GS and *al-Aqsa* Mosque. The King of Jordan condemned Israeli violence in GS,⁸⁹ while the Jordanian parliament—at a session for discussing the Israeli aggression on *al-Aqsa* Mosque—recommended that the government expel the Israeli ambassador from Amman and recall the Jordanian ambassador from Tel Aviv.⁹⁰ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates summoned the Israeli ambassador in Amman to confirm the Kingdom's condemnation and rejection of Israeli violations in *al-Aqsa* Mosque and demanded the immediate cessation of provocative Israeli practices which fueled conflict and constituted a clear violation of international law.⁹¹ Furthermore, tension increased when Israel arrested the Jordanian citizens Hiba al-Labadi and ‘Abdul Rahman Mir‘i at the border crossing, and in response Jordan withdrew its ambassador to Israel in protest.⁹²

Tensions between the two sides escalated after the King announced the expiry of the lease of al-Baqura and al-Ghamr, which Israel benefitted from under the 1994 peace agreement. On 10/11/2019, Jordan refused to extend the lease contract, despite Netanyahu's earlier announcement of his intention to negotiate an extension to the agreement,⁹³ and despite a formal Israeli request for consultations to extend the lease.⁹⁴ The Israelis were surprised by the Jordanian position after their media outlets had promoted the idea that the lease contract would be extended,⁹⁵ and some Israeli analysts said that the Jordanian decision had come as a result of internal pressure from the Jordanian opposition, particularly the MB movement.⁹⁶ Israel tried to employ the stick-and-carrot policy to press for the extension of the lease, but failed. On one hand, the Minister of Agriculture Uri Ariel threatened to cut water to Jordan should the lease not be extended,⁹⁷ and on the other hand, Israel released the two Jordanian prisoners, Hiba al-Labadi and 'Abdul Rahman Mir'i, as a gesture of goodwill.⁹⁸ However, Jordan did not change its position regarding the lease.

The strained relations led to a state of apathy and coldness in the diplomatic relations between Jordan and Israel. This prompted Itzhak Levanon, former Israeli ambassador to Egypt and a researcher at the Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, to call on Israel to save the “peace” agreement with Jordan, pointing out that Amman and Tel Aviv “recognize that the peace accord serves their mutual interests and is of strategic importance given the volatility of the region, yet neither has done enough to prevent a deterioration in ties.”⁹⁹ The Jordanian regime acknowledged the deterioration of the relationship with Israel, and in November 2019, King Abdullah II described it to be “at an all-time low.”¹⁰⁰

Cold diplomatic relations impacted economic relations as the Jordanian government faced opposition from some MPs to its implementing a gas deal with Israel, at a time the government had decided to expropriate 344 donums and rent 611 donums in 18 towns, in the governorates of Irbid and Mafraq, for the construction of a pipeline for natural gas from Israel.¹⁰¹ The Jordanian parliament rejected the agreement to import natural gas from Israel and demanded the government cancel the \$10 billion deal with Noble Energy. In return, the government requested a “deadline” in order to refer the matter to the Constitutional Court.¹⁰² Notably, the deterioration in economic relations was not only caused by Jordanian popular rejection of such relations, but it was also the result of Israeli conduct; for the 1994

peace agreement included establishing a joint industrial region, where Israel would establish a bridge over the Jordan river and build a small street connecting to the region. The bridge was established in 2018 (after 25 years) while the road has not been built yet, indicating frosty relations between the two sides.¹⁰³

It seems that the only thing which went smoothly between the two sides was security cooperation. In March 2018, Jordan's State Security Court, which is a military court, sentenced a Jordanian citizen to seven years in prison with hard labor for planning to stab Jews in WB. He was convicted for the felony of "threatening with terrorist act using violence." According to the indictment, the accused, a Jordanian national with a Palestinian ID, wanted to carry out a "terrorist" operation against Jews by stabbing one of them, and he left the Jordanian territory to WB in order to carry out stabbings there, but security forces managed to arrest him. The indictment indicated that while he was in Hebron, he inquired about a way to enter Jerusalem, but he was not able to do so because it was difficult to enter the city.¹⁰⁴ However, despite this security cooperation, Jordan has pursued backup security measures by demanding every Israeli entering Jordan to take a Jordanian escort from the border until leaving the country, and not allowing any Israeli to enter Jordan without having a prior reservation in a specific hotel.¹⁰⁵

3. Syria

a. The Impact of Changes and Revolutions on the Palestine issue

The Syrian crisis continued throughout the period covered in this report. Thus, its negative impact on the Palestine issue continued, especially regarding the Palestinians in Syria where RCs, notably al-Yarmouk RC, witnessed huge destruction and displacement of most Palestinians in Syria, whether within the country or abroad.

b. The Development of Syria's Political Relations and Diplomatic Activity

The PLO worked on enhancing its relations with the Syrian regime, especially after the civil war had almost come to an end in favor of al-Assad regime. In this context, a PLO delegation headed by 'Azzam al-Ahmad, visited Damascus and met the Syrian Minister of Social Affairs and Labor, Rima al-Qadri, who stated that the Palestinian refugee issue in Syria was a top priority for the Syrian government, and that the Palestinian people remain productive within Syria, their home until they return to Palestine.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal al-Mikdad

informed Palestinian National Action Fractions that al-Yarmouk RC residents could return to the camp and that there was a plan to organize the return of all refugees. According to the committee supervising the removal of the rubble from the camp, 20% of houses were completely demolished while other houses were either habitable or needed repair.¹⁰⁷ The Syrian government commissioned the Damascus Governorate to rehabilitate the infrastructure and restore basic services to al-Yarmouk RC in preparation for the return of those who were displaced.¹⁰⁸

The assignment of the rehabilitation of al-Yarmouk RC to the Damascus Governorate raised questions regarding the intentions of the Syrian government, for this decision meant replacing al-Yarmouk's "local committee," which was tantamount to a municipality, with the governorate. This meant that the workers of the RC local committee would be under the authority of the Damascus Governorate, which could abolish any exclusivity the largest Palestinian Diaspora RC has, and pave the way for the exploitation of the camp's land in large commercial projects, as the RC is located in a strategic area of the Syrian capital.¹⁰⁹

c. Relations with Israel

In 2018–2019, Israel continued to launch attacks on military sites inside Syria, primarily targeting Iran's military presence. It also targeted military armaments of Iran-affiliated forces in Syria to prevent them from acquiring any weapons that would disturb the balance of power with Israel. This approach appeared to have been coordinated with Russia during Netanyahu's visits to Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Syrian regime tried a new policy in the early months of 2018; retaliating to Israeli aggression. Thus, when Israel attacked targets inside Syria, including weapon depots on the outskirts of Damascus,¹¹⁰ the Syrian regime and its Iranian allies retaliated shooting down an Israeli F-16 fighter. After an Iranian drone was downed, Israel admitted that its plane was shot down by an antiaircraft missile launched from Syria, but said the pilots were not killed and had left the plane at the appropriate time.¹¹¹ In the same context, Syrian air defenses destroyed two Israeli missiles fired at the Damascus countryside,¹¹² and launched dozens of Syrian missiles at Israeli positions in the Golan Heights.¹¹³ The Syrian response was met with a violent Israeli attack on dozens of Syrian targets, in which the air force participated, in addition to the launching of dozens of artillery shells at Syrian targets, at a depth of tens of kilometers in Syrian territory. It was considered the largest Israeli attack on Syria since 1974.¹¹⁴

The Israelis pursued a carrot-and-stick policy with the Syrian regime by threatening to continue targeting it militarily as long as it allowed Iranian forces to operate on Syrian soil. At the same time, they sent messages that they would not target the Syrian regime should it abandon its Iranian allies. In July 2018, the Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman toured the Golan Heights and threatened to target any Syrian soldier violating the 1974 “armistice line” in the Golan,¹¹⁵ while Netanyahu, during his visit with Putin in July 2018, said, “We won’t take action against the Assad regime, and you get the Iranians out.”¹¹⁶ On 11/7/2018, the Israeli army bombed three Syrian military posts in response to the infiltration of a Syrian UAV into Israel.¹¹⁷ Several days after this bombing, the Israeli Air Force shot down a Sukhoi airliner killing its pilot and claiming that the jet had broken through the 1974 lines.¹¹⁸ The lack of any strong Syrian response encouraged the Israelis to continue their attacks, and in November 2018¹¹⁹ and early 2019, they carried out wide-scale strikes on Syria from over Lebanese territory.¹²⁰

The Israeli attacks began to include Palestinian organizations; on 12/11/2019 the Israelis fired three missiles at the house of PIJ political bureau member Akram al-‘Ajuri in Damascus, killing his son Mo‘az and wounding 10 other people. At the same time, the PIJ military leader in GS, Baha’ Abu al-‘Atta, was assassinated, leading to an escalation in the Strip. The PIJ responded by firing rockets at Israeli targets, where the three-day confrontations ended on 15/11/2019. Yet, after reaching calm in GS, several missiles were launched at the Golan Heights possibly in retaliation against the assassination of al-‘Ajuri in Damascus.¹²¹ Israel retaliated again by shelling the military sites, of the Iranian al-Quds Force in Damascus, as well as Syrian army sites in order to establish the equation that “the regime will pay the price for the actions of the Iranians.” As a result, Netanyahu stated, “I have made it clear that whoever hurts us – we will hurt him. This is what we did overnight vis-à-vis military targets of the Iranian al-Quds Force and Syrian military targets in Syria after a barrage of rockets was launched at Israel.”¹²²

In a related context and in what seemed to serve Israeli electoral purposes and the deterrence equation, and contrary to previous Israeli policy, Israeli officials revealed the size of attacks launched on Syria. Israel admitted, for the first time, that it has destroyed the Syrian nuclear reactor in 2007 in Deir Ezzor.¹²³ In a rare admission, the Israeli army stated that it had launched 200 raids on Syria in 2017 and 2018, in which some 800 rockets and bombs were shelled almost twice a week. It also had launched cyber-attacks, whose details were not disclosed, and

contributed to defeating ISIS, by carrying out raids that killed a thousand members of the organization.¹²⁴

Israeli attacks on Syrian territory were accompanied by the endeavors of the Israeli intelligence to extend the Syrian civil war by providing support to some Syrian armed factions, who were willing to make a compromise with Israel. Israel also tried to put on a humanitarian face by providing aid to sick and wounded Syrians. The London-based *al-Hayat* daily revealed that thousands of Syrians had received medical treatment in Israel, where 4,000–4,500 war-wounded patients from Syria had been treated since the start of the humanitarian aid program in 2013.¹²⁵ In the same context, Israel agreed to evacuate hundreds of White Helmets and their families from Syria to Jordan in coordination with the UN.¹²⁶ Not only did Israel provide “humanitarian” aid, but it also sought to arm some elements of the Syrian opposition. A *Foreign Policy* report showed that Israel’s secret program funded and armed at least 12 groups in southern Syria that helped prevent Iran-backed fighters and ISIS militants from taking up positions near the ceasefire line in the Golan Heights.¹²⁷ Major General Gershon HaCohen, a former General Staff Corps commander, said that former Defense Minister Moshe Ya‘alon met with Syrian operatives during his tenure.¹²⁸

Israel’s arming of some Syrian militias came in the context of protecting “its borders” from Iran-backed fighters and ISIS militants. It even sought to “cooperate” with Russia and the Syrian regime, as per *Yedioth Ahronoth*.¹²⁹ Israeli Army Minister Avigdor Lieberman expressed Israel’s desire for the Syrian regime to protect the borders, as he described victory by al-Assad as a fait accompli that could calm the Golan Heights.¹³⁰ Lieberman’s statement came during a tour in the Golan Heights, after an air strike killed seven ISIS militants near the borders, who were believed to be on their way to carry out an armed operation against Israelis.

