

The Palestine Strategic Report 2018 – 2019



Edited By

Prof. Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh



Al-Zaytouna Centre For Studies & Consultations

The Palestine Strategic Report 2018 – 2019



**Al-Zaytouna Centre
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Editor:

Prof. Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh

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List of Abbreviations

AIPAC	American Israel Public Affairs Committee
AKP	Justice and Development Party (<i>Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi</i>)
Aman	Military Intelligence Directorate (Israel)
AU	African Union
BDS	Boycott, Divestment and Sanction Campaign
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CBR	Crude Birth Rate
CBS	Central Bureau of Statistics (Israel)
CDR	Crude Death Rate
CRS	Congressional Research Services
DFLP	Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
ESCWA	Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
EU	European Union
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GS	Gaza Strip
HRC	Human Rights Council (United Nations)
IAA	Israel Antiquities Authority
IAI	Israeli Aerospace Industries
ICC	International Criminal Court
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISA	Israel Security Agency (<i>Shabak</i>)
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
IWI	Israel Weapon Industries
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
LAS	League of Arab States
MB	Muslim Brothers
MK	Member of Knesset
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MP	Member of Parliament

NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OCHA-oPt	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs-occupied Palestinian territory
OIC	Organization of Islamic Cooperation
PA	Palestinian Authority
PCBS	Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics
PCC	Palestine Central Council
PEGASE	Palestino-Européen de Gestion et d'Aide Socio-Economique
PFLP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PFLP-GC	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command
PIJ	Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine
PLC	Palestinian Legislative Council
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
PNC	Palestinian National Council
PPP	Palestinian People's Party
RC	Refugee Camp
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
US	United States of America
USAID	US Agency for International Development
VAT	Value-Added Tax
WB	West Bank

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Chapter Three:***The Land and the Holy Sites***

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Chapter Seven:

*The Palestine
Issue and the
Muslim World*

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Introduction

This is the 11th edition of the Palestine Strategic Report (PSR) series. It has come to occupy a distinguished position as a reference for Palestine studies and as an indispensable document for researchers studying the Palestinian affairs. The PSR is a source of comprehensive and well-documented information and data, presenting its material within an objective and analytical framework of academic discipline. The PSR also contains forecasts covering future scenarios in the near term. The PSR's scope covers the internal Palestinian situation, the Israeli scene, the paths of resistance and peace process, and the Arab, Islamic, and international dimensions of the Palestine issue. It also presents updates concerning the land, the holy sites, and the state of Palestinian demographics, education and economy.

The Palestine issue has come under a lot of pressure during 2018 and 2019, and the Zionist project, supported by the United States, has sought to settle this issue, based on a Likudist right-wing vision, without necessarily reaching a peace settlement with the Palestinian side or the Arab states. It seems that Trump's deal, aka the "Deal of the Century," was the culmination of these visions, which were sought to be enforced as a de facto matter; as was the case in the US embassy move to Jerusalem, the US legalization of Jewish settlements in the West Bank (WB), and Israel proceeding with the arrangements of the official annexation of parts of WB. Concomitantly, the Palestinian Authority (PA) and its status have deteriorated, and its role as a tool that serves the purposes of the occupation and its security requirements has been emphasized. This deterioration was accompanied by the PA and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leadership continuous effort to tighten its grip on the Palestinian arena; by dissolving the Palestine Legislative Council (PLC); forming a monocolour government, far from the national consensus; and suspending PLO reform and the reconciliation agreement. Consequently, the crisis of the Palestinian national project and the tension between the peace settlement and resistance camps have been persisted.

At the same time, the Palestinian political and popular forces have been united against the Trump deal and the Israeli annexation projects, the resistance movement has maintained its base in Gaza Strip (GS) and has continued strengthening and developing it. All forms of resistance has continued in WB, and the Palestinian people, whose numbers almost exceeded the number of Jews in historic Palestine,

have continued their steadfastness on their land, their popular resistance and preservation of Jerusalem and the holy sites. The activities of the Palestinians abroad continued, confirming their attachment to Palestine, their adherence to the right of return and their willingness to do what they can to liberate it.

There is nothing to be cheerful about in the Arab and Islamic scene, for it suffers from weakness, backwardness, divisions, political and sectarian conflicts, and it also suffers from the efforts of some regimes to normalize relations with Israel. However, the Arab and Islamic popular environment continues to strongly embrace Palestine, its people and its resistance, vehemently rejecting normalization.

The usual international support of the Palestine issue has remained the same, as in the case of voting in the United Nations and its institutions. There is a slow and gradual increase in the sympathy of the international public opinion for the Palestine issue.

As has been our practice in previous editions of the report, the names of contributors, chapter titles, or the titles of their research are mentioned at the start of the book, but not at the start of each chapter, reflecting the fact that the PSR is one collective effort and because the editing of this PSR, as in all previous editions, is above and beyond the usual task. As a result, crucial additions, amendments, and updates in some chapters were made, making the responsibility for their final shape a joint responsibility. This edition came despite the exceptional circumstances that the center is going through, and the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic on the work environment and daily life in Lebanon and the rest of the world.

We must extend our gratitude to the experts who have taken part in drafting the report, the advisers who have revised its texts, and the staff team at al-Zaytouna Centre, including editor's assistants and archivists, who had an invaluable role in providing material, revising texts and designing the report to the required standard. We would also like to thank the translators, proofreader and the language editor of the English version.

Finally, praise be to Allah for the good success of this report and its position as a specialized reference. We would like to thank everyone who has supported and encouraged the work behind it. We also welcome all constructive criticism, advice and suggestions.

Editor

Prof. Dr. Mohsen Mohammed Saleh

Chapter One

The Internal Palestinian Scene

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Introduction

The years 2018 and 2019 were marked by the continued crisis of the Palestinian national project; the state of weakness, deterioration and inefficiency of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO); and by the erosion of the Palestinian Authority (PA), which Israel is working hard to empty of substance relevant to national liberation to leave it to be solely devoted to its administrative function. The two years were also marked by the continuing Palestinian schism, the contradiction between the peace process and the resistance, and the stalling of the reconciliation process in the absence of a unified political program, with one Palestinian faction insisting on continuing to dominate official institutions and Palestinian decision-making.

First: An Anxious and Tense Start

The Reconciliation Agreement signed by Hamas and Fatah in Cairo on 12/10/2017 had spread optimism in the Palestinian arena. It was welcomed by Palestinian President Mahmud ‘Abbas and Hamas Political Bureau Chief Isma‘il Haniyyah, as well as the other Palestinian factions. Moreover, there were contacts between ‘Abbas, Hamas former Political Bureau Chief Khalid Mish‘al and Haniyyah, to counter President Donald Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and his decision to move his country’s embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. As for the Reconciliation Agreement, there were understandings or mutually agreed deferrals regarding complex issues such as the crisis of the civil servants of the Gaza Strip (GS) and the empowerment of the Hamdallah government, which in turn was the product of previous agreement between the two parties. Prior to that, there were understandings whereby Hamas agreed to dissolve the Administrative Committee pretexted by the PA leadership in Ramallah to impose sanctions on GS. However, and despite all of the above, the Reconciliation Agreement faltered before the end of April 2018, unsurprising given its slow implementation.

After the signing of the Cairo Agreement, Fatah was reluctant to abide by what it had promised, especially with regard to lifting sanctions on GS, which it had linked to the dissolution of the Administrative Committee subsequently announced by Hamas and ratified by its GS parliamentary bloc on 16/3/2017. Hamas dissolved the committee following negotiations with the Egyptian mediator on 17/9/2017, in return for concluding a comprehensive Reconciliation Agreement. Fatah then linked the lifting of the sanctions to the proposals and recommendations submitted by the competent committees,¹ but then raised the issue of the arms of the resistance citing the slogan of “One authority, one source of arms, one decision,” and claimed that decisions of war and peace were political decisions to be made by the legitimate PA represented by President Mahmud ‘Abbas, the head of all official Palestinian political institutions.²

The most explicit and serious of such statements was made by President ‘Abbas, a short time after the Reconciliation Agreement was signed, when he linked lifting the GS sanctions to what he called “empowering” the government, saying “I am not in a hurry.”³ Some press sources also reported that President ‘Abbas doubled the conditions imposed on Hamas in return for completing the reconciliation process, including impossible conditions or conditions that completely invalidated its role and influence.⁴

These statements and others about unresolved issues that had been deferred to specialized committees and mutually agreed scheduled timetables prompted some in the ranks of Hamas to express pessimism regarding the success of reconciliation.⁵ Hamas, after dissolving the Administrative Committee in Cairo, before signing the Reconciliation Agreement with Fatah, expressed surprise at Fatah’s comparatively slow pace in fulfilling its commitments.⁶ After the agreement was signed, the other Palestinian factions echoed Hamas, expressing dissatisfaction with the slow pace of the Fatah movement in lifting sanctions on the GS.⁷

The actions of the PA targeting GS were not limited to the strip, but were taken in conjunction with a decision to freeze the salaries of a number of freed prisoners, cut the salaries of a number of Hamas deputies in the West Bank (WB), and block websites close to Hamas. What is notable about these measures is that they were taken during Trump’s visit to Palestine on 23/5/2017.⁸ It seemed that the PA leadership had read the orientations of the United States of America (US) administration and the nature of its regional alliances, prompting it to fortify its

position by stepping up its attack on Hamas as an Islamist movement that had been targeted by the Trump-allied regional alliance. In addition, the Fatah leadership lacked the will to find an alternative path to the peace process or beyond the continuation of the PA.

Given this course of events, it is likely that the PA was not willing to return to GS, for it meant that it would have to recognize the resistance forces in GS, and not just Hamas, which would have contradicted the political line of President ‘Abbas. In the light of this consideration and other internal considerations related to Fatah, and within the context of getting rid of its responsibilities vis-à-vis GS, including financial ones, the PA/Fatah leadership decided to link the fulfilment of its reconciliation commitments to what it termed “empowering the government of national accord.” This vague concept implied Hamas abandoning its strength and influence, including its arms and tunnel network.

After Trump’s pro-israel decisions, contact between ‘Abbas, Mish‘al and Haniyyah, raised hopes of the possibility of transcending the escalating Fatah-Hamas rivalry and setting aside the issue of “empowering” the government of national accord. However, events only led to a limited and a temporary breakthrough, which later collapsed entirely, with no progress made in 2018 and 2019.

After Trump’s decisions and the emerging unified position to confront the challenges facing the Palestine issue, the Palestinian Central Council (PCC) convened an ordinary session in Ramallah, contrary to the emergency session promised by President ‘Abbas. Furthermore, the venue of the meeting triggered a major row between Fatah and other Palestinian factions, as Ramallah was under Israel’s security authority, with the Israeli army able to control the entry of PCC attendees. As a result, the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine (PIJ) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) considered that the PA’s political conduct had not undergone any change.⁹ In addition, President ‘Abbas refrained from convening the Interim Leadership Framework of the PLO, as had been recommended by several Reconciliation Agreements and by the meetings of the Palestinian National Council (PNC) preparatory committee,¹⁰ while the sanctions on GS continued, and the pre-existing political approach continued.¹¹ As for Hamas, its boycott of the PCC meetings continued, citing what it said was continued PA monopoly, and circumvention of the popular Palestinian will, and the denial of political partnership and accord on major national decisions.¹²

In addition to the circumstances of the PCC meeting in January 2018, and the boycott of Hamas and PIJ, President ‘Abbas’s PCC speech suggested a backtracking from reconciliation. ‘Abbas criticized the boycott by Hamas and PIJ, stating that the reconciliation had stalled, without progress or regression. The implicit message was that reconciliation had regressed, indeed, the Reconciliation Agreement had already been signed and it was supposed to progress not to stagnate.¹³

In the same sessions, Salim al-Za‘noun, president of PNC, suggested the convention of an ordinary PNC session to which Hamas and PIJ would be invited, and whose task would be to re-form, select or elect a new PNC in accordance with the PNC’s election system.¹⁴ However, he did not mention the interim leadership framework, which was supposed to be the one developing the PLO, according to a series of agreements signed between the Palestinian factions in general, and Hamas and Fatah in particular. This means that the Fatah leadership wanted to reshape the PLO on its own terms and according to its rules, based on the existing structures that it already dominated, without regard to the multiple agreements signed between Palestinian actors, mutual national interests, or the rule of partnership, which was another indication of the failure of the Reconciliation Agreement.