The “coordination” element of the relationship between the Israelis and the Syrian regime developed through Russian mediation and was enhanced when Israel released two Syrian prisoners in exchange for the remains of the Israeli soldier, Zechariah Baumel.¹³¹ Through its mediation, Russia cemented its role as a major player in Syria, and it is expected that Israel could benefit from this role as it seeks to remove Iran from the country. Indeed, Netanyahu revealed a Russian-US-Israeli agreement to oust Iran, which was halted by disagreement over its implementation.¹³²

Israel exploited the Syrian regime's involvement in the civil war to consolidate its control over the Golan Heights, and impose new facts on the ground. Trump's recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights¹³³ boosted Israeli settlement building plans, where the Israeli Ministry of Construction and Housing prepared a plan to build tens of thousands of settlement units to accommodate 250 thousand Jews by 2048. The plan aims to develop tourism projects, clear land mines from 80 thousand donum land and prepare areas for tourism, and prepare land for commercial and housing development and construction projects.¹³⁴ In addition, *Haaretz* reported on Washington's proclamation of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights as a key green light for Tel Aviv to move forward with its initiative to secure the significant underground oil and gas wells there. Golan Heights oil reserves are predicted to be somewhere around one billion oil barrels, which is enough to transform Israel from a self-sufficient start up country to a net exporter of energy by 2020.¹³⁵

4. Lebanon

a. The Impact of Changes and Revolutions on the Palestine issue

Large-scale demonstrations erupted in Lebanon in mid-October 2019 against the negative economic conditions, and in reaction to the government's decision to impose more taxes on gasoline and tobacco, besides a new tax on WhatsApp. The demonstrations soon evolved to demand the change of the ruling political class, the resignation of the three presidencies (the republic, the government, and the parliament), and the abolition of sectarian quotas for the benefit of a civil state. Lebanese from all spectra participated in the protests, which transgressed sects and parties, refused to exclude any party from the political equation and raised the slogan "Everyone means everyone" to indicate that the demonstrations were directed at all the powerful power parties, including Hezbollah. The protests resulted in the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri and the assignment of former Minister Hassan Diab to form a government, which would then pave the way for new elections. However, in spite of the Lebanese public's preoccupation with internal interests, the Palestine issue was not absent from the demonstrations, as was exemplified by raising pictures of Baha' Abu al-'Atta, who was assassinated by the Israeli army in GS, and by raising slogans of solidarity with GS while it was exposed to Israeli shelling after the assassination of Abu al-'Atta.¹³⁶

b. The Development of Lebanon's Political Relations and Diplomatic Activity

The Palestinian refugee issue was at the top of the agenda of the Palestinian-Lebanese relationship, and matters escalated due to some political measures. The Lebanese Minister of Foreign Affairs Gebran Bassil called on UNRWA to remove from its records any Palestinian who has left Lebanon or obtained another citizenship in order to reduce its financial burdens on the one hand, and to contribute to reducing the number of refugees in Lebanon without exposure to the sacred right of return on the other hand. Bassil's demand sparked wide Palestinian criticism, which prompted Bahaa Abu Karroum, a member of the leadership council of the Progressive Socialist Party which is a part of the Lebanese government, to declare that Bassil's statement did not reflect Lebanon's official policy.¹³⁷ In the same context, Hassan Mneymneh, head of the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC), an inter-ministerial government body, described Bassil's call a "confusion," noting that "UNRWA's records are the only existing documents that confirm and testify that the Palestinian identity belongs to every Palestinian and that they were there on the land of Palestine before 1948."¹³⁸

Lebanon rejected the US decision to stop funding UNRWA, and Bassil stated that Lebanon would do everything possible to refuse the permanent settlement of Palestinian refugees, and would engage in a political and diplomatic confrontation devoted to the Palestinian right of return. He considered the decision to stop UNRWA funding a violation of the foundations of the "peace" process, and therefore regional and international stability and peace.¹³⁹ Lebanese President Michel Aoun affirmed this position in the UN General Assembly, when he stated that Lebanon firmly rejects any permanent settlement of Palestinian refugees. He also questioned whether refugees' suffering had ceased so that UNRWA's role had come to an end, or whether the neutralization of its role would pave the way to take the status of refugee away from them, and integrate them in the host countries, wiping away Palestinian identity and imposing a settlement.¹⁴⁰ At a later time, Aoun mentioned the impact the Palestinian and Syrian refugees have on the future of the Lebanese state, warning that Lebanon would not survive if Palestinian and Syrian refugees stayed in it.¹⁴¹

Stirring the issue of the impact of the Syrian and Palestinian refugees coincided with a campaign by the Lebanese Ministry of Labor against foreign workers in



Lebanon. The Palestinian refugees believed that the campaign targeted them, despite their different political and legal status from the Syrians', for they did not originally come to Lebanon in search of job opportunities, but due to forced displacement by the Zionist movement. The campaign was preceded by the signing of an agreement between the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Norwegian Embassy in 2018, to implement the project "Survey of the Labor Force and Households' living conditions in the Palestinian camps in Lebanon" by the Central Administration of Statistics, marking the first time such a survey was carried out.¹⁴² After launching the campaign, Minister of Labor Camille Abousleiman stated that the Ministry of Labor's plan was meant to combat illegal foreign labor and did not target Palestinians.¹⁴³

Simultaneously, the Ministry of Labor issued a decision requiring foreign workers to obtain work permits, which stirred anger among Palestinians who took to the streets and staged unprecedented demonstrations and protests that lasted for around two months. The assurances made by the Minister of Labor did not alleviate the anger of the Palestinian refugees, who were called upon by President 'Abbas to calm down and give way for a solution between PA officials and the Lebanese government.¹⁴⁴

Some political parties tried to push the Palestinians into the Lebanese internal political confrontations, when the Lebanese Forces Party Chief Samir Geagea stated that the protests taking place in some Palestinian RCs had political motives; involving the Palestinian street in the conflict between Hamas and its Lebanese allies on the one hand (Hizbullah), and the PA on the other hand.¹⁴⁵ In contrast, Hizbullah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah addressed the issue of Palestinian employment by calling for differentiating between the foreign worker and the Palestinian, who has been forced out of his country and did not come to Lebanon of his own free will. Nasrallah denied any link between permanent settlement proposals and allowing the Palestinians to work within certain facilitations and controls, saying that the Palestinian and the Lebanese in the labor market "cannot be treated like the foreign worker." He also commented on some calls that urged the residents of Palestinian RCs to return to their country and work there, saying: "Okay; Tell the Lebanese army to withdraw from the borders and let the Palestinians return to their country."¹⁴⁶

Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri tried to calm things down by stating that the “unified Lebanese vision is our reference in dealing with the Palestinian refugees.”¹⁴⁷ However, the Minister of Labor insisted on his position by declaring that “exempting Palestinians from work permits needs the law to be amended, and the demand to exclude them from applying the law is not enforceable.”¹⁴⁸ The Secretary-General of the Popular Nasserite Organization MP Osama Saad called for “dropping the unjust measures issued by the Minister of Labor Camille Abousleiman and establishing the political, social, humanitarian and civil rights of the Palestinian people in Lebanon.”¹⁴⁹ As the debate worsened, Hariri froze the issue by calling for the formation of a ministerial committee to study the “Palestinian file” not only regarding the right to work, but also in terms of civil, social, political and human rights.¹⁵⁰

This tension did not prevent various Lebanese parties from expressing solidarity with the Palestinian people; as shown in the denunciation of the Israeli crackdown on the protests of the Land Day in 2018 and the support to the Palestinians who were killed during the Israeli aggression on GS.¹⁵¹ There was also consensus among Lebanese political parties on rejecting the relocation of the US Embassy and the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.¹⁵² The support to the Palestinians paved for further coordination, when the Lebanese army—based on an agreement with various Palestinian factions—intervened to dismantle its military presence in the Mieh Mieh RC. The agreement stipulated for the removal of all armed activities by all parties, including the withdrawal of armed elements, preventing the wearing of military uniforms and the carrying of weapons, as well as having every faction collect and control its weapons in a warehouse inside the camp, preventing its use by anyone and for any reason, while being liable to prosecution and arrest by the Lebanese army.¹⁵³

c. Relations with Israel

In 2018–2019, Israel’s aggressive policy towards Lebanon continued. At the beginning of 2018, it carried out a bombing operation in Lebanon, targeting Muhammed ‘Umar Hamdan, a Hamas official in Saida, who survived the assassination attempt. The Lebanese internal security investigations showed that the attempt was arranged by a Lebanese cell, affiliated with the Israeli Mossad and headed by a Lebanese,¹⁵⁴ who in turn confessed, after his arrest, to being operated by the Mossad.¹⁵⁵ It appears that the Israeli Mossad tried to penetrate

the Lebanese scene in several ways. In September 2019, the Lebanese newspaper *Addiyar* revealed the return of some 230 former Lebanese members of the Lahad army, who were working (or used to work) as agents for Israel and had entered Lebanon with US passports. According to *Addiyar*, the US Embassy provided protection for those US citizens, even if they were originally Lebanese, and that the Lebanese authorities had no right to deal with them except under Lebanese-US legal coordination.¹⁵⁶

The Hebrew newspaper *Maariv* later revealed the motives of the failed assassination, claiming that Hamdan was organizing a group to carry out missile attacks on Israel from southern Lebanon, which angered Hizbullah leaders for fear that any escalation from the south would drag them into a military confrontation with Israel. *Maariv* added that following meetings between the leaders of the two parties, it was agreed that Hamas would not pursue any step without Hizbullah's knowledge.¹⁵⁷

Hamas's activity in Lebanon prompted the Israelis to exert pressure on the Lebanese government, through foreign parties, to restrict the movement of its leaders. Israel's Public Broadcasting Corporation, Kan, said that, under Israeli pressure, the British government was considering bargaining with Lebanon to expel Saleh al-'Aruri, deputy head of Hamas political bureau. It revealed that Britain—within the framework of the British-Israeli foreign coordination to restrict al-'Aruri—would make Lebanon choose between maintaining the joint cooperation and expelling al-'Aruri.¹⁵⁸

Israel threatened Hizbullah and warned that the next battle would be decided by killing Nasrallah,¹⁵⁹ at the same time, Netanyahu claimed the existence of Hizbullah arms factories near the Rafic Hariri International Airport. These statements were interpreted in Lebanon as an attempt to justify any future Israeli aggression against the country, and this is what Foreign Minister Bassil indicated when he said, "Israel seeks to launch a new aggression against Lebanon."¹⁶⁰ At a later time, Netanyahu pointed out that Israel had prevented Hizbullah from possessing thousands of precision-guided missiles, as the Party had only dozens of them, in addition to thwarting its attempts to build tunnels into Israel, where two tunnels were discovered.¹⁶¹ A week later, Israel announced the discovery of a third tunnel which did not pose an imminent threat to Israeli settlers, and this may explain US

assurances to the Lebanese President that there were no “aggressive intentions” towards Lebanon in response to these tunnels.¹⁶²

In response, and in the context of psychological warfare, Nasrallah revealed that Hizbullah possessed enough precision-guided missiles to strike any target inside Israel. Nasrallah indicated that there were tunnels in southern Lebanon but added that “we are not obliged to say who dug them or when; constructive ambiguity is our policy.” He also reiterated, “We decide to enter the Galilee in the event of an ‘Israeli’ war on Lebanon,” adding that the Israelis “will not know from where we will enter the Galilee.” He emphasized that unveiling Hizbullah’s tunnels “doesn’t even affect 10 percent of our plan to take over the Galilee,” and that “The operation of tunnels does not cancel the Galilee operation, it is not even worth this propaganda.” He warned, “If the ‘Israelis’ attack Lebanon, they will regret it. This means they will be forced to never repeat their aggression, because our response will be one that they never expected.”¹⁶³

Israel tried to establish a new military equation in Lebanon, based on the assumption that Hizbullah was preoccupied with the war in Syria and could not retaliate due to the depletion of its forces. Thus, it assassinated two members of the party in Syria in addition to trying to bomb its stronghold in Beirut. However, Hizbullah retaliated to the assassination by destroying an Israeli military vehicle and wounding those inside it. Israel responded to this by shelling southern Lebanon, leaving no casualties. This round ended without further escalation, because the two sides did not want things to develop towards a comprehensive war. Nasrallah declared that the issue was “not a matter of restitution. Rather it is establishing equations, establishing the rules of engagement, establishing the logic of protecting the country,” adding that Israelis “have to pay for their aggression” and he threatened to down all Israeli drones from Lebanese airspace.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, a week after Nasrallah’s declaration, Hizbullah announced the shooting down of an Israeli drone in southern Lebanon, and Israel’s military spokesperson confirmed the incident.¹⁶⁵ Despite the relative calm on the borders, things remain subject to escalation at any time, as Israel is keen to ensure that Hizbullah does not disturb the strategic military balance by possessing quality weapons. Therefore, Israel might risk a war in order to achieve this aim, and the possibility of a full war remains intact even if the two sides are not enthusiastic about it. However, it is not possible to foretell where things might go should a new round of confrontations erupt.

On the economic level, Israeli attempts to steal Lebanese resources continued by their infringing on the Lebanese water borders to control natural gas resources. The Lebanese army stated that Lebanon insisted on its right to exploit Block 9 in the Mediterranean, stressing that it falls entirely within Lebanese territorial waters. The army stressed the position of the Lebanese government rejecting the establishment of an Israeli wall on the borders as it “affects Lebanese sovereignty, especially that Lebanon has reservations on some areas of the Blue Line (the UN-drawn border demarcation between Lebanon and Israel, in 2000).”¹⁶⁶ In the same context, the Lebanese Supreme Defense Council warned against the construction of the wall and the consequences of the Israeli stance on Block 9 stating that “should the Israeli wall be constructed on (Lebanon’s southern) border, it would be considered an attack on Lebanese sovereignty and a violation of Resolution 1701.”¹⁶⁷

The US tried to defuse the crisis by proposing to demarcate the maritime boundary based on the “Hoff Line,” which was drawn up by former US Ambassador Frederick Hoff in 2012, requiring the division of the disputed 860 km² area at approximately 60% for Lebanon and 40% for Israel; however, Lebanese officials rejected the US offer.¹⁶⁸ Lebanon reiterated its position on several occasions, and the Army Commander stated that the army would stand up to any Israeli attempt to infringe on Lebanon’s wealth.¹⁶⁹ The same position was reiterated by the Minister of Defense, Elias Bou Saab, while inspecting the borders, saying that “Lebanon will not give up an inch of land,”¹⁷⁰ while Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri said that “Israel wants to create new Shebaa Farms, but this time at sea,”¹⁷¹ referring to Israeli greed and expansionist aspirations.

5. KSA and the Gulf Countries

a. The Impact of Changes and Revolutions on the Palestine issue

The Arab Gulf states have been preoccupied with their internal conflicts, including the blockade imposed on Qatar by the KSA, the UAE and Bahrain, who are also involved in the war on Yemen. However, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states still declare that the Palestine issue is the foremost Arab and Muslim issue, and Jerusalem is the historic capital of Palestine in accordance with international resolutions. They also consider any step taken by Israel which would lead to tension in the region and weaken opportunities for a comprehensive and lasting peace, based on the two-state solution and the establishment of an

independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, as invalid,. This has been confirmed by the GCC in its closing statement of its 40th summit in Riyadh in December 2019,¹⁷² and 39th summit in December 2018.¹⁷³

b. Palestinian-Gulf States Relations

On the Political Level

In early March 2018, some media outlets reported that the KSA was pressuring President ‘Abbas to accept the “Deal of the Century,” although the PA leader maintained his rejection of the deal.¹⁷⁴ The Egyptian newspaper *al-Shorouk* reported that an important Arab capital, which it did not specify, has pressed President ‘Abbas to accept the “Deal of the Century” under the slogan “take and negotiate.”¹⁷⁵ The Israeli media (Channel 10) leaked confirmed news that the Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman had met with heads of Jewish organizations in New York, on 27/3/2018, and told them, “It is about time the Palestinians take the proposals and agree to come to the negotiations table or shut up and stop complaining.”¹⁷⁶ In this context, a study issued by the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies in the summer of 2018 said that the Saudi effort to take control of Islam’s holy places in Jerusalem served, among other things, to support President Donald Trump’s vision of the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.¹⁷⁷ The KSA did not comment on media reports regarding its desire to acquire guardianship, however, after a long period of media coverage of the issue, the Saudi Ambassador to Jordan Prince Khalid bin Faisal bin Turki denied such reports and announced that Saudi Arabia supported the Hashemite guardianship of Islamic and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem.¹⁷⁸

The Saudi regime’s support for the “Deal of the Century” did not prevent it from sympathizing with the Palestinians and denouncing Israeli violence towards them, as demonstrated in a phone call made by the Saudi King with President ‘Abbas.¹⁷⁹ In this context, the KSA sought to strengthen its relationship with the PA, when the Saudi Prince Mansour bin Musallam visited the PA territories in March 2019, the first of its kind on the Saudi level. Bin Musallam headed the Education Relief Foundation and signed a memorandum of cooperation with the Palestinian Ministry of Education.¹⁸⁰ Then, the Saudi soccer team visited the PA territories for the first time to play a match against the Palestinian team. Both visits stirred concerns that they might pave the way for overt normalization between KSA and Israel, while the Saudis considered the visits an act of support to the

PA. In this regard, KSA and the Palestinians agreed to establish a joint economic committee and a business council after President ‘Abbas’s visit to Saudi Arabia in October 2019.¹⁸¹

KSA’s negative position towards the Palestinian resistance was reflected in its relationship with Hamas, which the Saudis consider an ally of regional opponents, namely Iran and Qatar. In his speech to the European Parliament, in Brussels in February 2018, Saudi Foreign Minister ‘Adel al-Jubeir described Hamas as “extremist” and claimed that halting Qatar’s funding of Hamas had helped the PA government to take control of GS; he also labelled Hamas as “terrorist.”¹⁸² On another occasion, al-Jubeir said that the Iranian regime was seeking to destabilize several Arab countries, and that it supported Palestinian movements (Hamas and PIJ) in undermining the PA.¹⁸³ Also, the Permanent Representative of KSA to the UN Ambassador ‘Abdullah bin Yahya al-Maalami, denounced what he described as “the firing of rocket-propelled grenades from Gaza into Israeli civilian areas,” in reference to the Palestinian factions’ bombing of Israeli settlements in December 2018. The regional conflict between KSA, on the one hand, and Iran and its allies, on the other hand, made Hamas a Saudi target, where Saudi security forces interrogated ‘Abdul Rahman Ould Mohamed, a social media activist of Mauritanian descent, because of his sympathy with Qatar and a “terrorist” organization, a reference to Hamas.¹⁸⁴

Hamas revealed in a statement that the Saudi authorities had abducted one of the Movement’s leaders, Muhammed Saleh al-Khudari, and his eldest son Hani, on 4/4/2019 without declared reasons,¹⁸⁵ along with dozens of Hamas supporters, who were arrested in a Saudi campaign that intensified in early February 2019. The Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor counted more than 60 detainees, while it had information that the number of detainees was higher than that, but their families feared reporting their arrest.¹⁸⁶ According to media sources, the detainees were severely tortured by the Saudi security forces,¹⁸⁷ and at the time of writing this chapter of the Strategic Report, the vast majority of the detainees remained in custody.

The UAE and Bahrain identified with the Saudi position towards the Palestinians. The UAE maintained its position in support of its ally Muhammad Dahlan, while at the same time, it maintained a lukewarm relationship with President ‘Abbas. It voiced its support of the Palestinian people by condemning

Israel's use of "excessive" force, when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement regarding Israel's suppression of the Marches of Return, which began on the 70th anniversary of the *Nakbah*.¹⁸⁸ As for the relationship with Hamas, and based on its alliance with Iran and after Hamas had announced its support for Iran in the face of US sanctions, Anwar Gargash, UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, declared that Hamas "is only an Iranian regional instrument."¹⁸⁹ For his part, Bahraini Foreign Minister Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa stated that if there had been no Iranian support for Hamas in GS, with soldiers and money, the achievement of "peace" between the Palestinians and the Israelis would have been closer.¹⁹⁰

On the opposite side of the Saudi-Emirati-Bahraini position, there was the position of Qatar and Kuwait, where Qatar has been trying to mediate between the PA and Hamas, keen to maintain contact with the PA leadership while strengthening its relationship with Hamas. Coordination between the PA and Qatar did not stop, as shown in the official visits by President 'Abbas to Doha in August 2018,¹⁹¹ in addition to May¹⁹² and November 2019.¹⁹³ The visits aimed to discuss transferring Qatari funds to the GS outside the jurisdiction of the PA, as the latter criticized Qatar for sending money to GS through Israel because, from its point of view, this would strengthen Hamas and promote internal division. Consequently, Qatar pledged to send funds to the WB parallel to the GS to refute this accusation,¹⁹⁴ by allocating \$300 million to the PA education and health sectors, in addition to \$180 million to support electricity services in Gaza.¹⁹⁵ Ambassador Muhammed al-'Emadi, chairman of Qatar's Committee for the Reconstruction of Gaza, said earlier that Qatar was helping Israel avoid another war on GS by funneling relief money to impoverished Palestinians with Washington's blessing. He described this cooperation as evidence of Doha's distance from Hamas. In a press interview, al-'Emadi wondered, "If we are helping Hamas, do you think the Israelis (would) allow us to go inside and come out? It's impossible. They know we are not helping Hamas." He added that "every single penny" of Qatari money given to Gaza was monitored to ensure it was spent on humanitarian needs.¹⁹⁶ In response to al-Jubeir's speech that Doha has stopped supporting Hamas, al-'Emadi said that they were not helping Hamas, rather they were helping the people on principle.¹⁹⁷

Qatar announced its opposition to the Palestinian schism on several occasions, and al-'Emadi affirmed that Doha's position is that Palestinian reconciliation must be completed. However, Qatar's vision is based on not waiting for the reconciliation

to be completed to alleviate poor living conditions in GS, but rather to mitigate the effects of the Israeli blockade. In this regard, during his meeting with several Palestinian factions in GS, al-'Emadi stated, "What we do for Gaza is to relieve the suffering of our people and to facilitate reconciliation."¹⁹⁸

Qatar was able to bring views closer regarding elections, especially that it maintained a good relationship with the different Palestinian sides. Thus, after President 'Abbas announced his intention to hold elections, the Qataris wanted to ensure that they were held. Therefore, al-'Emadi held several meetings with the Hamas leadership in GS, President 'Abbas at his headquarters in Ramallah, and the PLC Speaker 'Aziz Dweik in the presence of some MPs affiliated with Hamas, persuading them to run in the elections and support independent candidates.¹⁹⁹