Not long after, the Reconciliation Agreement collapsed, when a bombing in GS on 13/3/2018 targeted a convoy of the prime minister of the National Consensus Government, Rami Hamdallah, who was accompanied by the head of the General Intelligence Service (GIS) Majid Faraj. The Marches of Return, launched by the popular and national forces in GS on 30/3/2018, did little to mitigate the escalation between the two sides, despite the fact that Fatah considered the march a qualitative leap forward in the history of Palestinian struggle.¹⁵

President ‘Abbas was quick to accuse Hamas of being behind the bombing,¹⁶ a claim echoed by the Hamdallah government spokesman,¹⁷ Fatah media officials,¹⁸ and members of the PLO Executive Committee from other factions.¹⁹ Meanwhile, the Ministry of Interior and National Security in GS accused an officer in the intelligence services in Ramallah of involvement in the bombing, saying he led a rogue Jihadist cell and was planning to carry out other attacks in GS targeting international and Egyptian delegations and blame them on the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The ministry said that it proposed from the first moment the formation of a joint committee of security forces in GS and WB to investigate the incident but this was not met with any response. A Fatah spokesman said the GS government official statement was a misleading and blatant charade.²⁰

The explosion ended the stalemate of the Reconciliation Agreement, six months after its signing. There followed an escalation under the pretext of empowering the government. Successive meetings in Cairo and GS could not reach an end to the row, prompting Hamas GS leader Yahya al-Sinwar to warn against the collapse of reconciliation, just over two months after it was signed.²¹ This happened eventually after the explosion in GS, when President ‘Abbas stepped up his rhetoric against Hamas, accusing it of being a political movement that had been based on assassinations since the 1930s, in reference to its roots in the Muslim Brothers (MB) movement. ‘Abbas stressed that he would take national, legal, and financial measures against Hamas’s rejection of his efforts to restore national cohesion and unity,²² implying that his government would step up sanctions against GS. The speech by ‘Abbas was followed by a campaign by Fatah on social media and in the streets entitled “We mandate you” in support of ‘Abbas’s forthcoming measures against GS.²³

In his speech, President ‘Abbas revealed that he was opposed to the context in which the last Reconciliation Agreement had been signed, meaning that Fatah had been forced to go to Cairo and sign the agreement as a political maneuver. Indeed, he spoke about the reconciliation that his movement signed as something that others wanted but not him, claiming other parties had “invented” it in the context of Trump’s plans.²⁴ ‘Abbas’s accusation against Hamas was not arbitrary, but as part of Fatah’s narrative alleging that Hamas was seeking to separate GS from the national project, and render it independent from the PA in the WB, thus serving the “Deal of the Century” plan and Trump’s other schemes for the Palestine issue. This allegation continued through the period after the collapse of the Reconciliation Agreement, and was made again by ‘Abbas himself, who stated: “We either take control of everything and assume responsibility for everything, or they take control of everything and assume responsibility for everything.”²⁵

While the Fatah leadership made this accusation against Hamas, some observers believed the PA sanctions on GS would actually lead to its secession, raising questions about the PA’s public narrative versus its actions. Whatever the case, observers noticed, before the bombing, that the Fatah movement was not serious about reconciliation, but was driven to pursue it out of political expediency.²⁶ Fatah’s behavior, particularly its maintenance of sanctions on GS, direct escalation against Hamas following the bombing, and the rejection of the proposal of Hamas and other Palestinian factions to form a joint investigative committee, have

corroborated this assessment even among some PLO factions, such as the PFLP, saying that Fatah's conduct raises questions about whether it can be considered a good faith actor.²⁷

Thus, Palestinians began 2018 and ended its first quarter with a growing escalation between Fatah and Hamas, which had a dangerous impact on internal national relations. For instance, it affected Palestinian institutions that various Palestinian factions theoretically agree on, such as the PLO institutions, in addition to the remaining legal and formal frameworks connecting GS to WB, such as the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). One of these institutions affected was the National Consensus Government, which was at center stage of the Fatah-Hamas dispute, and the reason for reconciliation being put on hold. It was dismissed and replaced by a Fatah-headed government for the first time since the Palestinian division. Note that the dissolution of the PLC was the prelude to changing the government, which was a violation of al-Shati' Agreement.

Second: From the National Consensus Government to the Fatah Government

After the Reconciliation Agreement collapsed following the targeting of Prime Minister Hamdallah's convoy, the issue of "empowering the government" dominated Fatah's narrative. Indeed, despite the dissolution of the GS Administrative Committee, the start of the work of the GS civil servants committee,²⁸ and the handover of GS crossings to the PA in November 2017,²⁹ the government empowerment dilemma remained the main obstacle in 2018. In early 2019, the bombing targeting Hamdallah's convoy marked a new deterioration in reconciliation efforts, however the empowerment controversy prevailed until the end of 2019.

Fatah made the issue of empowering the National Consensus Government the basis of the entire reconciliation process, without any consideration for reciprocal steps vis-à-vis GS, especially lifting the sanctions or respecting the facts on the ground in GS concerning resistance weapons. Indeed, since the Reconciliation Agreement signed in Cairo, Fatah leaders stressed that the empowerment of the government must cover all administrative, financial, and security issues, stating

that no other reconciliation matter would be tackled until the schism was ended through the full and comprehensive empowerment of the government.³⁰

While President ‘Abbas spoke explicitly of “unified weapons,”³¹ echoed by other Fatah Central Committee leaders,³² the head of the National Consensus Government Rami Hamdallah spoke about six aspects on which his government was not empowered in GS (resistance weaponry was not among them) which were: internal tax collection; internal security, in particular the police and civil defense; handover of the judiciary to end duplication of the legal system between GS and WB; handover of government lands; and handover of the crossings in a substantial, not token, fashion.³³

The Hamas movement dissolved the Administrative Committee of its own initiative, an initiative offered to the Egyptian mediator to be used in negotiations if President ‘Abbas agreed to reconciliation.³⁴ Furthermore, it handed over the crossings to the PA. However, it was clear that it was not going to cede its responsibilities for, or the security of, the resistance, without any reciprocal steps by the PA and Fatah vis-à-vis GS, especially on the issue of the GS civil servants. This required Hamas to hold on to domestic tax collection powers in order to be able to pay their salaries.³⁵ The same can be said about other government sectors run by personnel who came to their jobs during Hamas’s administration of the GS. Hamas was not going to return them to their homes and replace them with PA Ramallah-appointed personnel. Accordingly, the strides made by the reconciliation process were not enough to resolve the dilemmas of the GS, which had motivated Hamas to embark on the reconciliation path beginning with agreeing to dissolve the Administrative Committee and issuing over-optimistic statements, most famously when the GS Hamas leader Yahya al-Sinwar threatened to break the neck of anyone hindering reconciliation within Hamas or from outside, briefly becoming considered an “icon” of Palestinian reconciliation.³⁶

However, al-Sinwar himself, despite being the most enthusiastic about reconciliation, gave early warnings of the possibility of its collapse.³⁷ By late 2018, he was convinced that it had reached a dead end,³⁸ and he warned ‘Abbas that the Palestinian factions would turn against him if he imposed new sanctions on GS, for, as he put it, it would violate the rules of the game. In the context of explaining Hamas’s position on Fatah’s demands for full empowerment of the government, al-Sinwar said this would not happen unless it was under a unified PNC that would form an executive committee to govern GS on patriotic, national bases.³⁹

The row reignited when an Egyptian plan approved by Hamas and rejected by Fatah was put forward to resume the reconciliation process.⁴⁰ Fatah demanded the full empowerment of the National Consensus Government, including taking full control of territory, security, judiciary, crossings, and tax collection, and reinstating ministers, officials, agencies, and authorities without any intervention or obstruction by any other party,⁴¹ meaning Fatah rejected the presence of civil servants appointed under Hamas's administration of GS. Furthermore, Fatah responded while completely ignoring the fate of GS's civil servants and the impact of sanctions,⁴² which also included cutting salaries of PA Ramallah-affiliated civil servants. However, the PA promised to pay the salaries after the schism ended,⁴³ meaning that Fatah would tighten the GS blockade even if it adversely affected the Fatah loyalists there.

This row over reconciliation took place in August 2018, during Egyptian efforts to reach a long-lasting de-escalation agreement between Israel and the Palestinians in GS, less than two months after the start of the Marches of Return. It seemed at the time that the Egyptian government wanted to have the agreement signed under the legitimacy of PA, which, like Fatah, did not deal with the proposal positively from the outset, viewing it as part of President Trump's "Deal of the Century."⁴⁴ Fatah also demanded that reconciliation be signed-off before any ceasefire or de-escalation agreement was reached between Israel and the resistance in GS.⁴⁵ This effectively meant blocking such an agreement, because the reconciliation process had been stalled due to Fatah's conditions, as well as blocking any kind of relief for Hamas and other resistance forces that was not approved by the PA, under the pretext of preventing the secession of GS.

In the last quarter of 2018, Fatah continued to block de-escalation efforts between Hamas and Israel. Some observers saw this as an attempt to prevent Hamas from capitalizing on the Marches of Return, while improving the image of Palestinian President Mahmud 'Abbas, and justifying continued sanctions on GS.⁴⁶

The issue of empowering the National Consensus Government dominated the headlines throughout 2018 and remained a subject of controversy between Hamas and Fatah. The government of Rami Hamdallah was formed as a National Consensus Government, pursuant to al-Shati' Agreement signed between the PLO and Hamas. It was part of the agreement that included, in addition to the formation of this government: reaffirming previous agreements; holding presidential,

PLC, and PNC elections six months after the formation of the government; the reactivation of the PLC; convening a committee to activate and develop the PLO, in order for it to carry out its functions as stipulated in the agreements; and activating committees for freedoms and social reconciliation.⁴⁷ However, Hamas continued to accuse the National Consensus Government of neglecting GS and of not carrying out its duties towards it, which forced it—according to its narrative—to form an Administrative Committee to fill the void, but not as a substitute for the government.⁴⁸ However, the forming of the Administrative Committee, according to the PA, forced it to impose sanctions on GS, the problem of the empowerment of the National Consensus Government became the main obstacle for reconciliation. That was, until President ‘Abbas dismissed the government, and formed a Fatah-led one, which again demanded its own empowerment in GS.⁴⁹

In late December 2019, President ‘Abbas accepted the resignation of the Hamdallah government and assigned it to continue functioning in a caretaker capacity until a new government was formed.⁵⁰ More precisely, the Palestinian president dismissed the government that had been formed under al-Shati’ Agreement, then less than a month later, appointed Mohammad Shtayyeh, member of the Fatah Central Committee, to lead a new government.⁵¹ Shtayyeh’s government took the constitutional oath before the president on 13/4/2019,⁵² without naming ministers for the interior and religious endowments portfolios. The time elapsed between dismissing Hamdallah to the Shtayyeh government taking oath, and the absence of these two ministers, reflected the extent of internal differences within Fatah.⁵³ The Shtayyeh government was a poor representation of the Palestinian political spectrum, which was marred by divisions that had grown deeper with the dissolution of the PLC, the dismissal of the Hamdallah government and the attempt to reshape the PLO and its institutions without taking into consideration the internal political agreements already signed.

Poor representation was evidenced by the fact that other PLO factions boycotted the Shtayyeh government: For example, the Palestinian Democratic Grouping refused to participate in the Shtayyeh government.⁵⁴ The Grouping brings together five left wing Palestinian groups.⁵⁵ However, the decision of the Palestinian Democratic Union (Fida) and the Palestinian People’s Party (PPP) to participate in the government split the Grouping, prompting rows and resignations within the two parties themselves.⁵⁶ As a result, the Shtayyeh government produced more divisions in the Palestinian arena in general, and within the PLO factions in

particular. Some Palestinian factions saw the preparatory steps that preceded the formation of the government as divisive and exclusionary, including the dissolving of the PLC shortly before the dismissing of Hamdallah's government.

Third: The PLC Dissolution and Its Implications

The victory of Hamas in the PLC elections in 2006, and its subsequent formation of the Palestinian government, gave the party legitimacy in the Palestinian political system, shoring up its regional standing, and affording it popular legitimacy to govern GS after the political schism in 2007. The PLC that resulted from those elections represented the remaining legal and political bond between WB and GS following the Palestinian schism. Furthermore, the National Consensus Government also represented a linkage between the two territories of the PA.

Dismantling these linkages or unilaterally sidestepping them, without taking into account their national contexts, effectively means ties are severed between the two territories of the PA, producing the same scenario the PA had warned against, the separation of GS from the WB, or from what Fatah termed “the national project.” This would happen regardless of the PA's motives, whether to remove Hamas from the political system, or shrink its influence inside it, or to set the limits of its representation for future arrangements, or whether it is related to internal Fatah rivalries and arrangements for ‘Abbas's succession.