As for Kuwait, it condemned Israeli violations in international forums. Kuwaiti National Assembly Speaker Marzouq al-Ghanim described Israel as country which most violated the resolutions of the Security Council and the HRC.²⁰⁰ On the 70th anniversary of the *Nakbah*, al-Ghanim stressed that all Kuwaitis, regardless of any differences, were united on the issue of Jerusalem. He also noted that the parliament has voted unanimously for a statement confirming the unity of the Kuwaiti viewpoint regarding the Palestine issue.²⁰¹ Kuwait did not limit its support to verbal solidarity, but embraced diplomatic support through halting a statement proposed by Washington to condemn the Palestinian Resistance.²⁰² Kuwait also responded to the US reduction of its financial aid to UNRWA by saying that what Arabs have paid the Agency exceeded that of the US, despite Washington being its largest single donor.²⁰³ Kuwait continued to deplore Israeli transgressions in international fora causing embarrassment to Israel, whose delegation pulled out of the 139th General Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union after a fiery speech by al-Ghanim.²⁰⁴

On the Financial Level

KSA supported Palestine from 2000 to mid-2018 with more than \$6 billion. 'Abdullah bin 'Abdulaziz al-Rabiah, the advisor at the Saudi Royal Court, stated that KSA had contributed in the relief and humanitarian fields; including development aid at \$4,531,487,015; humanitarian aid at \$1,002,298,330; and charitable aid at \$17,330,878; in addition to \$200 million pledged to the State of Palestine (at the Jerusalem Summit), including \$50 million to UNRWA and \$150 million to support the Palestinian Waqf program in Jerusalem.²⁰⁵

Yet, according to data published by the Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Construction (PECDAR), the total Saudi support for the PA since its establishment in 1994 until 2017 amounted to \$3.83 billion.²⁰⁶

Qatar said that total grants and assistance to the Palestinians over seven years, from 2012 to mid-2019, amounted to \$1.18 billion.²⁰⁷ *Haaretz* said that Qatar had transferred more than \$1.1 billion to the Palestinians, with the approval of the Israeli government. The newspaper also said that after the amounts of money involved had begun to rise, Attorney General Avichai Mendelblit held a meeting on the matter in which various government bodies, including legal and security authorities, were asked to examine whether it was possible to continue with the process of the huge transfer of funds without it constituting a violation of the sanctions against Hamas. An Israeli political source confirmed to *Haaretz* that Qatar's contributions to UNRWA in 2018 helped to keep it from shutting down its activities and allowed it to continue operating in GS. The newspaper asserted that Israel had accepted the Qatari proposal to provide aid to Gaza after President 'Abbas's refusal to allow money to be transferred to Hamas from Palestinian banks, and after Egypt had rejected US proposals to provide assistance to the GS by setting up a border commercial area in Sinai.²⁰⁸

The UAE was keen to deliver its support to the Palestinian people through UNRWA rather than the PA. It provided \$1.68 billion in aid to the Palestinians throughout the 2013–2018 period.²⁰⁹ Kuwait provided UNRWA with \$50.1 million in 2018,²¹⁰ and the PA general budget with \$50 million in November 2018.²¹¹

c. The Position Regarding the Peace Process

A documentary aired by Channel 13 titled "The Secrets of the Gulf" indicated that between late 2015 and early 2016, direct contacts took place between Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Muhammed bin Zayed and Netanyahu in order to "coordinate positions" on the nuclear agreement reached between Iran and the Western countries in November 2015. Contacts also included attempts to launch a regional "peace" initiative, supported by Arab countries, for which a national unity government that included Labor Party leader Yitzhak Herzog would be formed in Israel. Israeli reports said that Herzog had tried to gauge the seriousness of Netanyahu's offers and thus contacted the Egyptian President, the Jordanian King and other undisclosed Arab sides, to "discuss the prospects and possibilities of launching the initiative."²¹²

Channel 13 also revealed that then-chief of Mossad Tamir Pardo secretly visited Saudi Arabia in 2014, amid mounting Saudi fears regarding rapprochement between the US and Iran, for the Saudis perceived Israel as the strongest opponent of the Iranians. Channel 13 also reported that in September 2014, Netanyahu met with Bandar bin Sultan, secretary-general of the Saudi National Security Council, in the presence of a representative from a third country (which it did not specify), where Saudi Arabia proposed a joint diplomatic initiative on Israeli-Palestinian “peace” talks, and the development of a joint strategy to counter Iranian influence and reconstruct GS. At the time, Netanyahu showed “acceptance” of the initiative, and he agreed with bin Sultan that both Netanyahu and the Saudi Foreign Minister would announce that initiative from the UN rostrum; however, the talks failed due to Netanyahu’s insistence on all the provisions of the Israeli draft. Channel 13 revealed that the contacts were renewed a year later, following the death of King ‘Abdullah bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz.²¹³

Despite the US determination to liquidate the Palestine issue through the “Deal of the Century,” and deny the foundations of the “peace process” through imposing a fait accompli by recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, some Gulf countries did not perceive such developments as an obstacle to the resumption of negotiations. Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs, ‘Adel al-Jubeir said, “[we] must wait for the American initiative” and “if it will have components that both parties can accept, it will be possible to renew negotiations despite the current crisis surrounding the Trump statement.”²¹⁴ According to some Hebrew news outlets, KSA and Israel discussed internationalizing *al-Aqsa* Mosque in order to proceed with the “peace” process.²¹⁵

The KSA position remains based on the two-state solution and a presumption of Jewish eligibility for a national homeland on the land of Palestine. This was stated by Saudi Crown Prince who said, when asked whether he believed the Jewish people had a right to a nation-state in at least part of their ancestral homeland, “I believe that each people, anywhere, has a right to live in their peaceful nation. I believe the Palestinians and the Israelis have the right to have their own land,” adding, “But we have to have a peace agreement to assure the stability for everyone and to have normal relations.”²¹⁶

During his visit to the US, bin Salman was keen to meet the Israel lobby and send reassuring messages about the relationship with Israel, where he informed Haim Saban, the Israeli-American media mogul, that the time had come for a new

era of relations.²¹⁷ According to *The New Yorker* magazine, the Saudis presented a plan that was radically favorable to Israel. It would recognize Israel's claims to Jerusalem and ratify nearly all its settlements in the WB. The magazine quoted a senior Palestinian official saying that Arab leaders had been applying intense pressure on 'Abbas, in cooperation with the Trump administration, where the "whole idea is to settle the Jerusalem issue, so the White House can build a united front against Iran."²¹⁸

It seems that the Crown Prince's rush to engage in the "peace process" file, while departing from the determinants of the Arab initiative based on the two-state solution, in addition to the Arab and Palestinian angry objections and criticism against the Saudi behavior, pushed the Saudis to hold back and the King himself to take the lead, assuring Arabs that KSA would not endorse any Middle East "peace" plan that fails to address Jerusalem's status or the refugees' right of return. Reuters indicated that the private guarantees offered by King Salman to President 'Abbas, and his public defense of long-standing Arab positions have helped reverse perceptions that Saudi Arabia was changing its stance under Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman.²¹⁹

Reuters's report confirmed the revelation by i24 News, based on a classified Axios report, indicating that Saudi Arabia would not support the Trump administration's peace plan or normalize with Israel unless the Israeli government made a "substantive concession" to the Palestinians. The i24 News channel said the report served to contradict claims by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that Israel would be able to normalize relations—which he claimed he was already in the process of doing—with Gulf nations. Netanyahu claimed that diplomatic relations with the Arab countries could lead to a settlement with the Palestinians, yet the channel said the chances of success of any peace plan remain slim.²²⁰ Remarkably, despite the conflict between KSA and Qatar, both rejected a "deal" not including the right of return and the status of Jerusalem. Qatari Foreign Minister Muhammed bin 'Abdulrahman Al Thani declared that "Qatar had no interest in anything that is not a two-state solution, the 1967 borders, the right of return, a clear designation of Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine."²²¹

d. The Stance on Israel

Israel exploited the state of enmity between Iran and the Gulf states to build a security and economic alliance with them, apart from solving the Palestine issue

and under the slogan “facing the Iranian threat and fundamentalist movements.” This was reflected in the conference against Iran held in New York in September 2018, which brought together Arab officials with the head of the Israeli Mossad. The conference was attended by the Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs, ‘Adel al-Jubeir; the UAE Ambassador to the US Yousef al-‘Otaiba; the Yemeni Foreign Minister Khaled al-Yamani; the Bahraini Ambassador to Washington Sheikh Abdullah bin Rashid; the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in addition to the Mossad Chief Yossi Cohen.²²² In the same context, the Israeli Army Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot participated in a conference for army leaders in Washington, meeting his Arab counterparts from KSA, Bahrain, Jordan and Egypt, and discussing the Iranian issue and the developments of the Syrian scene.²²³ Later, Eisenkot revealed that Israeli security and intelligence services were working “closely” with their counterparts in the Arab world.²²⁴ US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that an international alliance including the Gulf countries, European and Asian countries alongside Israel was forming, in order to develop defensive systems to deescalate the situation in the Middle East. Pompeo stressed that Iran was the central problem causing instability in the region.²²⁵

The growing security coordination between Israel and some Arab countries, who have demonstrated their need for Israel to find a balance with Tehran, has prompted Netanyahu to claim that Israel was defending the entire region from Iran.²²⁶ It encouraged him to submit an initiative to normalize relations with a number of Gulf countries, and establish public economic and security cooperation, despite the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yet, the initiative did not stipulate for reaching a “comprehensive peace” agreement with the Gulf states, because Israel realizes that it is not possible given the existing conditions.²²⁷

Relations between Israel and the Gulf countries became more overt having previously been clandestine, and that was clear during the Bahrain Economic Workshop attended by all Gulf countries and in which the economic aspect of the US “peace” plan was revealed. Oman was the first among the Gulf countries to openly establish relations with Israel, as Netanyahu was received in Muscat, at the invitation of Sultan Qaboos, to discuss the “peace” process in the Middle East.²²⁸ After the visit, Yusuf bin ‘Alawi, Omani Minister of Foreign Affairs, confirmed that he thought it was time to recognize Israel, which he claimed must be a friend of the Palestinians and a partner rather than a usurping country, adding that the US

peace plan would be deficient if it failed to address all of these matters.²²⁹ After Netanyahu's visit to Muscat, Israeli press revealed that relations with Oman started in 1979 and had continued secretly thereafter.²³⁰

In November 2018, the Israeli Intelligence and Transportation Minister Yisrael Katz participated in a transportation conference held in the Sultanate of Oman, where he presented a plan for a rail link, called "Tracks of Peace," which would link the Mediterranean to the Gulf by rail via Israel. The initiative was based on two central ideas, namely: "Israel as a land bridge and Jordan as a regional transportation hub." According to Katz, in the plan Israel would form a land bridge with Europe, Jordan would be a center for transporting goods, and it should benefit the Palestinians and the Gulf states in addition to Iraq in the long run.²³¹ Katz presented the railway plan as an alternative which would make it possible to avoid Iranian threats in the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Bab al-Mandab.²³²

Relations between Oman and Israel were disclosed frequently as bin 'Alawi met Netanyahu during the US-led Ministerial to Promote a Future of Peace and Security in the Middle East held in Warsaw.²³³ In an interview with an Israeli newspaper, bin 'Alawi stated that Arab countries should reassure Israel that it was not under threat in the Middle East as "Israel still believes that it is in a region with enemies. It considers its security requirements to be a top priority. Therefore, as Arabs, we must discuss this issue and see how we can eliminate this feeling and reach a mutual understanding with Israel."²³⁴

As for the KSA, *Yedioth Achronoth* revealed that Saudi Arabia allowed Indians to travel to Israel via its airspace.²³⁵ But the Saudi Civil Aviation Authority denied granting any permission for flights between India and Israel,²³⁶ while Air India later confirmed that Saudi Arabia has permitted such flights.²³⁷ The rapprochement between the two sides was demonstrated in the participation of the Saudi and Bahraini ambassadors in Cairo at the Israeli celebration of the anniversary of the founding of Israel.²³⁸

Security and economic coordination between Saudi Arabia and Israel has increased under the pretext of confronting the Iranian threat and fighting "terrorism." Eisenkot revealed that the Head of the National Security Council Meir Ben Shabat met bin Salman seeking security and intelligence cooperation between the two sides and working to confront Iran and the Salafi Islamic movements.²³⁹ Also,

Israeli television channel Kan said that Saudi Arabia and Israel were cooperating to counter the challenge posed by Iranian drones.²⁴⁰ The media revealed that Israel had licensed the NSO Group sales to KSA of its spyware, known as Pegasus.²⁴¹ It seemed that the security relations between the two sides had come a long way as Tamir Pardo, the former chief of the Mossad, revealed the close relationship between Mossad agents and their Saudi counterparts.²⁴²

The strengthening of economic relations between KSA and Israel was confirmed by leaks about joint projects between the two sides. The former Knesset member Ayoob Kara revealed that Saudi Arabia was considering buying natural gas from Israel, and that the two countries had discussed building a pipeline linking KSA and Eilat.²⁴³ Clearly, there had been meetings between the two parties to consolidate economic relations with joint projects awaiting the appropriate opportunity. Indeed, Katz revealed chances of cooperation between Israel and moderate Sunni Arab countries had increased, promoting his initiative to link the Gulf states by rail through Jordan to the port of Haifa. He said that Israel had a policy to advance ties and normalization with the Arab Gulf states, and that it did not have a conflict with the Gulf states but common interests in the field of security against the Iranian threat, as well as in developing many joint civil initiatives.²⁴⁴

Aware of the importance and centrality of the Saudi role and the naturalization initiatives undertaken by the Crown Prince, Israel has sought to support bin Salman within the US administration, to assist him in avoiding consequences following the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Netanyahu told the press that the killing of Khashoggi was horrendous but that Saudi stability was paramount, and that Riyadh's role in countering Iran must be maintained.²⁴⁵ Also, *Maariv* revealed that Netanyahu pressured Trump to save bin Salman, because Israel needed him.²⁴⁶ Trump justified his collusion with bin Salman in the Khashoggi affair based on the importance of the Saudi regime to Israel's security, declaring that, without Saudi Arabia, Israel would be in big trouble.²⁴⁷

The UAE also continued its journey of extending relations with Israel, on the diplomatic, economic and security levels. On the diplomatic level, UAE Foreign Minister 'Abdullah bin Zayed recognized Israel's right to defend itself against the threats of Iran and Hizbullah,²⁴⁸ while Anwar Gargash called for correcting what he saw as the error of severing ties with Israel.²⁴⁹ On the economic level, Israeli news

outlets said that Israel had signed an agreement for a pipeline project linking it to Europe and funded by Abu Dhabi, which would be signed by Israel, Greece, Italy and Cyprus. The agreement stipulates for the establishment of an undersea pipeline, which would be the longest in the world, at around two thousand kilometers, and would allow Israel to export gas to the countries signing the agreement besides the Balkans and other European countries. The move was initiated by Israeli Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz, who presented the proposal to the EU at a conference in Abu Dhabi, where it was approved and \$100 million was allocated as an initial investment.²⁵⁰

On the security level, *The New Yorker* magazine revealed an Emirati military intervention with Israeli air cover in the Sinai Peninsula, allegedly participating in the fight against ISIS. The magazine indicated that Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Muhammed bin Zayed had deployed Emirati forces to train and assist Egyptian troops, who had been fighting militants with help of the Israeli military aircraft and intelligence agencies.²⁵¹ Later, the Israeli i24 News channel revealed that a military delegation from the UAE had visited Israel to review operations of the latest US-made F-35 fighters owned by the Israeli air force.²⁵² Apparently, the UAE was no longer determined to hide its relations with Israel, which could be a message to Iran regarding the depth of their relations. The UAE Ambassador to the US, Yousef al-‘Otaiba, shared a table with the Israeli Ambassador in Washington Ron Dermer at a pro-Israel annual security event organized by the Jewish Institute for National Security of America (JINSA).²⁵³

Channel 12 revealed joint exercises conducted between the UAE air force and the Israeli air force on the sidelines of the military drill, which took place in Greece with the participation of several countries, notably the US, Italy and the host country.²⁵⁴ *Maariv* revealed that deals to purchase intelligence equipment were concluded between the UAE and Israel through Verint Systems, a specialist in security and surveillance products, as well as NSO Group in Herzliya, which sold Pegasus software to the UAE to spy on phones. According to the newspaper, the motive behind the UAE’s quest to strengthen its security ties with Israel was the fear of Iran and the MB movement, both deemed as threats to its national interests.²⁵⁵ The Hebrew Forum for Regional Thinking (FORTH) website pointed out that the volume of trade exchanged between Israel and the UAE reached \$1 billion in 2018.²⁵⁶ *Haaretz* revealed that Israel would provide the UAE with

advanced intelligence capabilities, including two spy planes, in a deal amounting to 3 billion shekels (\$846 million).²⁵⁷ It also disclosed that an Emirati cybersecurity company called DarkMatter Group has lured veteran Israeli intelligence officers to work with it in million-dollar contracts.²⁵⁸

The relationship between the two sides was not confined to the security level but extended to other areas, where two Israeli drivers participated in the Abu Dhabi Desert Challenge in the Emirates. Despite the previous participation of Israeli athletes in various competitions organized in the UAE, this participation was based on an official invitation from Emirati organizers, while in previous cases, the organizers allowed the participation of Israelis against their will, and in compliance with the threats of different international sports federations to remove the host country from international organizations if it refused to allow Israeli athletes.²⁵⁹ In a related context, the Israelis announced that the UAE would allow them to enter the country after obtaining an entry visa using their Israeli passports to attend Expo 2020 in Dubai.²⁶⁰ Visits by Israeli ministers to the UAE have become public and frequent. In 2018, two Israeli ministers, Ayoob Kara and Miri Regev, visited the UAE, and Regev bragged about publishing her pictures in the Emirates on her Facebook page.²⁶¹ Israeli Channel 10 revealed that the leader of the Labor Party, Avi Gabbay, visited Abu Dhabi secretly in early December 2018 and met with officials in the UAE government.²⁶² In 2019, Minister Katz publicly visited the UAE and offered an initiative regarding economic cooperation between Israel and the Gulf countries.²⁶³

Bahrain has been working directly to bring Gulf states' relations with Israel into the open, whether by holding formal meetings or through press statements by Bahraini officials. Channel 13 revealed that the relations between Israel and Bahrain had been going on for more than 25 years.²⁶⁴ However, these relations had recently developed and became public, with the Bahraini Foreign Minister stating in mid-February 2019 that there would be a breakthrough in relations with Tel Aviv when the time is right.²⁶⁵ On another occasion, the Minister asserted that Bahrain had recognized the right of Israel to exist, and that "Israel is a country in the region... and it's there to stay" and "we want peace with it."²⁶⁶ Commenting on Israel's bombing of Iranian sites in Syria, the minister said that Israel was defending itself, adding that Iran had declared war on Bahrain.²⁶⁷ As for mutual visits, Mubarak Al Khalifa, the Bahraini Prince residing in London, visited Tel Aviv in early 2018 where he met Minister of Communications Ayoob Kara.²⁶⁸

Bahrain started the public disclosure of its normalization with Israel by officially inviting the Israeli Minister of Economy and Industry Eli Cohen to participate in an international conference held in Manama.²⁶⁹ This was followed by the participation of an Israeli Foreign Ministry delegation in the Global Entrepreneurship Congress held in Bahrain.²⁷⁰ Former Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni revealed that she had met the Bahraini foreign minister on the sidelines of a lecture she had given on the situation of the Middle East, before the US-led Mideast economic workshop “Peace to Prosperity” was held on 25/6/2019.²⁷¹ This workshop was attended by the representatives of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Morocco, Egypt and Jordan in addition to the Israelis, while the PA and the rest of the Arab countries did not participate.²⁷²

The “Peace to Prosperity” workshop contributed to the normalization of Bahraini-Israeli relations, where Bahraini officials would not find it wrong to meet with Israeli officials in front of the cameras, such as the meeting of the Bahraini Foreign Minister with his Israeli counterpart in July 2019, on the sidelines of the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington.²⁷³ Bilateral relations developed, especially on the security level, under the pretext of facing the Iranian threat. In October 2019, the Israeli Foreign Ministry delegation participated in the meeting of the Ministerial Maritime and Aviation Security Working Group held in Manama, discussing ways to defend ships in the Gulf against Iranian attacks.²⁷⁴ At a previous time, Ayoob Kara described the Bahraini backing of Israeli strikes on Iranian targets in Syria as a historic support to Israel.²⁷⁵ The Bahraini Minister also condemned the actions of the Lebanese resistance and said that Hizbullah’s digging of tunnels would destabilize Lebanon.²⁷⁶

6. Other Arab Countries

Other Arab countries either cooperated indirectly with Israel, or rejected its continued aggression against the Palestinian people, by denouncing its actions or supporting the Palestinians. It was revealed that Israel airlifted over 400 Yemenite Jews “with the help of a neighboring Arab country,” which remained unnamed, and transported them to Ben Gurion Airport in Lod.²⁷⁷ In the context of targeting the Palestinian Resistance, a Libyan court issued, for the first time in the history of Libya, strict rulings against four Palestinians in the case known in the media as the “Hamas cell,” accusing them of smuggling arms shipments to Hamas via Libya and Sinai.²⁷⁸

For its part, Tunisia announced that it had identified the assassins of Tunisian aviation engineer Muhammed Zouari and arrested one of them in Croatia.²⁷⁹ Hamas, as the representative of the Palestinian Resistance, enjoys popularity in North Africa, which prompted Zouari to join the Movement. This might explain the assertion by Prince Hicham bin ‘Abdullah El Alaoui, the cousin of the Moroccan King, that had it not been for the presence of Hamas, there would have been no such thing as the Palestine issue. Prince Hicham added, during a television interview on BBC Arabic on 15/1/2019, that “Hamas, and not the PA, was able to maintain the Palestine issue.”²⁸⁰ In a demonstration of Moroccan solidarity with the Palestinians, a field hospital was established in GS.²⁸¹

In another indication of solidarity and sympathy with Palestine, on 11/11/2019 Tunisian presidential candidate Kais Saied declared that normalization was treason, and that it was necessary to try those who normalize with an entity that has displaced and abused a whole people.²⁸² On the opposite side, the US Department of Justice revealed that a competing presidential candidate, Nabil Karoui, had signed a contract—amidst his presidential campaign—with former Mossad agent Ari Ben-Menashe, president of the Canada-based political consultancy company Dickens and Madson, which arranges meetings with influential international political figures, aka “lobbying.”²⁸³ In a video interview, Ben-Menashe revealed why Karoui hired his company saying that Karoui “wanted to get Tunisia out of the French orbit and bring it to the US orbit.”²⁸⁴ After Kais Saied was sworn in as president, he said that Palestine is engraved in the hearts of Tunisians and Tunisia would remain supportive of all just causes, first and foremost, the issue of our people in Palestine. He added that Palestinian rights have no statutes of limitations, and asserted that Palestine is not a plot of land registered as real estate, but rather registered in the sentiment of the Tunisians.²⁸⁵

In Iraq, the state’s negative policy towards Palestinian refugees continued. In November 2018, it withdrew all “privileges” from the Palestinian refugees, including withholding the monthly food card, abolishing the retirement rights of the deceased Palestinians and depriving their heirs of their privileges. In addition, there were other decisions related to students and jobs, along with health, education and various service fees, which were re-imposed on Palestinian refugees after decades of exemption. They were also denied the right to obtain a housing unit within government projects and were excluded from Law 21, which stipulates

that victims of terrorist operations and military mistakes committed by US forces during their occupation of Iraq or by Iraqi forces, would be compensated.²⁸⁶