On 22/12/2018, ‘Abbas announced the Constitutional Court verdict dissolving the PLC and calling for new PLC elections within six months.⁵⁷ Two days later, the verdict was posted in the Official Gazette, revealing that the verdict's date had been 10 days prior to President ‘Abbas's announcement, based on a letter sent from the Minister of Justice to the Constitutional Court on 2/12/2018 pursuant to petitions submitted to the High Court of Justice. The petition was referred to the Constitutional Court at the behest of the Supreme Judicial Council to interpret some clauses of the Basic Law pertaining to the PLC. Accordingly, the judge ruled that the PLC had lost its legislative function, invalidating its capacity as a legislative assembly for failing to discharge its legislative and oversight jurisdictions, and that its term had ended on 25/1/2010. Therefore, the court ruled that “the higher interests of the Palestinian people and the homeland” require dissolving the PLC as of the date of the issuance of this verdict. The ruling called on President ‘Abbas

to announce new legislative elections within six months of the date of publication of the verdict in the Official Gazette.⁵⁸

The verdict of the Constitutional Court sparked a legal and political controversy, and was rejected by most Palestinian factions, led by Hamas,⁵⁹ the PIJ,⁶⁰ and PLO factions such as the PFLP⁶¹ and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP).⁶² It was criticized by the Palestinian National Initiative movement,⁶³ while the PPP expressed its concerns and called for time to be taken before implementation.⁶⁴ The verdict was however backed by Fatah and some small factions allied to it.⁶⁵ The first repercussion of the verdict was that the security forces prevented PLC deputies from Hamas in WB from holding a press conference outside its building,⁶⁶ while the PLC Speaker Aziz Dweik was summoned by the GIS.⁶⁷

The PLC dissolution brought back memories of the legal and political criticisms of the law forming the Constitutional Court, and its subsequent creation. Concerns regarding the court began in 2006, when the outgoing PLC began to discuss the law of the court before the new PLC took over. The law was ultimately enacted that year.⁶⁸

The series of amendments President ‘Abbas introduced into law in 2012, 2014, and 2017 were heavily criticized,⁶⁹ as were the circumstances in which the court was created in 2016.⁷⁰ Legal advocacy groups continued to submit objections and expressed concerns regarding the court’s law, its formation, and some of its decisions. They criticized the amendment made by the president in 2012, before backtracking,⁷¹ and his amendment in 2014.⁷² In a petition filed to the president, many such groups objected to the formation of the court, saying it lacked a legitimate constitutional basis produced by the PLC and presidential elections, in addition to a unified judiciary, while lacking independence from political interference.⁷³ They held a press conference stating that the Constitutional Court had not completed the required procedures for its formation and that its verdicts were therefore null and void.⁷⁴ It violated the law in its method of convening, in the way it was formed by presidential decree, and in some of the laws it had issued, such as granting President ‘Abbas the power to revoke parliamentary immunity for any PLC member, in situations other than convening emergency sessions of the PLC.⁷⁵

These Legal advocacy groups questioned the eligibility of the chairman of the Constitutional Court, as since 2013, years before he was appointed to the post, he had expressed views in favor of executive authority at the expense of the Basic Law and the PLC. He said that the PLC's term had expired, and that the president had the right to revoke the parliamentary immunity of PLC members.⁷⁶ These groups warned against the encroachment of the executive authority over the judiciary, which risked causing the total collapse of the political system. They also noted other practices undertaken by the executive in its quest to exploit the judiciary, such as dismissing the head of the Supreme Court and chairman of the Supreme Judicial Council, in contravention of the provisions of the Basic Law and the Judicial Authority Law.⁷⁷

The importance of returning to the legal position over the Constitutional Court in terms of its laws, formation conditions and some of its decisions, stemmed from the fact that the dissolution of the PLC was based on its ruling. An examination of whether the dissolution was purely legal or in fact political—using legal cover and pretexts—was required, whereby internal rivalries were dealt with by exploiting the judiciary. This was not limited to the Constitutional Court and how it was used in a number of measures, including the dissolution of the PLC, or limited to the dismissal of the President of the Supreme Court and the Supreme Judicial Council. Indeed, on 18/7/2019, President ‘Abbas dissolved the Supreme Judicial Council and established a transitional council for a period of one year, abruptly and without the knowledge of the judiciary.⁷⁸ This was viewed by judicial circles as an affront to the judiciary, a flagrant assault on its independence, and a demolition of all constitutional principles enshrining the separation of powers.⁷⁹

The dissolution of the Supreme Judicial Council seven months after the PLC dissolution effectively removed any checks and balances in the Palestinian political system, even in the most minimal, procedural way. This compounded the political dimension of these moves, and their negative impact on internal political relations and trust between Palestinian factions. The exploitation of the judiciary to settle internal rivalries and the encroachment of the executive's authority expanded dramatically to the point that the PA blocked websites critical of it using the powers of the Magistrates Court and the cybercrime law, which President ‘Abbas issued during the absence of the PLC.⁸⁰ Some of these websites were affiliated to Hamas, raising questions and doubts about the integrity, transparency, and credibility of the call for new PLC elections. Moreover, some of these websites adopted an

independent editorial line, suggesting Palestinian society was being transformed into a closed society under a quasi-police state.

In addition to the invalidity of the decision to dissolve the PLC, in view of the unconstitutionality of the Constitutional Court itself—according to human rights institutions, and also considering that the Basic Law does not permit the dissolution of the PLC, even in a state of emergency;⁸¹ numerous issues have been raised about the court's decision, whether regarding its legal merits or apparent bias to the narrative of the executive branch. Indeed, the decision considered that the dysfunction of the PLC and failure to hold PLC elections prejudices citizens' rights to legislation and political participation, yet failed to address the denial of citizens' right to electing a new president of the PA. This has prompted many observers to ask: Why did the Constitutional Court not move earlier to put an end to many of the violations, including the expiry of constitutional terms of all leading positions, led by the presidential post itself? How can this decision apply to the PLC, but not to the president, whose term had expired in 2005? Why did the decision not include holding presidential elections too, six months later?⁸²

The paradox here is that while the Constitutional Court tackled the expired term of the PLC, it dealt with the president's term as an ongoing valid term; and while Hamas would not acknowledge the expiry of the term of the PLC as having taken place until a new PLC took the constitutional oath, in 2009 the PA/Fatah leadership summoned the PCC to extend the terms of both the PLC and the president until elections were held for both.⁸³ This meant that Fatah had acknowledged the legal expiry of President 'Abbas's term in 2009.

Regardless of any discussion about the legality of the step that took place in 2009, and the claim that the PA's legitimacy stems from the legitimacy of the PLO, which alone has the authority to grant or withhold legitimacy to PA institutions, it is a recognition of the end of the term of President 'Abbas. It reveals the fundamental bias and contradiction in the decision of the Constitutional Court. It is noteworthy that PLO institutions were used as a cover, which in turn highlights how Fatah-dominated PLO institutions have been exploited for internal political reasons, without any consideration of other facts, be they political, popular, or legal.

No matter the legal reality, political discourse left no doubt regarding the political motives behind dissolving the PLC, especially since the talk about the

dissolution of the PLC preceded any public legal debate. Rather, the president announced his intention to dissolve the PLC before the decision of the Constitutional Court.⁸⁴ This was in addition to President ‘Abbas’s speech in which he announced the decision of the Constitutional Court to dissolve the PLC, which hinted at measures against Hamas,⁸⁵ which places these two matters in the same context. In addition, the president spoke explicitly about the need for a legal step to dissolve the PLC,⁸⁶ which again suggested exploitation of the judiciary to settle political scores.

Some believe that dissolving the PLC was partly motivated by revenge against Hamas members of parliament (MPs) in the Change and Reform bloc, who challenged the legitimacy of the president in a letter to the United Nations (UN) in September 2018.⁸⁷ However, the dissolution of the PLC, followed by the dissolution of the Supreme Judicial Council, and the clear exploitation of the judiciary, revealed a tendency to monopolize all authorities by one person, which actually led to the collapse of the political system, as warned by human rights institutions, as all powers became concentrated in the hands of President ‘Abbas. In addition, national relations worsened, perpetuating tension and internal rows, a crackdown on freedoms, the substitution of conflict with Israel for conflict with Hamas, and a striving to get Hamas out of the political system, or curtailing it within the system, or even preparing harsher measures against it to withdraw any constitutional legitimacy it has. While these actions were some of the presumed aims behind dissolving the PLC, the move also remained deeply rooted in the issue of arrangements for the succession of President ‘Abbas, and the internal polarizations within the Fatah movement.

Indeed, the dissolution of the PLC worsened the already strained relations between the two major movements, Hamas and Fatah, and 2019 saw further rhetorical and security escalation. Some incidents preceded the PLC’s dissolution, but these are considered normal in the dynamics of the internal Palestinian relations, such as the PA security forces preventing two marches by Hamas in WB, on its anniversary in December 2018 in Nablus and Hebron, and cracking down on participants.⁸⁸ In return, Hamas barred Fatah from holding a commemoration on the anniversary of the death of former President Yasir ‘Arafat at the time and place chosen by Fatah, while allowing supporters of former Fatah leader Muhammad Dahlan to hold their own ceremonies. While the two movements accused each

other of detaining their respective supporters, President ‘Abbas lashed out at Hamas calling it “a bunch of spies,”⁸⁹ while Fatah, said Hamas, was an Israeli production.⁹⁰ This climate had an impact on Fatah itself, with its leadership in GS cancelling its rally, prompting some in the Fatah Central Committee to call for the dismissal of Fatah leaders in GS.⁹¹

The tension reached a peak when the PA withdrew its personnel from all GS crossings,⁹² under the pretext that Hamas was impeding their work.⁹³ However, ‘Azzam al-Ahmad, member of Fatah Central Committee, claimed this step had really intended to undermine Hamas’s rule in GS, noting that he had been the first to suggest declaring GS a rogue region. He also threatened further measures to end Hamas’s rule, and denounced the backlash by Palestinian factions including PLO factions against the PA’s withdrawal of its personnel.⁹⁴

In such conditions, the Hamdallah government was dismissed and the government of Mohammad Shtayyeh was appointed, meaning that the rivalry with Hamas was a central factor in this political shift. Hamas reacted by declaring the Shtayyeh government a “separatist” government.⁹⁵

With the dissolution of the PLC, which was the most difficult step, the road was paved to form a Fatah-led government that could address concerns regarding post-‘Abbas arrangements, contain internal polarization within Fatah, distribute centers of powers among its poles, and harmonize with the logic of monopolizing and consolidating power in the PA.

Fourth: A Look at the Performance of the Two Governments

Shtayyeh did not announce a detailed program for his government, but rather the features of a program and a three-month emergency plan.⁹⁶ The plan included, in addition to traditional promises of development found in any government plan, holding PLC elections based on the letter of appointment issued by President ‘Abbas. This was despite the divisive circumstances in which this government emerged, and the negative impact on the cohesion of PLO factions, especially leftwing ones and even Fatah itself. Their internal rivalries were reflected through the dominance of technocratic ministers holding government portfolios, with the

inability to appoint ministers for the interior and religious endowments, amid criticism within Fatah against the choice of ministers.⁹⁷ This was something that did not suggest political vitality, but rather an intractable aggravation when also taking into consideration political stagnation, the crackdown on freedoms, and the escalation of internal rivalry.

Internal rivalries escalated, despite the serious challenges faced by the Shtayyeh government, including a major financial crisis caused by Israel's withholding of clearance revenues (the tax Israel collects on behalf of the PA) equivalent to the salaries the PA pays to the families of prisoners, and the PA's refusal to receive the discounted clearance revenues. This forced the government to pay only 50% to 60% of the salaries of its employees that exceed 2,000 shekels⁹⁸ (about *\$556) from March 2019, until the PA backtracked and reached an agreement with Israel in October 2019.⁹⁹

It is worth recalling that the Shtayyeh government inherited the clearance revenue crisis from the Hamdallah government. While the problem evolved in the last days of the latter government, its precursors began in mid-2017.¹⁰⁰ In 2018, the Knesset passed a law after first and second reading to slash funds to the PA that are paid to the families of those killed and prisoners from PA tax funds.¹⁰¹ This meant that the PA had ample time to come up with an effective response, especially during Hamdallah's tenure. Hamdallah said that his government was ready to deal with all possible scenarios if Israel deducted funds from the clearance revenue,¹⁰² however, the performance of his government and the Shtayyeh government thereafter revealed fatal shortcomings in the handling of this essential file on two levels: First, because it directly targeted prisoners, their families and the families of those killed, thus hitting one of the core foundations of resistance; and secondly because it affected the survival of the PA, by threatening its economic resources and its spending capabilities.

The clearance revenue crisis revealed that the PA's existence and its entire function was dependent on the Israeli occupation, as demonstrated by the PA having to yield and accept discounted clearance revenue in the end. This raised questions about any and all liberation efforts to enjoy self-determination, even if only economically, apart from Israeli dominance, whether in the schism period, or under the first government of Hamdallah, followed by the National Consensus

* US Dollar.

Government under Hamdallah as well, then under the Shtayyeh government. All the solutions they could have proposed would have been futile, such as seeking loans from Arab and non-Arab states, attempts to activate an Arab safety net,¹⁰³ borrow from banks,¹⁰⁴ or even relying on shifts in Israeli policy.¹⁰⁵

In addition to austerity measures, political steps may be considered more strategic and practical, such as suspending agreements signed with Israel, implementing relevant decisions by PLO institutions,¹⁰⁶ and disengaging economically from Israel.¹⁰⁷ At the same time, the PA suffered a credibility crisis, for many reasons, one was the Hamdallah government increasing the salaries of its ministers despite austerity measures, triggering local popular criticism. In addition, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov also criticized the move, which contradicted the PA's financial crisis and austerity drive.¹⁰⁸

The PA itself proved it had no appetite to implement the very same measures it touted, let alone having the ability to do so, owing to its total geographical and security subjugation to Israel, and its lack of any outlet to the outside world that does not pass through Israel. The Shtayyeh government was indeed unable to implement its decision to ban veal imports from Israel,¹⁰⁹ which in turn revealed the nature of the centers of power within the PA, its agencies and within Fatah, and their relationship with Israel.¹¹⁰ Shtayyeh had spoken previously about his bid to purchase oil from Iraq to disengage from Israel,¹¹¹ which did not happen.

It can be said then that the failure of the Shtayyeh government to implement promises that are relatively small compared to the broader economic disengagement from Israel, and the failure of the PA—especially the Hamdallah government—indicated that it was impossible to implement strategic steps, even if pure economic ones are concerned—such as establishing industrial zones¹¹² using the PA's own resources. However, it was more of a priority for the PA to implement fundamental political steps, even on the domestic front. Indeed, Shtayyeh failed to resolve the crisis of liberated prisoners whose salaries were cut by the PA. It turned out later that their issue was in the hands of President 'Abbas, and the GIS director.¹¹³ He was unable to retract the blocking of a number of websites despite declaring his opposition to this move.¹¹⁴ Thus, the successive governments formed outside serious national reconciliation, from the internal national aspect, have remained influenced by presidential decisions and other power centers, whose power is based

on their security function or coordination with Israel. They also remained hostage to the PA's circumstances that render it subject to Israel's absolute dominance, with its role not exceeding administrative management, without the ability to develop fundamental solutions. Regarding national relations, especially with GS, the government will remain under pressure due to these conditions and considerations.

Fifth: The PLO at the Heart of the Schism

It has already been mentioned that the PCC was summoned in 2009 to renew the mandate of both President 'Abbas and the PLC without elections, and on the pretext that the PLO supersedes the PA, which was established by the PLO and was the result of its policies. This behavior, while contradicted later by the dissolution of the PLC by the Constitutional Court without addressing the problem of the presidency, underscores the instruments that Fatah may use to impose its dominance and policies and settle internal scores, in such a way as to allow the PCC to supersede the PLC. Moreover, the discussion about dissolving the PLC preceded the legal aspect, for the Fatah Revolutionary Council recommended the dissolution of the PLC¹¹⁵ to the PCC, two months before the verdict of the Constitutional Court. Notably, observers have confirmed that the PCC was not the one that established the PA, and that a non-elected body cannot dissolve an elected one. They questioned the motives for dissolving a suspended PLC, and wondered that if the PCC had the right to dissolve it, then the move should have included the entire PA, including the presidency.¹¹⁶ These questions reveal Fatah's exploitation of PLO institutions and its bid to consolidate its dominance over the entire Palestinian arena.

The exploitation of PLO institutions started earlier, just before the dissolution of the PLC, which the Palestinian factions considered a violation of accords and signed agreements. Although President 'Abbas, following Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, pledged to convene an emergency session to which all factions would be invited,¹¹⁷ he only held an ordinary PCC session in January 2018,¹¹⁸ which was boycotted by Hamas and PIJ who considered such a move a breach of the national consensus.

The biggest step in this direction, which preceded the PLC's dissolution, the dismissal of the National Consensus Government, and subsequent formation of

the Shtayyeh government, was the convention of an ordinary session of the PNC between 30/4/2018 and 3/5/2018. It was the first such session since 1996—albeit the council had convened an extraordinary session to elect new members to the Executive Committee in 2009.¹¹⁹

Hamas boycotted the PNC meetings, stating that holding them in that format reflected a policy of exclusion, monopoly, and unilateralism vis-à-vis the capacities and institutions of the Palestinian people. Hamas questioned the motives of a meeting that was convened with unprecedented Israeli facilitation. This meant, according to Hamas, that the Council was not expressing the national will, and that it was flagrantly defying the unity of the Palestinian people, undermining the PLO, its legitimacy, and its representation of the full spectrum of the Palestinian people. Hamas cited the fact that more than two-thirds of PLC members, who are members of the PNC, and a large number of other PNC members in Palestine and abroad, alongside the PFLP (the second largest PLO faction), Hamas, and the PIJ (and the popular weight they represent) had boycotted the meeting.¹²⁰

The PIJ also boycotted the PNC meeting, saying it did not represent the full spectrum of the Palestinian people, because the circumstances in which it was held violated all previous agreements and the outcomes of the meetings of the preparatory committee of the PNC¹²¹ previously held in Beirut. These were the same justifications put forward by the PFLP for its decision to boycott the PNC meetings, despite being a PLO faction. The PFLP viewed convening the Council in this format as a violation of many national agreements on the PLO, including: the Cairo Agreement of March 2005, which specifically tackled the PLO; the National Conciliation Document (Prisoners Document) of May 2006; the Reconciliation Agreement signed in Cairo in April 2011; as well as the outcomes of the preparatory committee meetings in January 2017 in Beirut, which brought together all Palestinian national and Islamic factions. The committee was tasked that year to convene a national inclusive meeting of the Council. Therefore, convening the PNC in contradiction with this agreement deepened Palestinian divisions, according to the PFLP, which also cited other reasons for its boycott.¹²²

The meetings of the PNC, which discussed the structure of the PLO and the renewal of its institutions, led to the election of President Mahmud ‘Abbas as President of the State of Palestine by those in the attendance.¹²³ These meetings approved a new executive committee of 15 members, including most notably

President Mahmud ‘Abbas, Saeb Erekat, ‘Azzam al-Ahmad, Hanan Ashrawi, Taysir Khalid, and Bassam al-Salhi,¹²⁴ who elected ‘Abbas as the committee chairman,¹²⁵ and approved the addition of 35 members to the PCC.¹²⁶ This meant that the Fatah movement and the PA elite, from their position of domination over the PLO, reformulated the organization’s structures to perpetuate their influence and its de-facto reality, without any real elections, in divisive circumstances.

The most prominent PNC decisions concerning Israel were to end the transitional period stipulated by the agreements signed in Oslo, Cairo, and Washington; entrusting the Executive Committee to suspend the recognition of Israel until it recognizes the state of Palestine along the borders of 4/6/1967; repealing its decision to annex East Jerusalem, and halting settlement building. The meeting of the PNC also affirmed the necessity of implementing the decision of the PCC in its previous two sessions (i.e., prior to the PNC session) to suspend security coordination of all forms with Israel, and disengage from the economic dependency that was enshrined in the Paris Protocol including boycotting Israeli products.¹²⁷

These decisions seemed to be a serious review of the peace process that led to the official Palestinian crisis and impasse, and the dangerous situation that threatened to liquidate the Palestine issue. Nevertheless, PNC meetings deepened the Palestinian division, even beyond the Hamas and Fatah schism, dividing the PLO factions, where the PFLP boycotted the PNC meeting, and leftist forces had differences over whether to participate or boycott.¹²⁸ Likewise, many political circles boycotted the sessions or asked for them to be postponed, objecting to the venue of the meeting, its merits, its measures, and its divisive circumstances.¹²⁹ Not many took the Council’s decisions and stances vis-à-vis Israel seriously, given the history of announcing such decisions without implementing them on the ground. Furthermore, the PNC statement indicated that it still abided by the peace process, by calling for an international conference under collective international sponsorship of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, on the basis of the related UN resolutions.¹³⁰ All this prompted Hamas to describe the PNC as a separatist council.¹³¹

This rift increased later, with the PCC convening in Ramallah on 15/8/2018.¹³² In addition to the expected boycott of Hamas and PIJ, the PFLP also boycotted, saying the meeting would further ignore national consensus and uphold the same

exclusionary monopolistic approach of the PNC's previous meeting. The PFLP said that convening the PCC in this context would deepen the horizontal and vertical division in the Palestinian arena, whether within the institutions of the PLO itself, or at the factional and popular levels, commending the boycott of the DFLP, the Palestinian National Initiative movement, and independent personalities.¹³³ The boycott of the PCC went even further than at previous meetings.

The PCC sessions included a speech by 'Abbas questioning the intentions of Hamas towards reconciliation, and stressing his traditional position regarding the Palestinians' right to armed resistance, saying that he would accept only one legitimate source of arms.¹³⁴ Thus implying his rejection of the resistance's weapons, showing the full extent of the divergence between the Palestinian factions on the reconciliation issue.

With respect to the struggle against Israel, the PCC approved the recommendations of the PLO Executive Committee, pursuant to the decisions of the PNC on revising the relationship with Israel in the economic, political, and security areas, including suspending recognition of Israel until it recognizes the State of Palestine, suspending all forms of security coordination with Israel, and beginning economic disengagement from Israel.¹³⁵ This revealed that the decisions of the PNC had not been implemented for the entirety of the period between the two meetings. Furthermore, these decisions were not implemented anyway in 2018 or 2019, as we will detail later.

Later, the same factions, namely Hamas, PIJ, the PFLP, the DFLP, and the Palestinian National Initiative movement boycotted the meetings of the PCC 30th session held in Ramallah on 28–29/10/2018. Hamas this time did comment, perhaps because of reports that the PCC may issue new decisions concerning stepping up sanctions on GS or dissolve the PLC. Hamas said the session was illegitimate and all its decisions invalid.¹³⁶ Based on the same concerns, the PIJ leader Khalid al-Batsh presented a vision to restore unity and end the division on behalf of a number of Islamic and national forces. He said that any new PCC decisions that deepened the division, escalated tensions, and forced people to accept contentious political solutions would undermine the national legitimacy of those who made them.¹³⁷

The PFLP reaffirmed its previous positions, saying that the insistence of the “dominant leadership” to convene the PCC despite broad-based boycott, was

a continuation of its national and political “sin” that had kept the PLO hostage to monopoly and one-sidedness with regard to the organization’s decisions and direction. The most dangerous issue, according to the PFLP, was the confiscation of the PLO’s right to reform and modernize, which meant its role and function continued to be undermined.¹³⁸

Although the PCC did not issue a decision to dissolve the PLC, which was later dissolved by the Constitutional Court, the discourse of the PCC on Hamas and the reconciliation took a sharp turn during the meeting. First, President ‘Abbas accused Hamas of adopting “the thoughts of the enemies” and seeking to establish a mini-state in GS.¹³⁹ Second, the PCC statement held Hamas solely responsible for failing to commit to the agreements previously signed. It alluded to what it termed “suspicious projects” like seeking to separate GS from the WB, claiming that it was part of the “Deal of the Century,” rejecting any de-escalation with the occupation outside the PLO framework, and rejecting any humanitarian projects in GS such as establishing a port or an airport, claiming them to be projects seeking to destroy the Palestinian national project and the Palestine issue.¹⁴⁰

While the PCC was used as a forum to reaffirm Fatah’s narrative on issues of contention with Hamas, it also reaffirmed the decisions of its previous sessions regarding the conflict with Israel. The Council declared the transitional period invalid, and therefore ended the PLO’s and PA’s commitments to all agreements with Israel, including suspending the recognition of Israel until the latter recognized the State of Palestine, suspending all forms of security coordination, and beginning economic disengagement, as well as declaring that the Paris Protocol had become invalid, too.¹⁴¹ These were the same formulations adopted in the previous session, the execution of which was then entrusted to the PLO Executive Committee,¹⁴² hence suggesting that these decisions would not go beyond media discourse to actual implementation, while worsening internal national relations.