In the Iraqi context, the Israeli air force bombed, for the first time in 28 years, Iranian arms stores belonging to militias in Iraq, as revealed by *The Wall Street Journal*.²⁸⁷ This suggested that Israel was changing the rules of the game and sending a message to the Iranians, as asserted by Netanyahu who said that “Iran will have no immunity, anywhere” hinting that Israel was behind recent airstrikes on Iranian targets in Iraq, without acknowledging the responsibility directly.²⁸⁸

Third: Developments Concerning Normalization

We have seen an increase in the pace of normalization between the Arab countries and Israel, and many contacts between the two sides have come out to the open. The developments here have not been limited to leaks or suggestions by some political leaders, as the “Boycott Campaign–Palestine” reported that 20% of Arab and Muslim countries had established diplomatic relations with Israel, with 15 having diplomatic relations with it to one degree or another.²⁸⁹ As for the Arab Gulf states, Bahrain took a proactive role in normalization, which—according to some Israeli reports—was being employed by the KSA and the UAE to legalize normalization with Israel.²⁹⁰ They either want to please the US, or under the pretext of building alliances with Israel, to deal with the perceived threat of Iran and the “political Islam” movements. In order to prepare Arab public opinion to accept relations with Israel, the notion of normalization has been passed down quietly and gradually, by holding joint meetings on the sidelines of international conferences, employing sports and common economic interests, in addition to various declarations indicating that achieving “peace” in the region and resolving the Palestine issue could be achieved through normalization. Also, there have been efforts to change prevailing perceptions through changing education curricula in the Arab world, as recommended by a study issued by the INSS.²⁹¹

Developments of normalization could be tracked by tackling statements and media reports issued by presidents, political leaders and research centers, for they are usually a prelude to disclosures of political action. In addition, these developments could also be traced through meetings and visits held with the

Israelis, under various pretexts including sports and international fora, and through trade exchange between some Arab countries and Israel.

1. Statements and Media Reports

Netanyahu boasted about normalized relations with many Arab countries that previously had no diplomatic relations with Israel, and said there were understandings and security alliances aimed at coordination to stop the expansion of Iran and the Islamic movements. Besides Netanyahu, various Israeli ministers and public figures have bragged about the high level of coordination between Israel and Arab figures. Netanyahu has been trying to promote normalization through “peace,” as was highlighted in his statement that “Many Arab countries now see Israel not as their enemy but as their indispensable ally in pushing back Iranian aggression,” adding “this has created normalization which can lead to peace. I believe that if we have peace with the broader Arab world, it will help us get to peace with the Palestinians.”²⁹²

Israel has taken advantage of the fear of some Arab regimes of Iran and the Islamic movements to normalize relations. This, in turn, has caused some Arab regimes to ignore the Palestine issue and even use it as a pretext for normalization. When asked in a press interview, published at the end of August 2018, whether Arab leaders raised the Palestine issue when they met Israeli officials, Lieberman said that the agendas have included “the real threats: Iran, al-Qaeda and the terrorist Sunni movements. They know what they can get from Israel: intelligence, expertise, technology and strategic cooperation. I do not remember that the Arab leaders have ever highlighted the Palestine issue in their proposals; not even as a first point, a second or a third.”²⁹³ For his part, Netanyahu said that the nuclear agreement with Iran was bad in every respect, except that it has brought Israel closer to the Arab world on a scale never known before, and had imposed a gradual normalization with leading countries in the Arab world. He said, “This process, of normalization by leading countries in the Arab world with the strong State of Israel, is happening before our eyes on a scale that would have been impossible to imagine a few years ago.”²⁹⁴

Netanyahu’s visit to Muscat whetted his appetite to make more visits to Arab countries, as he announced on 25/11/2018.²⁹⁵ In this context, Israeli UN Ambassador Danny Danon revealed that Netanyahu had held secret meetings in New York with a number of heads of states not having diplomatic relations with



Israel.²⁹⁶ Netanyahu also announced that the Sultanate of Oman had agreed to allow Israeli civil aviation company El Al to utilize its airspace en route to the countries of Asia.

Netanyahu responded to Israeli accusations that he was missing a golden opportunity to establish “peace” relations with the Arab world in exchange for a settlement of the Palestine issue. He said that Israel’s relations with the Arab world were witnessing a real and unprecedented revolution, and that there was an understanding with these countries not to mortgage normalization with Israel to Palestinians’ caprices. Netanyahu asserted that “Currently we can fly over Egypt, Chad, and apparently, we can fly over Sudan,” adding that he was working on getting Saudi Arabia’s permission for that as well. Indeed, Khartoum allowed Netanyahu’s plane to fly over South Sudan after returning from Chad.²⁹⁷ Netanyahu also bragged that, through intelligence services, Israel had “provided information that has stopped several dozen major terrorist attacks, many of them in European countries.”²⁹⁸

Emphasizing the improvement of Arab-Israeli relations under Netanyahu, the Head of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) Mort Friedman said that Saudi Arabia was the closest ally of Israel in all regional and international issues. He drew attention to the fact that relations had existed for decades between Israel and Egypt, Jordan and Morocco, while they remained secret with some of the GCC countries, adding, “Relations with most of these countries have become warmer today, to the degree that some of the royal families in the Gulf States have visited Israel.” Friedman indicated that secret relations with the UAE had been stable for years, and he revealed that the next public Gulf station for the Israeli PM after Oman would be Manama, while Saudi Arabia has given the green light to Bahrain to open an official representation office to Israel during this visit.²⁹⁹

Israeli statements about normalization with Arab countries were frequent, and the Israeli media quoted a spokesperson of the Israeli Foreign Ministry in saying that 13 Arab delegations had visited Israel from the Gulf, Jordan, Yemen, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, adding that the delegations included a diverse mix, but the emphasis was on media personalities influential in their countries.³⁰⁰ The Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesperson’s statement was backed by the disclosure of the Foreign Ministry regarding three secret visits of Iraqi delegations to Tel Aviv. This explains Israeli Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon’s

announcement that Iraq had been removed from the list of “enemy countries” (which includes Lebanon, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Iran), where he signed a decree authorizing commercial exchange with Baghdad, and the decree stipulated that Iraq was not an enemy country.³⁰¹

Netanyahu boasted about the improvement of Israel’s relations with Arab countries under his rule, telling Israeli media that in 2018 he secretly visited four Arab countries not having relations with Israel.³⁰² On another occasion, he revealed having contacts with six Arab and Muslim countries that used to be described as hostile to Israel.³⁰³ Netanyahu also claimed that Arab leaders had called and congratulated him on his victory in the April 2019 Knesset elections, and in an event organized by the Likud party in honor of the elections, he said that many leaders of the Arab and Muslim world congratulated him on his elections victory.³⁰⁴ These declarations by Netanyahu are likely true, in light of later developments, where the UAE Foreign Minister wished Jewish people a happy Jewish new year,³⁰⁵ while the Saudi Ambassador to Washington Reema bint Bandar Al Saud congratulated American Jews on the occasion of the advent of the Jewish new year, marking a first in the history of Saudi diplomacy.³⁰⁶

Netanyahu issued a statement on the first anniversary of moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem saying, “there is a new efflorescence, a new renaissance of relations between us and many of our Arab neighbors, and many non-Arab Muslim countries. We are united in our desire to stop Iranian aggression.”³⁰⁷ Netanyahu also announced Israeli participation in the economic workshop in Bahrain, although the White House said that it had decided not to invite official representatives from Israel.³⁰⁸ Indeed, it was the first time, and the Israeli media flocked with their Israeli passports to cover the US-led Mideast economic workshop “Peace to Prosperity” in Bahrain, and Israeli journalist Barak Ravid said that Bahrain had allowed journalists from six different Israeli media outlets to enter the country to cover the conference.³⁰⁹

On the Arab level, a media outcry erupted after Israeli Radio announced Netanyahu’s intention to visit Khartoum, which made the leader of the ruling Sudanese National Congress Party, ‘Abdel Sakhi ‘Abbas, denounce the reports, stating that Netanyahu could not visit Sudan, and that his country’s position on normalization with Israel was clear and closely related to the Palestine issue.³¹⁰ ‘Abbas’s statement did not pacify the uproar, so the Sudanese Information Minister

Bishara Juma reiterated that hostility between Sudan and Israel was ideological and religious and would continue until the hour of judgment.³¹¹ It seemed that the reason for the uproar was that the idea of normalization was actually raised in the corridors of the ruling regime in Sudan, but it was met with the rejection of most of its pillars. Al-Amin ‘Abdel Razek, secretary-general of the Popular Congress Party (PCP), the largest party participating in the government, explained the circumstances behind such news. He said that the country’s recent national dialogue initiative had featured proposals to open channels of communication with the Israeli government, adding that the proposals were discussed but were ultimately rejected by more than 95% of the Sudanese political groups, who reiterated their longstanding refusal to accept normalized ties with Israel. He clarified that such an issue would cause the government to lose its legitimacy, because one of the most important recommendations regarding the country’s foreign relations was for Sudan to be open to all countries except Israel.³¹² It is clear that the crisis Khartoum had been experiencing led some to promote normalization with Israel, as a way to improve the situation in Sudan. President ‘Omar al-Bashir, before he was overthrown, said, “We have been advised to normalize relations with Israel in order to improve the situation in the country, but we believe that sustenance is in the hands of Allah, and not in anyone’s hand.”³¹³

With the fall of al-Bashir’s rule in Sudan in April 2019, and the assumption of power by the army and forces affiliated with the revolution, pressure increased on the new ruling body to normalize relations with Israel, as a prelude to pleasing the US and lifting economic sanctions. With the escalation of the economic crisis, Sovereign Council Chair General ‘Abdel Fattah al-Burhan met with Netanyahu in Uganda on 3/2/2020. This was followed by Netanyahu’s announcement that Israeli aircraft could overfly Sudan for the first time on 15/2/2020. The Sudanese leadership’s decision to open up to Israel faced widespread popular objections.