The PLO leadership did not convene the PNC for 20 years, with two exceptions, 2009 and then in 2018, amid deep political division, constantly escalating internal rivalry, and an impasse blighting the peace process that created the PA. At the same time, PLO institutions were not efficient in developing practical solutions to the crisis of the Palestinian political project, rather they were used as a platform for rhetorical grandstanding against the occupation without any real consequence. They were even used for real measures that deepened Palestinian divisions, for

the series of PNC and PCC sessions created new divisions within the national movement in general, and among PLO factions and even inside each one of them, in addition to the PLC dissolution and the formation of the Shtayyeh government.

In this context, with the deteriorating in the health of President ‘Abbas, it has been hard to conceal Fatah’s internal dilemma, which has sought to rearrange the Palestinian scene into total monopoly, while using some PLO factions in a cosmetic manner to provide cover for its movements. Fatah’s popularity has been on the decline, with its political project clearly failing, while Israeli society and politics have lurched into the right with full cover from the Trump administration. As a result, the PA’s *raison d’être* has been eroding, reducing its function to the servicing of a small elite benefiting from it. In the same context, internal rivalries in Fatah have been growing, seeing more competition for control of the centers of power. Since Hamas represents Fatah’s main rival, Fatah has moved to delegitimize Hamas, and block regional and international initiatives concerned with GS, turning the competition with Hamas into its main rivalry, replacing the one with Israel at a very critical and dangerous stage.

Sixth: Breaking the Deadlock Between Reconciliation and Elections

The Fatah leadership, and President ‘Abbas, have not dealt positively with the reconciliation plan presented by the Palestinian factions, namely the PIJ, PFLP, DFLP, PPP, the Palestinian National Initiative movement, Fida, the Vanguard of the Popular Liberation War (al-Sa‘iqah), and the PFLP-General Command (GC).¹⁴³

Hamas agreed to this initiative,¹⁴⁴ but was ignored by President ‘Abbas, who in his speech at the UN announced his intention to hold general elections in the WB, GS, and Jerusalem.¹⁴⁵ Although the call to elections was unilateral, Hamas agreed to it anyway,¹⁴⁶ whether as a maneuver to block attempts to remove it from the political landscape and delegitimize it (by holding elections in WB but not GS, or by using electronic polling in GS without Hamas’s consent), or as something borne out of conviction of the possibility of exiting the impasse by turning to the people through elections.

Hamas and the Palestinian factions in GS met with the Central Elections Committee.¹⁴⁷ Hamas waived its previous conditions that PLC, presidential, and PNC elections must be held simultaneously.¹⁴⁸ Hamas and other Palestinian factions had called for a national meeting prior to the elections—a call criticized by Fatah,¹⁴⁹ however, it expressed its willingness to withdraw that call. It also accepted that the elections be held according to the proportional-representation law, and showed willingness to make more concessions and be more flexible in order to ensure that these elections succeed.¹⁵⁰

There was a Palestinian debate about whether President ‘Abbas was serious about his election proposal. It is worth recalling here that the elections remained a recurrent proposal by Fatah to end the division, rather than following the conventional reconciliation process. It seemed that it was a proposal relying on rejection from Hamas, after the experience of 2006, the crises of government experienced by Hamas, and the dismantling of its organizations in WB. The elections were a clause included in the numerous agreements signed between the two parties, and a clause in the plan put forward by the factions that Fatah ignored. However, they were a clause within an agreed package and timetable, whether in the signed agreements or in the factions’ initiative. Moreover, the Constitutional Court’s decision urged President ‘Abbas to call for PLC elections six months after the dissolution of the PLC, and included a letter mandating the Shtayyeh government to organize PLC elections.¹⁵¹

Some believe that President ‘Abbas, along with the Fatah leadership, had gambled on Hamas refusing the call to elections or clinging to its traditional conditions, so that they would be able to repudiate the reconciliation process, sidestep the factions’ initiative, and preoccupy Palestinian public opinion with this political bombshell. They wanted incomplete elections in order to renew the PA’s eroding legitimacy, at a time when the PA’s political project had collapsed, and its function in the struggle against occupation had been largely absent.¹⁵² At the same time, such elections would meet the demands of the European Union (EU) on the need for an elected PLC, while also using that to delegitimize Hamas in case it boycotted the elections, especially since the threat of declaring GS a rogue province was on the table.¹⁵³

In return, Hamas has sought to embarrass President ‘Abbas and Fatah by agreeing to the election proposal, hence obstructing the PA’s plan to delegitimize it.

Hamas, no matter what the election outcome may be, probably believed that an impasse with ‘Abbas would be more dangerous than elections, even as the likelihood of holding one remains low, given the political impasse inside Israel itself, which may prompt it to obstruct elections in Jerusalem. In the event that elections were held, Hamas would remain inside the political system and achieve a reasonable result. Its political foes in Fatah would also suffer greatly when trying to name candidates, as a result of the growing polarization within and the struggle for the succession of Mahmud ‘Abbas, as well as the failure of its political project.¹⁵⁴ If elections were to be held in a climate of political repression, Hamas would not run and would still retain its arms in GS.

In late 2019, holding elections was not inevitable. Despite both sides placing their bets on the time factor, the results of any such elections would reproduce the schism discourse. The events of 2006 were still fresh, and the behavior of Fatah in 2018 and 2019 was centered on the PA project, which had become an end in itself for a powerful elite who are acutely aware that the PA is the condition for their own political existence and survival. Accordingly, one can understand its unilateralism in all of the above, from the dissolution of the PLC, to the formation of Fatah-led government, the convening of the PNC and PCC, re-shaping the PLO in isolation of all agreements, and launching a crackdown on freedoms. Fatah also continued the policy of security coordination, despite its claim that it had been suspended, and its claims to be engaging in popular resistance, which not only did not materialize, but the PA actually cracked down on, according to Israeli sources.

If Fatah were to win the elections, whatever Hamas’s presence in the Palestinian political system, Hamas’s arms in GS would be used as a pretext for a new crisis, even if the factions sided with Hamas, as they gradually move away from Fatah. If Hamas were to win, there would be no chance it would be able to administer the WB, unless it made concessions that fatally undermined its fundamental political principles.

In case these elections were not held, the climate prevailing in 2018 and 2019 would probably continue. Nothing could alter this reality unless regional shifts occurred, forcing the two sides to come together, or favoring one side over the other, altering the internal balance of power.

Seventh: Palestinian Factions: Status and Popularity

We have previously discussed the negative repercussions of the formation of the Shtayyeh government on the efforts of the Palestinian left to form a coalition of its forces. This coalition was called the Palestinian Democratic Grouping, and was officially announced on 3/1/2019. A statement explained the reason for the establishment of this grouping: the need for a new bloc that could pressure the two main factions of the PA. It added that internal despotism must be ended, including ruling by presidential decree, the domination of security forces, and the erosion of the PLO in favor of the PA and its organs. The statement explained that the latter had led to the paralysis of the PLO, disregard for its decisions and representative status, especially regarding exiting the Oslo Accords, and the obstruction of any attempts to revive and reform the PLO. In addition to the national struggle and domestic issues, the declaration called for adopting an economic program based on social justice, protecting workers' rights, implementing a fair distribution of the tax burden, reducing spending on security for the benefit of education and health, and securing the rights of prisoners and martyrs, as well as strengthening the resilience of Jerusalem and other threatened areas. The declaration reflected social attitudes emanating from leftwing concerns that may be locally problematic, such as calling for bringing legislation in line with the provisions of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).¹⁵⁵

Although the Grouping sought to highlight its presence through holding public events and issuing unified stances,¹⁵⁶ its formation lacked robust mechanisms and was governed by vague ones under the broad title of dialogue.¹⁵⁷ There were no practical structures such as an independent leadership framework,¹⁵⁸ and internal bylaws that govern the members' leadership frameworks, hence preventing factional and personal polarizations. It was this problem that led the Grouping to fail, and undermined the unity of its factions, because of differences over the Shtayyeh government and participation in it. Indeed, Fida and PPP decided to join the government contrary to the Grouping's position.¹⁵⁹

First tier leaders in these two parties resigned, some because of the Shtayyeh government issue, others because of the way decisions were made to participate in that government, which involved forgery according to some.¹⁶⁰ Thus, another experience of the Palestinian left to unify its ranks, or create a third bloc, had

failed. This time, the direct cause was the coercion of the PA, which had been seeking to control the entire public sphere and deploy it for its own agenda, its internal rivalries as well as its rivalries with its foes.

The PA's coercions did not spare Fatah itself, although no overt divisions appeared in its ranks. Internal dissent and divergence, which were historical features in Fatah, have ended under 'Abbas's leadership and the last two Fatah conferences. The centers of power were clear in the PA, as was evident in the Shtayyeh government's paralysis vis-à-vis some issues addressed above. Multiple sources have reported the existence of centers of power dominated by the security forces, with some figures entrusted with coordinating with Israel. They shape the trends within the PA in contradiction to Fatah's national slogans. In addition, Fatah has been unable to fill the portfolios of the Interior and Religious Affairs Ministries in the Shtayyeh government, amid other issues linked to the circumstances in which the Shtayyeh government was formed and Rami Hamdallah dismissed.

Despite this, media sources, especially Israeli ones, kept reporting on conflicts within the Fatah movement over the succession of President 'Abbas. The analyses that factored-in these conflicts placed Fatah's measures and arrangements for the PLO in this context, along with the formation of the Shtayyeh government, in addition to other contexts.

There was talk in the Palestinian street regarding Fatah's preparation for the post-'Abbas era, reinforced by leaks in the Israeli media, which claimed that arms were being procured and militias being formed in preparation for the succession of President 'Abbas and for potential chaos and conflict.¹⁶¹ In this context of 'Abbas's succession, a number of Fatah and PA leaders have been mentioned, most notably the member of the Fatah Central Committee and former director of the Preventive Security Service (PSS), Jibril Rajoub; the former GIS director and member of the Fatah Central Committee Tawfiq al-Tirawi; the deputy head of Fatah Mahmud al-'Aloul; and the current GIS director Majid Faraj.¹⁶² The name of Hussein al-Sheikh, member of the Fatah Central Committee and head of the General Authority For Civil Affairs, was also mentioned as one of the influential figures in the decision-making corridors within the PA.¹⁶³

Perhaps this internal polarization in Fatah has encouraged its factions to hold on to President 'Abbas during this period, to avoid an early clash or to escape

from the problem, including by declaring him the sole candidate in any upcoming presidential election,¹⁶⁴ despite his turning 84 at the end of 2019. Observers have almost unanimously agreed on the difficulty of finding a consensual leader after President ‘Abbas, due to the death of most historical leaders of whom he is the last, and due to Fatah’s failure to attract new generations of members.¹⁶⁵ Nevertheless, the nature and function of the PA, and its organic bond with Fatah, could help settle this dilemma, through the ability of external powerful forces to impose their candidate on the PA.

In the same context, the imprisoned Fatah leader Marwan Barghouthi represents an interesting phenomenon in Fatah, with many figures approving him. However, his faction remains weak in the context of the equations that govern power distribution in the PA. This was evident through the PA’s efforts to weaken the Prisoners Club or annex it to the Prisoners Affairs Authority, after it supported a prisoner strike led by Barghouthi,¹⁶⁶ in April and May 2017, a strike that caused a split within Fatah inside prisons.¹⁶⁷

Furthermore, in the context of Fatah’s internal conflicts, there was the role of former Fatah leader Muhammad Dahlan and his supporters of ex-Fatah members, calling themselves the Reformist Movement. Dahlan is well connected internationally, especially with the governments of Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), although his movement was hit hard by Turkey’s decision to place his faction on its terrorist list.¹⁶⁸ Dahlan commands control of formidable human resources and a media network. He has proven his influence in GS, when his bloc won against Fatah’s official bloc in the elections of the Workers and Staff Syndicate of Al-Azhar University in GS,¹⁶⁹ and during the massive rallies on Fatah’s anniversary¹⁷⁰ and the commemoration on the anniversary of the death of Yasir ‘Arafat, both of which were official Fatah events. Indeed, Dahlan is keen to repudiate the idea of total separation from Fatah and accusations against him of going rogue, affirming that belonging to Fatah is not about loyalty to one person.¹⁷¹

One of Dahlan’s touted strengths, in addition to organizational presence, is his extended networks abroad, most notably in Lebanon, through social and charitable activities and military loyalties inside the refugee camps (RCs); as well as in Jordan.¹⁷² This is in addition to his clout within the WB RCs, reflected by frequent confrontations between PA agencies and militants in these camps,¹⁷³ not to mention his relations with some Fatah Central Committee members, especially

Tawfiq al-Tirawi, who is reported to have met with Dahlan in person several times. Al-Tirawi is also reported to be among those stockpiling weapons in preparation for the post-‘Abbas phase.¹⁷⁴

On the other hand, with regard to internal national circumstances, the PIJ held internal elections, declaring the election of Ziad Nakhleh as its new secretary general in September 2018.¹⁷⁵ He succeeded Ramadan ‘Abdullah Shallah, who in April 2018 entered into a coma and was no longer able to run the movement. The elections included electing members for the movement’s political bureau and leaders in other arenas.¹⁷⁶ The political bureau admitted new members who were known political and media personalities, such as Muhammad al-Hindi, Nafez ‘Azzam, Khalid al-Batsh, and Anwar Abu Taha, and other, less well-known, figures.¹⁷⁷

Eighth: Popularity Indicators

It is not possible, with the Palestinian situation suffering this level of division, political disruption, and paralysis of the national movement, especially in the WB, to talk about reliable measurements of the influence of the Palestinian factions and their popularity; even if there are indications that the Hamas and Fatah movements both enjoy popular support.

With the absence of any general or local elections in which Hamas can run, all eyes have been on student elections. However, these elections, since the emergence of the Palestinian schism, have lost their representative value given the PA’s ability to subdue campuses. As a result, university administrations have adopted a security approach, cracking down on student activism, while the PA has cracked down on rival student blocs and Israel banned some student groups, rendering competition deeply unequal.¹⁷⁸

Indeed, An-Najah University administration banned the activities of the Islamic Bloc,¹⁷⁹ Hamas’s student framework. In Hebron University, student elections have been banned for successive years, with only individual candidates allowed, practically invalidating the work of student groups.¹⁸⁰ In Al-Quds University (Abu Dis), the Islamic Bloc was also banned from recent student elections, on the pretext of not meeting the required conditions.¹⁸¹

While this was the case for the WB universities, universities in GS have been subject to a different kind of division. Hamas dominates the Islamic University and Fatah controls Al-Azhar University. The Islamic University holds elections but without proportional representation, and they are therefore boycotted by many student groups.¹⁸² Whereas Al-Azhar University bans student elections outright,¹⁸³ mainly on account of the divisions within Fatah between the ‘Abbas faction and the Dahlan faction, which won the most recent elections of the Workers and Staff Syndicate there.¹⁸⁴

Birzeit University, in central WB near Ramallah, remained the exception. The Islamic Bloc there managed to win the elections of the Student Council for four successive rounds between 2014 and 2018.¹⁸⁵ This was due to two main factors: First, the efforts of the Islamic Bloc in this university, with a view to preserving itself and exerting its role and influence; and second, the keenness of the university administration to maintain its independence as much as possible from the political regime, and carve out a space for student activism and student elections. This allowed the Islamic Bloc to win over the years, before losing the student council in 2019.

The Student Youth Movement, the student framework of Fatah, won the student council elections in 2019,¹⁸⁶ with a majority of 67 votes, defeating the Islamic Bloc, although both sides controlled the same number of seats. This result affirmed the special nature of Birzeit University, but at the same time, confirmed that Hamas and Fatah share the Palestinian street almost equally, without any other faction being able to form a bloc to compete with them, or benefit from the rivalry between them. In turn, this means that the two movements have maintained the same weight in the street as they had during the PLC elections in 2006.

Birzeit University enjoys a representative quality, not only because of the relative freedom of its campus from the dominance of the PA, but also thanks to its liberal nature. Indeed, it cannot be considered sympathetic to Hamas, having been founded originally by a Christian family. In addition, its good academic reputation and special location in the center of WB makes it a meeting point for all Palestinians in WB.¹⁸⁷

Despite the near equal split of Palestinian support between Hamas and Fatah, the last local elections held in WB in 2017 showed a decline of Fatah’s popularity and a decline in its influence on local communities. Indeed, independent lists in

those elections won 65% of the votes compared to 27.6% for Fatah, while Hamas officially boycotted the election. After that, no local elections were held in WB, except for some elections in villages and towns in 2018 and 2019. Furthermore, the low turnout is noteworthy, reaching only 53.4% in 2017 compared to 82.5% in 2005. Compared to the student election in which the Islamic Bloc was disqualified at the Al-Quds University (Abu Dis), we find that the turnout was 28–45%, divided according to the polling stations and university degree levels—undergraduate and postgraduate¹⁸⁸—while the turnout in Birzeit University student elections in which the Islamic Bloc participated was 78%.¹⁸⁹ These figures underscore the impact of PA policies on the popular activism of the Palestinian people.

In the same context, the elections of the Palestinian Medical Association in WB (part of the Jordanian Medical Association), held in March 2019, saw Fatah losing the syndicate president position. It is worth comparing these elections to previous local elections, as Fatah competed against independents in them, while Hamas and the PFLP backed the independents and the independent candidate for the syndicate president position, an ex-Fatah member.¹⁹⁰ While this indicates a decline in political life in WB, it also reflects the deteriorating conditions under which all Palestinian factions are operating as a result of repression and persecution.

With these indicators, a poll conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR), on 11–14/12/2019, showed that 40% of Palestinians (47% in WB and 30% in GS) expected Fatah to win upcoming PLC elections, compared to 25% (19% in WB and 35% in GS) who predicted a Hamas win. While 32% said they would vote for Hamas, 40% said they would vote for Fatah, with 10% saying they would vote for third parties, and 20% were undecided. According to the same survey, the vote for Hamas in GS stands at 41% and in WB at 24%, noting that some among those who said they would vote for Fatah said they would vote for Muhammad Dahlan. In other words, the actual vote for Fatah would be at 35%, a similar percentage to the Hamas vote.¹⁹¹

While the result of the survey confirmed several fixed trends in the Palestinian street, such as Fatah and Hamas's near-equal share of popular support, the inability of the remaining factions to form an influential third bloc, and the impact of intra-Fatah divisions on the movement's popularity, the survey did not accurately reveal the attitudes of the Palestinian street. Indeed, despite the fact that Hamas's structures in GS are more robust than those in the WB, Hamas still proved in

the last PLC and municipal elections it contended that it enjoys broad popular approval in the WB, which was also affirmed by the elections in Birzeit University. This was particularly pertinent given the fact that Palestinians in WB tend to be less affiliated to political groups than their compatriots in GS, and therefore are more susceptible to propaganda and the economic, security, and political policies of the PA that impact the status of Fatah. Moreover, the reluctance of Palestinians in WB to express their real views in polls probably reflects the declining individual freedoms there, and the dominance of PA security forces over public life.

Ninth: Security Coordination Between National Relations and the Relationship With Israel

As noted earlier, the PCC's decisions dictated the suspension of security coordination and requested a plan that includes a comprehensive timetable and the full specifications of political, economic and security relations with Israel. These PCC and PNC decisions, discussed earlier, were not the first of their kind in the history of the PA and PLO; rather, this was a discourse that had been repeated frequently in recent years. Indeed, in a PCC session convened on 5/3/2015, a decision was issued to suspend all forms of security coordination with Israel in the light of its failure to abide by agreements signed between the two sides.¹⁹² Accordingly, Mahmud al-'Aloul, Fatah Central Committee member and deputy chairman, said that the decisions of the PCC were not recommendations but binding resolutions, including the resolution to suspend security coordination with Israel, and he asked the Executive Committee to implement these resolutions.¹⁹³ At the time, the president's advisor for provincial affairs affirmed the seriousness of the president in implementing these decisions. The PLO Executive Committee, tasked with implementing these decisions, decided to task the Political Committee, security forces chiefs, and other relevant bodies to develop a detailed plan to implement the suspension of security coordination with Israel.¹⁹⁴

These decisions were made in the first quarter of 2015, and explicitly requested the suspension of security coordination, revealing the multiple forms of this coordination, and exposing security ties with Israel, more than three years before the 2018 PNC and PCC sessions. In turn, these sessions issued the same decisions, with a higher ceiling that included declaring the end of the transitional phase and

its commitments, suspension of the recognition of Israel, and the disengagement of economic relations with Israel.

However, none of these decisions were implemented in subsequent years, which brings to mind the insistence of President Mahmud ‘Abbas on continuing security coordination with Israel, in his famous 2014 declaration—less than a year before the 2015 recommendations—saying, “Security coordination with Israel is sacred, and will continue whether we agree or disagree.”¹⁹⁵ Five years later, ‘Abbas in early 2019 reiterated the same message, confirming the continuation of security coordination, and revealing that the PA had signed an agreement on “counter-terrorism” cooperation with world powers. ‘Abbas’s statements came during a meeting in al-Muqata‘ah Headquarters in Ramallah, attended by Palestinian and Israeli “peace” activists.¹⁹⁶

Between the PCC decisions of 2015 and 2018, security coordination continued without interruption, judging by President ‘Abbas’s statements in early 2019. However, in July 2019 he declared the suspension of agreements signed with Israel and claimed that the PA had begun developing mechanisms and committees to implement the decision “starting the following day,” pursuant to the resolutions of the PCC. This was empty rhetoric, and the PCC decisions taken the previous year had not been implemented; referring them to further committees to develop mechanisms for implementation is in effect a form of obstruction, given that such committees had already been formed since 2015.¹⁹⁷

After President ‘Abbas’s speech, the Secretary of PLO Executive Committee, Saeb Erekat, explained that the agreements that would be suspended were the Oslo Accords of 1993, the Gaza-Jericho Agreement of 1994, the Paris Protocol of 1994, the Interim Agreement of 1995, the Hebron Agreement of 1997 (aka the Hebron Protocol), the Wye River Memorandum of 1998, the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum of 1999, and the Movement and Access Agreement of 2005,¹⁹⁸ bearing in mind that some of these agreements had established the security coordination process.

In the first actual confirmation that the president’s declarations of July 2019 were not implemented, and that instead they would become suspended threats, in September 2019 ‘Abbas told the UN that all agreements signed with Israel and the obligations consequent upon them would be terminated, if Israel annexed the Jordan Valley, north of the Dead Sea, and the Israeli settlements.¹⁹⁹ This was his response to Benjamin Netanyahu’s threats to annex the Jordan Valley,²⁰⁰

following the US declaration that Israeli settlements did not violate international law.²⁰¹ The Palestinian response was to denounce the US move, and announce a series of meetings, and local and international moves to counteract this step, without addressing the suspension of agreements or security coordination.²⁰² If the suspension announcement is renewed, then it will probably again be an announcement without implementation.

On the ground, accusations have been made against the PA regarding several incidents in which Israeli forces were allegedly given information to capture Palestinian resistance fighters or thwart resistance operations. In some of these incidents, there were official announcements that PA security forces were indeed involved, such as the case of Basil al-‘Araj and ‘Umar Abu Laila. Other reports regarding security coordination were leaked by Israeli sources, such as the assassination of Ahmad Nasr Jarrar in Jenin.²⁰³ The governor of Nablus declared after this incident that the PA was committed to the principle of security coordination.²⁰⁴ At the same time, leaks were published about the PA wiretapping citizens’ phones.²⁰⁵ Israeli newspapers also ran reports stating that security coordination with the PA had helped contain protests in the Palestinian territories, following Donald Trump’s declaration of US recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.²⁰⁶ President ‘Abbas had declared unequivocally that he would not allow a new *Intifadah* in WB. In early May, the Israeli press reported that PA security forces foiled 40% of attacks planned against Israel.²⁰⁷ Despite the US cutting off aid to the PA, Washington gave the PA security forces \$61 million to support continued security coordination with Israel.²⁰⁸ The PA was also accused of participating in the manhunt for Ashraf Na‘alwa, who was subsequently killed.²⁰⁹

According to multiple Israeli security and military sources, security coordination is responsible for the Israel’s success in containing Hamas cells in the WB. These reports indicated that ‘Abbas verbally threatened to suspend coordination, but that, in practical terms, coordination never stopped.²¹⁰ This was confirmed by ‘Abbas, who said on many occasions during meetings with Israeli delegations, that security coordination would remain ongoing. ‘Abbas even said that he “regularly meets with the chief of the [Israel Security Agency—ISA] Shabak, and that he agrees with Israeli security forces 99% of the time,” and that PA security forces “coordinate on a daily basis with Israeli security forces,” while doing everything they could to prevent harm to any Israelis. Palestinian and Israeli officials have confirmed this as true on several occasions.²¹¹

Israeli statements praising security coordination with the PA were renewed from early 2019.²¹² That year, Israel allowed armored vehicles to be handed over to the PA at the request of the United States,²¹³ amid reports indicating that security coordination had helped Israel apprehend and neutralize ‘Umar Abu Laila, the perpetrator of an attack.²¹⁴ Israeli reports continued to address security coordination, even after the speech by Mahmud ‘Abbas in July 2019 declaring the suspension of agreements signed with Israel.²¹⁵ Accordingly, the Israeli press said that “security coordination between the two sides has not been harmed fundamentally,” suggesting the reason was that the PA feared Hamas could benefit from the situation on the ground in the event the PA loosened its security grip.²¹⁶ Israeli sources also claimed that the PA helped hunt down the perpetrators of ‘Ein Bubin attack near Ramallah,²¹⁷ who belonged to a PFLP cell.