In a related context, during the emergency session of the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union, on 8/2/2020, Iraqi Parliament Speaker Muhammad al-Halbousi said that his country rejected all forms of normalization with Israel, and that “Iraq supports the Palestinian people’s right to establish an independent state on all of their lands, and rejects all forms of normalization with the usurping Israeli entity, all attempts to impose biased projects, and attempts to pass them through a fait accompli policy.”³¹⁴ As Israel revealed the visits of the Iraqi delegations and while

the US Secretary of State talked about bilateral relations, deputy speaker Hassan al-Kaabi said that any normalization with Israel would not happen, stressing that the Iraqi position on the Palestine issue would not change. The parliament speaker's statement asserted that changing the Iraqi governments has not, and would not, change the position of Iraq and its people towards Palestine. Al-Kaabi also said that "Some parties are paid to promote ideas to change the Iraqi position, and we tell them that the Iraqis have not and will not reach this point of normalization with Israel."³¹⁵ However, it appears that the announcement of the Iraqi Parliament was ignored by Iraqis promoting normalization, as *Haaretz* revealed, in August 2019 that some Iraqi officials had had contacts with Israel, and some Israeli officials had been holding secret meetings with Iraqi government officials, while some of these meetings were held in Israel.³¹⁶

In February 2019, Kuwaiti Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled al-Jarallah confirmed Kuwait's clear position in rejecting normalization, and that his country would be the last to normalize relations with Israel, and only after a just and comprehensive resolution of the Palestine issue.³¹⁷

On 24/6/2019, members of the Kuwaiti National Assembly called for boycotting the Bahrain US-led Mideast economic workshop "Peace to Prosperity," considered a prelude to the "Deal of the Century."³¹⁸

In return, some Arab countries have been preparing public opinion to accept normalization with Israel, by having politicians and writers promoting the idea. Thus, the Bahraini writer 'Abdulla Aljunaid indicated that "GCC countries do not need anyone's permission to make a decision to establish direct relations with Israel or any other State if such a decision serves our national interests."³¹⁹ In the same context, Emirati businessman and billionaire Khalaf Al Habtoor reiterated his call for Gulf states to establish relations with Israel to achieve political and economic gains, while he had previously said that "we want peace with Israel, even if it refuses."³²⁰ There was also the statement by 'Abdul Hadi al-Hweij, the Foreign Minister of the Interim Libyan government of insurgent General Khalifa Haftar—affiliated with the UAE—that his country hoped to establish normal relations with Israel if the Palestine issue is resolved.³²¹ Al-Hweij's statement was not strange in light of reports regarding Israeli coordination with Haftar in southern Libya. He has also met with an Israeli intelligence officer in Amman for security coordination, where Israel would assist him in exchange for his prevention of arms smuggling from Libya to the Palestinian Resistance through the Sinai peninsula.³²²

Such statements reflect the wishes of some Arab leaders, who do not hide their desire to normalize relations with Israel and even visit it. This was revealed by the Jewish American activist and journalist Mike Evans, who met a number of Arab figures and leaders, such as the Jordanian King, Saudi and Emirati Crown Princes as well as al-Sisi, whom he met four times, and got a clear insight as to what they think of Israel and its prime minister. Evans wrote in *The Jerusalem Post* that he has been told personally by these leaders in regards to Netanyahu that “I really respect him,” “I work closely with him,” “I want to thank him,” or even “I want to come to Jerusalem.”³²³

At the time of writing, it appears that those convinced of normalizing relations with Israel are on their way to unifying and organizing their efforts. A *New York Times* report entitled “Arab Thinkers Call to Abandon Boycotts and Engage with Israel” talked about the efforts of a group called the “Arab Council for Regional Integration” to push forward towards normalization with Israel. This group brought together Arab journalists, artists, politicians, diplomats, Quranic scholars and others, sharing a view that isolating and demonizing Israel has cost Arab nations billions in trade. The report indicated that this group comprised dozens of members, including well-known figures in Morocco, Libya, Sudan, Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq and the Gulf states.

The report stated that some participants suggested establishing a teachers’ college and research institute with campuses in Casablanca, Amman, Haifa and Manama, while the Iraqi security expert residing in Germany, Jassim Mohammad, urged Arab security forces to stop the spread of “radicalism and hate” in the media, schools and mosques, and to spread “corrective content on Israel and the Jews” instead. The report noted that the only Palestinian attending was Muhammad S. Dajani Daoudi, who said that he lost his academic position at Al Quds University after he had taken a group of Palestinian students to Auschwitz concentration camp. Dajani called for educating a new generation of peacemakers, lamented the failure of the Oslo process; because the “peace discussed between diplomats and generals was never fully matched by preparations for a wave of peace between peoples, allowing spoilers on both sides to win the day.”³²⁴

Israel is expected to seek overt normalization with the Gulf countries in the coming period. This was announced by Israeli Foreign Minister Yisrael Katz, who revealed that he had visited Dubai aiming at an “overt normalization” and met

a “prominent” Emirati figure. Katz outlined to the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee the goal of the Israeli government, which was to achieve open normalization and cooperation agreements with Arab states. In his speech, Katz prided himself on his participation in the UN conference in Dubai, as part of his political activity, noting that the main thing was to raise the level of relations with the Gulf states. Katz acknowledged Israel’s participation in the US-led security coalition to protect navigation in the Gulf, revealing that it has participated with intelligence and “other security aspects.”³²⁵

2. Visits and Meetings

Normalization continued through religious visits and sports, in addition to press meetings. Thus, the visit of an Egyptian church delegation to Jerusalem broke the ban imposed on Copts’ visits to the occupied city, and responded to President ‘Abbas’s statement that “visiting the prisoner does not mean normalization with the warden.”³²⁶ However, worshipers at *al-Aqsa* Mosque expelled the Saudi activist Muhammad Saud from the courtyards of the Mosque, and called him the “normalizing collaborator,” after he had appeared with Israeli settlers, as well as on social media praising “Israeli democracy.”³²⁷

In the context of religious normalization, *Israel Hayom* revealed that Sheikh Mehmet ‘Adil al-Haqqani, leader of the Naqshbandi Haqqani Sufi Order, had made a first historic visit to Israel and the PA, to bolster ties with followers of the order, and build spiritual and religious ties between Islamic holy sites and “Sufi Islam.” The paper described the Haqqani Order as a “social network that crosses continents and includes some 60 million Sufi followers.” It added that al-Haqqani’s visit would give millions of Sufi Muslims the “legitimacy” to visit Israel.³²⁸

Also, Israeli media revealed that a delegation of the Conference of European Rabbis, consisting of rabbis from Israel and heads of Jewish organizations, visited Tunisia in May 2018 under the auspices of the Tunisian government. The Israeli media showed the rabbis receiving a “royal hospitality and reception” from the Tunisian Ministry of Tourism.³²⁹

Concerning sports normalization, Doha hosted Israeli tennis player Dudi Sela at the Qatar Open in January 2018. In addition, it hosted an Israeli team in the World Schools Handball Championship, which was held in February of the same year, as well as the Israeli gymnastics team participating in the Artistic Gymnastics World

Championships,³³⁰ where the Israeli national anthem “Hatikvah” was played, and the Israeli flag was raised after the Israeli gymnast Alex Shatilov had won a gold medal in the championship.³³¹

Morocco, for its part, received an Israeli sports delegation participating in the Judo Grand Prix in Aghadir,³³² while a Bahrain-UAE sports delegation participated in a bike race known as the Giro d’Italia 2018 race, which took place in Jerusalem.³³³ A Netball championship brought Israel and the UAE together in May 2018, when the Emirati women’s team met its Israeli counterpart in the Netball Europe Open, and Yonatan Gonen, head of the Arabic-language New Media Section at the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, celebrated the participation of the UAE team. On his Twitter account, Gonen published a photo of the match and wrote in Arabic: “Sports wins... Israel and the UAE are one hand in the netball tournament.”³³⁴

In a related context, Israeli Broadcasting Corporation correspondent Shimon Aran tweeted a picture of Maitha al-‘Arifi, the Emirates’ representative of the Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak Ladies’ Sports Academy, with Israel’s representative Ofra Abramovich, while participating in an international sports conference in Gaborone, capital of Botswana.³³⁵

In an indication of the extent of sports normalization, Israeli Minister of Culture and Sport Miri Regev bragged that the Israeli flag would be raised in Abu Dhabi, and the “Hatikvah” would be heard during the judo matches.³³⁶ Indeed, the UAE granted the Israeli judo team visas to participate in the International Judo Federation Grand Slam held in Abu Dhabi in October 2018.³³⁷

The official Saudi position has rejected sports normalization, and the KSA denied visas to seven Israeli players, who wanted to participate in the World Chess Championship hosted by Saudi Arabia. As a result, the KSA was stripped of the right to host the contest.³³⁸

As for media normalization, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs revealed in February 2018 that an Arab media delegation of nine would visit Israel, five of whom were from Morocco, in addition to a Lebanese, an Iraqi, a Yemeni and a Syrian.³³⁹ The Moroccan National Syndicate of Journalists has repudiated the visit of Moroccan journalists to Israel and stressed its firm opposition of all forms of normalization with Israel.³⁴⁰ These normalization visits continued despite denunciation by journalists’ syndicates, and in July 2019, the Israeli Ministry of

Foreign Affairs announced that six Arab journalists would visit Israel, including for the first time journalists from Saudi Arabia and Iraq.³⁴¹

Visits were not limited to journalists but extended to a womens' delegation from Morocco, who participated in social activities, projects, and symposiums to "advance the status of women." This was preceded by another visit of a Moroccan delegation, including 11 businessmen and engineers.³⁴² In the city of Meknes, a training institute called "The Alpha Institute for Special Guards Training" was revealed to be holding martial arts and combat training provided by former Israeli military officers.³⁴³ In the midst of the elections, Israeli media said that Netanyahu would visit Morocco and meet the Moroccan King, but this did not happen. In December 2019, Netanyahu used US influence to join US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in his visit to Morocco, but Rabat refused to receive him.³⁴⁴

The rejection of normalization with the Israelis was not restricted to grassroots organizations, but was of legal nature, for example in Tunisia, a first instance court prohibited the entry of an Israeli delegation who was intending to participate in the conference, Ambassadors for Inter-Religious Dialogue, organized by the International Union of Muslim Scouts.³⁴⁵ However, this judicial decision did not prevent Tunisia's Jewish Tourism Minister Roni Trabelsi from giving an interview to the Israeli i24 News channel, in which he declared that Tunisia had been historically committed to peace in the Middle East.³⁴⁶

3. On the Economic Level

Israeli figures showed that the total trade between Israel and its three leading Arab economic partners (Egypt, Jordan and Morocco) grew by 10% between 2017 and 2019, and declined by 5.6% between 2018 and 2019 (see table 1/6).

**Table 1/6: The Volume of Trade Between Israel and Some Arab Countries
2016–2019 (\$ million)**

Country	2016	2017	2018	2019
Egypt	136.1	150.9	184.3	184.1
Jordan	357	339.8	417.5	382.8
Morocco	56	37.5	12.9	13.6
Total	549.1	528.2	614.7	580.5

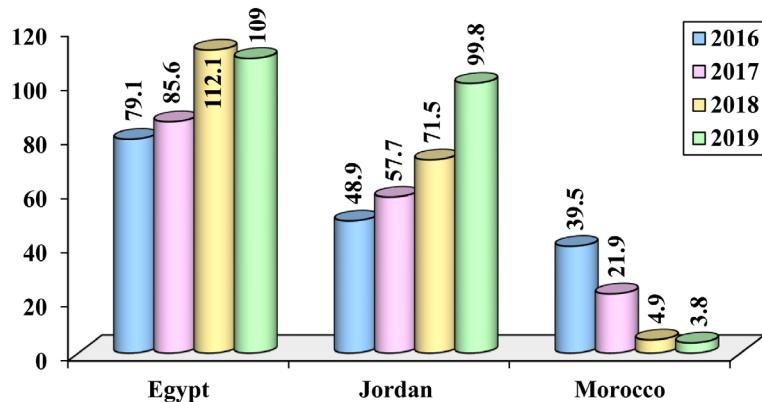
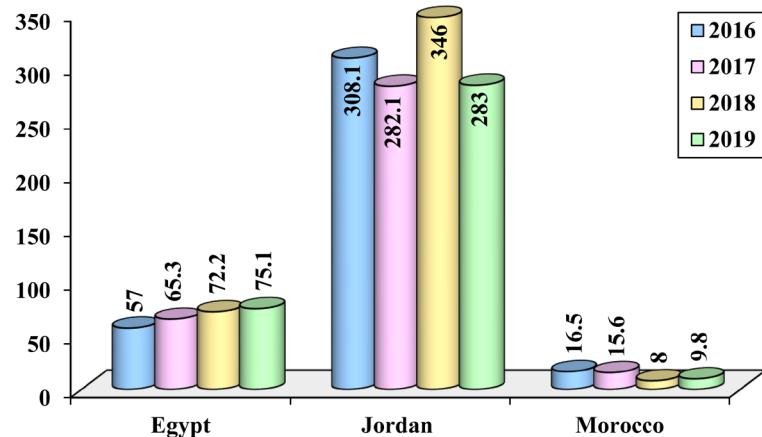
Trade with Jordan witnessed a growth between 2017 and 2019, with an increase from \$339.8 million to \$382.8 million (12.7% growth). Jordan remains the top Arab trading partner of Israel, accounting for 70% of the total trade volume of the three Arab countries, with the trade balance continuing to favor Amman. The value of Israeli exports to Jordan between 2017 and 2019 increased from \$57.7 million to \$99.8 million (73% growth), while Israeli imports from Jordan remained almost the same and amounted to \$282.1 million in 2017 and \$283 million in 2019 (0.3% growth) (see table 2/6).