Meanwhile, coordination meetings between Israel and the PA in all areas continued as usual. The PA revived the committees for economic and political coordination with Israel in early October 2019, marking a reversal of President ‘Abbas’s declaration in July 2019;²¹⁸ and then threatened to stop this coordination again in September 2019. Moreover, political meetings did not stop, even at the level of prime minister, during the Hamdallah term.²¹⁹ Meetings resumed between Palestinian and Israeli ministers in 2019,²²⁰ while the PA, as noted earlier, retracted its decision not to receive clearing revenues from Israel except in full, after months in which it had to pay partial salaries to its employees. The PA abandoned its decision after high-level meetings with the Israelis, with President ‘Abbas even saying in the last days of 2019 that he had requested a meeting with Netanyahu more than 20 times, but the latter had refused to meet.²²¹ In 2018, ‘Abbas revealed that he had been meeting regularly with the chief of Shabak, and that those meetings ended with agreement on 99% of issues.²²² ‘Abbas’s statements came after the PNC and PCC sessions, which issued resolutions suspending security coordination with Israel, yet President ‘Abbas met again with the head of the Shabak in 2019.²²³

We can see two elements that marked the PA’s relations with the Israeli establishment. The first is the tension with the ruling right-wing hardline establishment, represented primarily by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, where even if this tension comes from the Israeli side, the PA is ineffective in responding to the Israeli-right’s policies, or the position of the US

administration supporting them. The PA will make threats and decisions that are not, or cannot, be implemented. The second component is that the PA enjoyed good relations with the Israeli military and security establishment, to the extent that the PA's leadership prefers Israeli army former chief of staff, General Benny Gantz, leader of the Blue and White alliance, in the elections against Netanyahu.²²⁴ It is possible that the Arab Joint List's nomination of Gantz to head the Israeli government²²⁵ was influenced by the PA.

In the light of internal Israeli polarization, it is possible to conclude that there are policy differences between the Israeli security establishment and the Netanyahu government. On more than one occasion, Israeli security forces have opposed the laws and policies supported by the Netanyahu government and right-wing parties that would embarrass the PA in front of its people or undermine its authority,²²⁶ such as the law confiscating the funds to the families of prisoners and those killed from tax revenues. Indeed, while the Israeli security forces appreciated the security role of the PA, the ruling Israeli class is more focused on internal one-upmanship, undermining Palestinian political representation, and expanding settlement and security domination in the WB, which necessarily undermines the political presence of the PA and leads to a broad drive for annexation in the WB.

As a result, this means that the PA is aware of the conditions necessary for its survival, as evidenced by its reliance on the security and military establishments. Therefore, it fears suspending security coordination and the continuation of the internal Palestinian tensions, which are fundamentally caused by conflicting platforms, and the differences over the function of the PA, resistance weapons, and relations with Israel. Furthermore, suspending agreements or disengaging the Palestinian economy from Israel is impossible, given the total Israeli domination over the WB and its crossings, and the Palestinians' lack of any link to the outside world independent of Israel. In order to implement such decisions, it would be necessary first to exit the peace process, and rebuild national unity as a basis of the program that addresses the function of the PA, and also the basis of a resistance program adopted by all sides. Since the PA's policies remain the opposite of this, it cannot be expected that it will implement such decisions or threats.

Conclusion

The Palestine issue is subject to liquidation under the “Deal of the Century” plan supported by some central Arab states, and successive Israeli governments have expanded the imposition of facts on the ground, making the establishment of a Palestinian state on all of the WB lands an impossible task, at least under the current balance of power. This was all supported by the Trump administration through its recognition of the Israeli sovereignty over Jerusalem and the settlements. In return, Palestinian official reaction was characterized by helplessness, while at the same time continuing to fulfil the obligations of the PA, without implementing any of the PLO’s decisions, the recommendations of the Fatah Revolutionary Council, or the threats of President ‘Abbas. In contrast, the PA focused its attention on rhetorical and actual escalation against Hamas, and on policies that widened the gap with the rest of the Palestinian factions.

National internal relations were marked by confrontation and rivalry, especially between Fatah and Hamas. It is possible to say that 2018 and 2019 witnessed an unprecedented escalation in the conflict between the two parties. Security tactics were used for political purposes, such as the bombing in GS that targeted a convoy of the prime minister of the National Consensus Government accompanied by the GIS chief, causing the last Reconciliation Agreement to collapse, and triggering a round of mutual accusations between the two sides.

In these confrontations, political and administrative tactics were also used, where Fatah re-structured national institutions unilaterally, outside any national accord, violating a series of long agreements with Hamas and other national factions. PLO institutions were re-formed and then used for Fatah’s gain, as happened with the PNC and PCC sessions, and the appointment of new members to the latter, new members to the Executive Committee, and reelected ‘Abbas as chairman of this committee, and then as President of the State of Palestine by the PNC.

The escalation included dissolving the PLC, dismissing the National Consensus Government, forming a new government led by Fatah, and dissolving the Supreme Judicial Council. The Executive Branch then proceeded to dominate the scene without the bare minimum of checks and balances, with the invalidation of other branches of power. The Executive dominated the judicial branch, as the domination of security forces increased, triggering fears that the Palestinian

community was being transformed into a police state characterized by intimidation and crackdown on freedoms even in cyberspace. All this happened in parallel with the continuation of security coordination, which led according to leaked information to the apprehension and killing of wanted resistance fighters, and the containment of popular protests. In parallel, economic crises ravaged the PA, undermining its ability to survive and raising questions about its independence from direct Israeli domination, particularly in light of its acquiescence to Israeli measures to reduce funds to prisoners and martyrs, its inability to suspend security coordination, disengage from Israel's economy, or implement any of its decisions in these regards.

The combativeness impacted Fatah and the PA's relations with other factions in the PLO, with the meetings of the PCC and PNC boycotted repeatedly by influential parties. The monopoly and unilateralism of the PA affected the forces of the Palestinian left, which were further divided by the formation of the Shtayyeh government, foiling their attempt to form a coalition.

In addition, there have been continuous reports in the Palestinian street about rivalries between Fatah leaders, and the emergence of centers of power within the PA, linked to security forces or to security coordination with Israel. In addition, the rivalry with the faction of ex-Fatah leader Muhammad Dahlan continued, and Hamas sought to form an electoral alliance with incarcerated Fatah leader Marwan Barghouthi for future PLC and presidential elections.

While many expressed optimism regarding the possibility of overcoming this conflict through legislative and then presidential elections proposed by President 'Abbas, after the failure of reconciliation attempts, others believe that elections would only reproduce the problem or prolong it, pending internal or external shifts that could serve one of the two rivals. As 2019 ended with the postponement of those elections, both factions are monitoring shifts in the region; whether in Israel, where Fatah hopes for Netanyahu to lose power, or elsewhere, where Hamas has been seeking to enhance its regional relations, and break the siege through de-escalation and limited popular and military maneuvers. Unless sudden fundamental shifts take place in the regional landscape or in the relationship with Israel, it is likely that the status of the national landscape prevailing in 2018 and 2019 will continue unchanged.

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Chapter Two

Palestinian Demographic and Economic Indicators

Palestinian Demographic and Economic Indicators

Introduction

Statistical studies reflect the resilience of the Palestinian people and their attachment to their land, despite all forms of suffering under the Israeli occupation and despite the conditions of forced asylum in the Diaspora. Although about half of the Palestinian people live outside Palestine, most Palestinians still reside in neighboring countries and aspire to return to their land.

This chapter examines the demographic and economic indicators of the PA in the WB and GS, where data are available for such kind of studies. Undoubtedly, the current economic indicators do not genuinely reflect the Palestinian people's capabilities, because the PA economy is dominated by Israel and curtailed by the terms and restrictions of the Oslo Accords and the Paris Protocol. However, these indicators make it possible to understand the reality of the Palestinian economy in the WB and GS, and the extent to which Israel exploits the Palestinians, their resources and potential.

First: Demographic Indicators

1. The Palestinian Population Worldwide

The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) has reconsidered its previous data and provided updated figures with reduced estimates of the numbers of Palestinians, especially in Palestine, upon which we based our statistics. As for data not provided by the PCBS, statistics were based on available figures. Notably, the number of Palestinians in the Diaspora remains difficult to ascertain, since available data could be inconsistent.

Available figures indicate that the number of Palestinians worldwide reached 13.35 million in 2019 compared to 13.05 million in 2018, an increase of 2.3% (see table 1/2).

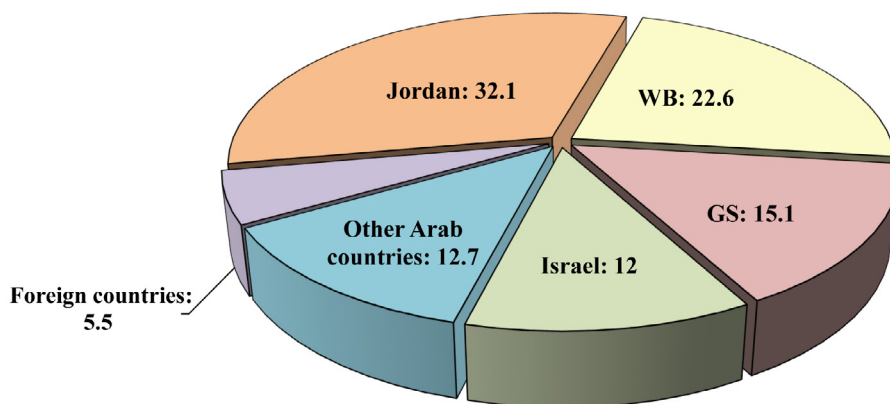
Table 1/2: Palestinian Population Worldwide Estimate by Place of Residence at the End of 2018 and 2019 (thousands)¹

Place of residence Population estimates		2018		2019	
		Population estimates	Percentage (%)	Population estimates	Percentage (%)
Palestinian territories occupied in 1967	WB	2,954	22.6	3,020	22.6
	GS	1,961	15	2,019	15.1
Palestinian territories occupied in 1948 (Israel)*		1,568	12	1,597.5	12
Palestinians in historic Palestine		6,483	49.6	6,636.5	49.7
Jordan**		4,187	32.1	4,290	32.1
Other Arab countries		1,663	12.7	1,696	12.7
Foreign countries		717	5.5	727.5	5.5
Palestinians in diaspora		6,567	50.3	6,713.5	50.3
Total		13,050	100	13,350	100

* For the Palestinian population in the 1948 occupied territories, the number excludes the Palestinians in the 1967 occupied territories including the Jerusalem governorate, Arab Syrians and Lebanese, non-Arab Christians and those classified as “Others.” Israeli statistics publish figures different from PCBS figures, and show that the number of Arab Palestinians in the 1948 occupied territories reached about 1.918 million in 2019, and if we deduct the 358 thousand East Jerusalem citizens (based on 2018 statistics) and the number of citizens in the Golan Heights which is around 25 thousand, the number becomes about 1.535 million.

** The number of Palestinians in Jordan is based on 2009 PCBS statistics reaching 3,240,473, and on the 2.47% annual growth rates in 2016, issued by the Jordanian Department of Statistics, Population and Housing, Demographic Statistics, <http://dosweb.dos.gov.jo>

Palestinian Population Worldwide Estimate by Place of Residence at the End of 2019 (%)



Based on 2019 estimates, Palestinians in historic Palestine are estimated at 6.637 million, constituting 49.7% of Palestinians worldwide. Palestinians in the 1967 occupied territories are estimated at 5.039 million and constitute 37.7% of Palestinians worldwide, while Palestinians in territories occupied in 1948 (Israel) are estimated at 1.597 million, constituting around 12% of Palestinians worldwide (see table 1/2).

Palestinians in the Diaspora were estimated at 6.713 million at the end of 2019, comprising 50.3% of Palestinians worldwide, mostly concentrated in neighboring Arab countries, particularly Jordan where Palestinians (most of whom are holders of Jordanian nationality) are estimated at 4.29 million, representing 32.1% of Palestinians worldwide. As for other Arab countries, the number of Palestinians is estimated at 1.696 million, 12.7% of Palestinians worldwide, mostly living in neighboring Arab countries: Lebanon, Syria, Egypt and the Gulf countries. Palestinians in foreign countries are estimated at a total of 727 thousand, 5.5% of Palestinians worldwide (see table 1/2).