Egypt's trade with Israel increased from \$150.9 million in 2017 to \$184.1 million in 2019 (22% growth). Israeli exports to Egypt increased during that period from \$85.6 million to \$109 million (27.3% growth), and the Israeli imports from Egypt also increased from \$65.3 million to \$75.1 million during the same period (15% growth).

Trade exchange between Morocco and Israel decreased by 63.7% during that period, falling from \$37.5 million in 2017 to \$13.6 million in 2019. Israeli exports to Morocco decreased by 82.6%, down from \$21.9 million in 2017 to \$3.8 million in 2019. The value of Israeli imports from Morocco also decreased from \$15.6 million in 2017 to \$9.8 million in 2019, with a 37.2% decline during the same period.

**Table 2/6: Israeli Exports and Imports with Some Arab Countries
2016–2019 (\$ million)³⁴⁷**

	Israeli exports				Israeli imports			
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2016	2017	2018	2019
Egypt	79.1	85.6	112.1	109	57	65.3	72.2	75.1
Jordan	48.9	57.7	71.5	99.8	308.1	282.1	346	283
Morocco	39.5	21.9	4.9	3.8	16.5	15.6	8	9.8

Israeli Exports to Some Arab Countries 2016–2019 (\$ million)**Israeli Imports From Some Arab Countries 2016–2019 (\$ million)**

4. The Arab Public Position and its Directions

Despite the crises in their countries, the Palestine issue continued to be a concern of Arab populations, who launched popular campaigns opposing normalization and the “Deal of the Century,” which aims at liquidating the Palestine issue, in addition to engaging in activities that support and show solidarity with the Palestinian people.

In Kuwait, the National Union of Kuwait Students launched a campaign against normalization dubbed “Kuwaitis against Normalization,” deploying huge billboards on the streets of Kuwait protesting all forms of normalization with Israel.³⁴⁸

As for the Lebanese, the martial artist Youssef ‘Abboud withdrew from the Muay Boran World Championships finals held in Thailand, refusing to compete against his Israeli opponent. ‘Abboud abandoned the gold medal which went to his Israeli rival and won the silver medal. He refused to receive the medal on the same platform, preferring to take it behind the scenes so that the Lebanese flag would not be raised beside the Israeli flag.³⁴⁹

Denying press reports about Sudan’s intentions to normalize relations with Israel, the President of the Sudanese Journalists Syndicate Sadiq al-Ruzaiqy attacked Arab states seeking normalization, saying that they did not serve the Palestine issue and had no connection with the people, who reject normalization with the Israeli occupation and support the Palestinian people. He added that the Sudanese media rejects all forms of normalization, whether on the media, political, cultural or economic levels.³⁵⁰

In an attempt to coordinate the efforts of anti-normalization forces, an international conference was held in Beirut and Gaza in March 2019 organized by The Global Campaign to Return to Palestine. This conference, “Muslims and Christians Against Normalization,” was held simultaneously in the Lebanese capital Beirut and GS, with the participation of several institutions and figures. The Campaign is a league that includes institutions, organizations and activists from more than 80 countries. The conference participants stressed that normalization with Israel in all its cultural, artistic, sports, economic, political and other forms is a betrayal that identifies with the Israeli crime, considering it a religious sin.³⁵¹

As for the “Deal of the Century,” Moroccan activists launched a campaign entitled “The Deal will not Pass” to refuse the “Deal of the Century” and counter measures to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem.³⁵² The revolutionary forces in Bahrain affirmed their support to the Palestine issue, and condemned the US administration embassy move, considering it a hostile move against Muslim peoples and all free people of the world. The February 14 Youth Coalition, Islamic Action Society (*Tayyar al-‘Amal*), Islamic Loyalty Current (*Tayyar al-Wafa’ al-Islami*) and the Haq Movement emphasized the position of the Bahraini people rejecting normalization with Israel and labelled normalizers “traitors.”³⁵³ The Bahraini opposition rejected the conspiracies taking place in Bahrain to liquidate the Palestine issue, and the member of the Bahraini opposition party, Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, Ibrahim al-Madhoun apologized to the

Palestinian people, describing the developments as shameful and a disgrace for Bahrain and all Arabs.³⁵⁴ In response to the US-led Mideast economic workshop “Peace to Prosperity” held in Bahrain, Iraqi demonstrators stormed the Bahraini Embassy in Baghdad, hoisted the Palestinian flag over the building and burned the Israeli flag.³⁵⁵

Yet, parallel to popular solidarity with the Palestine issue, and under the impact of regional polarization and continuous incitement by some media outlets, some voices attacked the Palestinian resistance and the Palestinian people as well. Such stances reflected individual phenomena, however, they remain dangerous and will not serve the interests of the Palestinian people, as was the case when the US special envoy to the Middle East Jason Greenblatt cited the tweets of some Saudis opposing the Palestinian resistance during the Israeli aggression on GS.³⁵⁶ In the same context, some incited against the resistance in GS, like Ayad ‘Allawi, head of the Iraqi National Coalition, who claimed that its missiles were aimed at the Gulf states.³⁵⁷

These voices attacking the Palestinian resistance did not affect the popular stance towards the Palestine issue. In Morocco, a demonstration of solidarity with the Palestinians participating in the Marches of Return took place on the occasion of the “Land Day.”³⁵⁸ In Lebanon, a group of youths affiliated with the “People’s Movement” changed the names of some streets of Beirut to bear the names of some of the Palestinian heroes in a campaign titled “Restoring Beirut’s Identity.”³⁵⁹ In Rabat, the “Our Neighborhood in Jerusalem is a Right” campaign concluded a week of activities that included media and legal discussions about the Moroccan neighborhood and the Waqf in Jerusalem, where members from Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia participated in the campaign.³⁶⁰ In Amman, the Jordanian “Plant Your Resilience” campaign managed to collect, in just one day, funds to grow 15 thousand trees in Jerusalem, out of the 30 thousand trees sought to be planted in Jerusalem villages and GS.³⁶¹ Despite the civil war in Yemen, most Yeminis still sympathized with the Palestine issue, and the “Popular Committee for the Solidarity with of the Palestinian People” held a rally, in the city of Taiz, to protest the relocation of the US Embassy.³⁶² In Morocco, thousands joined a march in Casablanca, in solidarity with the Palestinians participating in the Marches of Return in GS, and to protest against the relocation of the US Embassy.³⁶³ Solidarity in Morocco was not limited to the popular level, but also was official, when the government

provided 120 university scholarships to Palestinian students in various disciplines for the academic year 2018/2019,³⁶⁴ which were renewed for the academic year 2019/2020.³⁶⁵

Popular religious bodies and institutions played a positive role in supporting the Palestine issue and rejecting normalization. The Sudan Scholars Association called on the LAS and the OIC to “wash away the shame of silence” on the Israeli aggression against the Palestinian people in GS. The Association’s chairman Muhammed ‘Uthman Saleh said that “moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem will not change our conviction or the conviction of the free people of the world that Jerusalem will remain the eternal capital of Palestine.”³⁶⁶ The Catholic Patriarchs of the East issued a joint letter affirming that the survival of Israel could not be at the expense of the Palestinian people, and accusing Western policies of “displacing” Christians. The letter was circulated by Vatican Radio in Italy.³⁶⁷ The International Union of Muslim Scholars, headed by Ahmed al-Raissouni, stressed its commitment to support the Palestine issue, engaging in its service and always placing it at the forefront of its interests. The Union called for confronting all conspiracies aiming at ending the Palestine issue, expressing its firm position against any form of normalization with Israel, for it would indicate an acceptance of usurpation, killing, displacement and all other crimes committed by Israel, and would even be a reward to the criminal aggressors.³⁶⁸

Conclusion

Polarization has increased between the so-called moderate and the Refusal Front countries, thus affecting people’s interest in the Palestine issue. The Refusal Front countries use their support of the Palestine issue to encourage people to support their policies. They accuse “moderate” countries of neglecting the Palestine issue and accepting the “Deal of the Century” The “moderate” countries stress in media and official statements that the Refusal Front countries use the Palestine issue as a cover to their real intentions of dominating the region. Most popular forces of change have been preoccupied with internal affairs, prioritizing national concern and the fight against tyranny, which affected their level of solidarity with the Palestine issue, yet without abolishing it from their agenda. Hence, Palestinian flags have continued to flutter in demonstrations with pictures

of the killed Palestinians raised in squares and streets. Although some thought that counter-revolution forces had dominated the landscape and that the forces of change had been defeated, the Arab Spring flourished again in Sudan, Algeria, Iraq and Libya, while the counter-revolution camp retreated in Yemen and Libya. This suggests that the waves of the Arab Spring have not reached an end and that a significant transformation in the region is still going on. The current scene indicates that the forces of change may regain their ability to influence the course of events, achieving more freedoms and rights, which would positively affect the level of solidarity with the Palestine issue, and raise the cost of normalization between some Arab countries and Israel.

Israel regards the conflict between the moderate countries and the Refusal Front a historic opportunity to present itself as a protector of the region from the ambitions of Iran and its allies. Before that, Israel had considered itself protector of the West from “barbarism” and “Islamic fundamentalism,” while now it presents itself as a defender and ally of the Arab countries facing “Islamic fundamentalism” represented in Iran and the Islamic movements. This has given a strong impetus to the normalization process between some major Arab countries and Israel, where the bilateral relations began to appear in public, the pace of normalization increased clearly, and Israel turned from an enemy to a partner. The hostility of major Arab states against Iran has also included the Palestinian resistance movements that have been classified as arms of Iran; thus, their support has declined. Therefore, it is expected that Israel would take advantage of this development, intensify its targeting of the resistance in Lebanon and GS, and impose a new equation that guarantees Israel calm and security. Also, Israel is expected to take advantage of the regional environment conducive to normalizing its presence, thus provoking the forces of change and resistance to line up again to face it and resist the accelerating normalization process.

The current time might be best suited to Israel in terms of the strategic environment, thanks to unlimited US support under Trump and the collusion of Arab regimes. However, despite this, Israel has not been able to liquidate the Palestine issue under the “Deal of the Century,” and the resistance forces are still able to influence the course of events, which may prevent the success of liquidation plans. More importantly, the US plans contradict the interests of the Arab countries surrounding Israel, as any permanent settlement of refugees would negatively

affect the fragile internal composition of the Arab countries, whether in Jordan or Lebanon. Even those regimes allied with the US, such as Jordan and Egypt, reject any solution to the issue at the expense of their internal security. Thus, it is expected that the US solution based on the permanent settlement of Palestinian refugees, whether in Jordan or Sinai, will fail, and the US administration's attempts to liquidate the Palestine issue will fail, too. Ultimately, without resolving the issue of the millions of Palestinian refugees, the Palestine issue will remain alive.

¹ The Secretariat of the League Council Affairs, The 29th Ordinary Session of the Council of the League of Arab States (LAS) at the Summit Level, Decisions, Dhahran, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), 15/4/2018, p. 10,

<http://www.lasportal.org/ar/summits/Documents/%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA%D20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%85%D8%A9%2029.pdf> (in Arabic)

² Ibid., p. 11. (in Arabic)

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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.

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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



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