It should be noted that these numbers are estimates, as it is difficult to uncover accurate statistics for Palestinians in the Diaspora. Moreover, the estimated number of Palestinians in foreign countries was based on the PCBS 1.5% growth rate, whereas the real increase is assumed to be over 2%.

At the end of 2018, Palestinians worldwide reached 13.05 million, of whom 4.915 million were living in WB and GS, and around 1.568 million in the territories occupied in 1948 (Israel), compared to 6.567 million living abroad; 4.187 million

in Jordan, 1.663 million in other Arab countries and 717 thousand in foreign countries (see table 1/2).

2. The Demographic Characteristics of the Palestinians

a. The WB and GS

At the end of 2019, the number of Palestinians in WB and GS was estimated at 5.039 million, of whom about 3.02 million lived in WB (59.9%) and 2.019 million (40.1%) in GS. This means that the growth rate reached 2.5%, given that the number of Palestinians in the WB and GS was 4.915 million at the end of 2018.

Estimates for 2017 indicated that 42.2% of Palestinians in WB and GS were refugees descending from the territories occupied in 1948. Refugees comprised 26.3% of the WB population and 66.1% of the GS population. Based on available statistics, the number of refugees in 2019 is estimated at 2.129 million (about 794 thousand in WB and 1.335 million in GS).

**Table 2/2: Palestinian Total and 1948 Refugee Population
in WB and GS 2018–2019 (thousands)²**

Year	Place of residence	Total Population		Refugees (1948 Palestinians)	
		Estimates	Percentage (%)	Estimates	Percentage (%)
2018	WB	2,954	60.1	777	26.3
	GS	1,961	39.9	1,296	66.1
	WB & GS	4,915	100	2,073	42.2
2019	WB	3,020	59.9	794	26.3
	GS	2,019	40.1	1,335	66.1
	WB & GS	5,039	100	2,129	42.2

Note: The 2018 and 2019 figures are estimates based on percentages published by the PCBS (26.3% of the WB population and 66.1% of the GS population are refugees).

As for population count by governorate, Hebron has the largest population (752.8 thousand or 14.9% of the WB and GS population), followed by the Gaza Governorate with 687.3 thousand or 13.6% of the WB and GS population, then the Jerusalem Governorate with a population of 456.6 thousand or 9.1% of the

WB and GS population. As for the Jericho and Rift Valley Governorate, it is the least populated with 1% of the WB and GS population. The following table shows the estimated population count in the WB and GS governorates based on PCBS estimates:

**Table 3/2: Estimated Population Count in WB and GS by Governorate
2018–2019 (thousands)³**

Governorate	2018		2019	
	Estimates	Percentage (%)	Estimates	Percentage (%)
WB	2,953.9	60.1	3,019.9	59.9
Jenin	322	6.6	328.7	6.5
Tubas and Northern Jordan Valley	62.4	1.3	63.8	1.3
Tulkarem	190.2	3.9	193.6	3.8
Nablus	396.2	8.1	403.9	8
Qalqilya	115.2	2.3	117.7	2.3
Salfit	77.5	1.6	79.3	1.6
Ramallah and al-Bireh	336.8	6.8	344.1	6.8
Jericho and Rift Valley	50.9	1	51.9	1
Jerusalem	446.6	9.1	456.6	9.1
Bethlehem	222.6	4.5	227.5	4.5
Hebron	733.5	14.9	752.8	14.9
GS	1,961.4	39.9	2,019	40.1
North Gaza	383.8	7.8	396.9	7.9
Gaza	670.1	13.6	687.3	13.6
Dayr al-Balah	282	5.7	290.2	5.8
Khan Yunis	383.7	7.8	395.6	7.9
Rafah	241.8	5	249	4.9
Total (WB & GS)	4,915.3	100	5,038.9	100

The Palestinian community in WB and GS is young with more than a third of its individuals (38.3%) aged under 15, with a stark difference between WB and GS, reaching 36.3% in the former and 41.4% in the latter (see table 4/2). Statistics indicate that the median age (the age dividing the population into two numerically equal groups, i.e., half of the population is below that age and half is older) in the WB and GS has increased throughout 2000–2019 from 16.4 years in 2000 to 20.7 years in 2019. Comparing the data of the WB and GS separately over the same period shows that the median age in WB increased from 17.4 years in 2000 to 21.7 years in 2019, while in GS it increased from 14.9 years in 2000 to 19.2 in 2019.⁴ Although the median age is lower in the GS than in the WB, it increased over 2000–2019 by 28.9% in GS compared to only 24.7% in WB.

As for the elderly (65 years and over), they constitute a small percentage of the total population, estimated at 3.3%, with 3.6% in the WB and 2.8% in the GS in 2019. Here again, it is noted that the Palestinian community in the GS is younger than that in WB.⁵

In 2017, 16% of households were headed by an elderly person, 17% in WB and 14% in GS. Also, the average size of households headed by an elderly person was usually relatively small reaching 3.7 individuals (3.3 in WB and 4.3 in GS) compared with 5.4 individuals for households headed by a non-elderly person.⁶

Data also shows that 42% of the elderly in WB and GS have not completed any formal educational qualification (26% for males and 56% for females), while the elderly who have completed middle school and above did not exceed 15%. Notably, 26% of the total population aged 18 years and over hold an intermediate diploma or a higher degree (25% for males and 27% for females).⁷

As for the distribution of population by sex, the number of males at the end of 2019 in WB and GS reached 2.56 million compared to 2.48 million females with a gender ratio 103.2 males per 100 females. In the GS, the number of males reached 1.02 million males compared to 996 thousand females with a gender ratio of 102.4, while the number of males in the WB reached 1.54 million compared to 1.48 million females with a gender ratio of 104.⁸

Data shows that the dependency rate (number of dependent persons per 100 individuals of working age, 15–64 years) in the WB and GS decreased from 100.6 in 2000 to 71.2 in 2019. Remarkably, there is a big difference in dependency rate

in WB and GS, where it decreased in WB from 94.3 in 2000 to 66.2 in 2019, while in GS it decreased from 112.8 in 2000 to 79.2 in 2019.⁹ Also, 2018 data shows that 11% of households are headed by females in the WB and GS, with 12% in WB and 9% in GS.¹⁰

Life expectancy has increased in WB and GS, from 70.7 years in 2000 to 72.9 years in 2019 for males, and from 72.2 years in 2000 to 75.2 years in 2019 for females. In GS, life expectancy was 73.6 years (72.5 years for males and 74.7 years for females), while in WB, it reached 74.3 years (73.2 years for males and 75.5 years for females) in 2019. The higher life expectancy is mainly due to improved health care, and lower infant mortality rates (see table 4/2).

Available data indicates a decline in Crude Death Rate (CDR) in WB and GS, where it decreased from 4.5 deaths per thousand population in 2000 to 3.7 deaths per thousand population in 2019. A slight difference is noted regarding the CDR between the WB and GS, where in 2019 it reached 3.9 deaths per thousand population in WB compared to 3.5 deaths per thousand population in the GS (see table 4/2).

Natural population growth (the difference between birth and death rates) in the WB and GS decreased from 3.6% in 2000 to 2.5% in 2019. In GS, the natural population growth rate decreased to 2.9% compared to a 2.2% decrease in WB.¹¹

There are indications that the fertility rate of Palestinian women has decreased, especially since the 1990s. Based on the results of the Palestinian household survey in 2014, there was a decrease in the total fertility rate in the WB and GS where there were 4.1 births per woman during 2011–2013 compared to 5.9 in 1999. Comparing WB with GS shows an increased fertility rate in GS compared to WB during 1999–2013; where in the WB there were 3.7 births per woman over 2011–2013 compared to 5.5 births in 1999; while in GS there were 4.5 births per woman over 2011–2013 compared to 6.8 in 1999.¹²

Data available for 2019 reveals a decline in the average household size in WB and GS compared to 2000, where it decreased from 6.1 persons in 2000 to 5 in 2019. The average household size in WB declined from 5.7 persons in 2000 to 4.6 in 2019, and in GS from 6.9 persons in 2000 to 5.7 (see table 4/2).

As for housing density (persons per room), in 2017, it was high in GS compared to WB, where it was 1.6 persons/room in GS compared to 1.3 in WB, while the total average housing density in GS and WB was 1.4 persons/room (see table 4/2).

The percentage of Palestinian households in which a family member owned a housing unit was approximately 85%, with 85% in WB and 83% in GS. Available data shows that 62% of households in WB and GS, in 2017, use safe drinking water as defined by the Sustainable Development Goal indicators, with 95% in WB and 11% in GS,¹³ which triggers concern regarding the health of Palestinians in the GS.

In addition to the decline in the average household size, a decrease is also observed in the Crude Birth Rate (CBR) in WB and GS, as it deteriorated from 40.9 births per thousand in 2000 to 30.2 in 2019. Furthermore, in WB, it was estimated at 27.7 births per thousand compared to 34 in GS (see table 4/2).

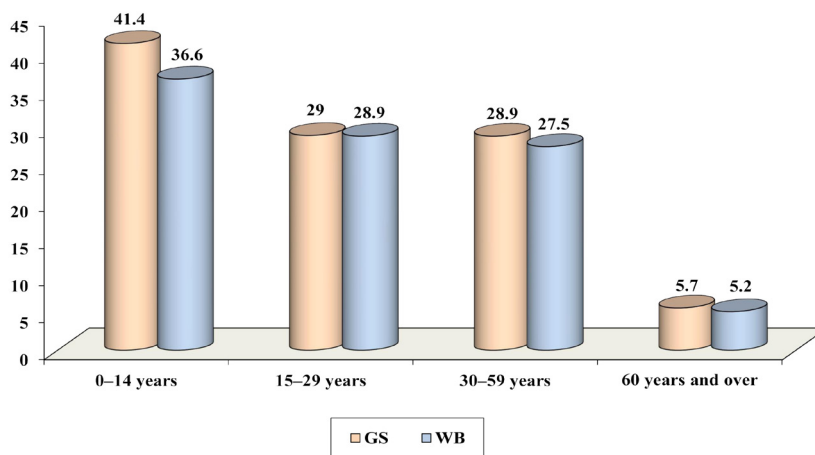
As for marriage characteristics, 2019 data indicates that 58.7% of Palestinians aged 14 and over are married, where 57.8% of males who are 14 years and over are married compared to 59.6% of females. Those divorced represent 1.1% of the total population aged 14 years and above. The registered marriages in 2018 indicate a decline in the number of marriage contracts compared to 2017, as they decreased from 47,218 in 2017 to 43,515 in 2018. The general marriage rate decreased to 9 marriages per thousand in 2018 (9.7 cases in WB and 7.8 cases in the GS) compared to 10 marriages per thousand in 2017.¹⁴

The 2017 data revealed that 19.4% of the population (10 years and above) in WB and GS have completed high school. The illiteracy rate for individuals aged 10 years and over is 2.9%. The illiteracy gap is significantly marked among males and females in 2017 at 1.5% and 4.3% respectively, while in 1997, it was 6.7% and 16.8% respectively. This represents a significant decline over 20 years, especially among females. As for the illiteracy rate among the Palestinians aged 15 and over, it was 3% in WB compared to 2.4% in GS in 2018.¹⁵

Table 4/2: Selected Demographic Indicators of Palestinians in WB and GS¹⁶

Indicator		WB	GS	WB & GS
Population density (persons/ km ²) (2019)		534	5,533	836
Population growth (2019)		2.2	2.9	2.5
Average family size (2019)		4.6	5.7	5
Life expectancy at birth (males) (yrs) (2019)		73.2	72.5	72.9
Life expectancy at birth (females) (yrs) (2019)		75.5	74.7	75.2
CBR (births per thousand population) (2019)		27.7	34	30.2
CDR (deaths per thousand population) (2019)		3.9	3.5	3.7
Infant mortality rate (deaths per thousand live births) (2014)		17	19.6	18.2
Average number of rooms in the housing unit (2016)		3.4	3.6	3.5
Age structure (%) (2019)	0–14 years	36.6	41.4	38.3
	15–29 years	28.9	29	28.8
	30–59 years	27.5	28.9	25.3
	60 years and over	5.2	5.7	4.4
Average housing density (2017) (persons/ room)		1.3	1.6	1.4

Age Structure in WB and GS 2019 (%)



b. The Palestinian Territories Occupied in 1948 (Israel)

Palestinians living in Israel at the end of 2019 were estimated at 1.598 million compared to 1.568 million in 2018. Available data shows that they are a young community where individuals aged under 15 represent 32.8% of males and 31.8% of females, while those aged 65 years and over amounted to 4.4% of males and 5.3% of females (see table 6/2).

Available estimates for 2018 indicate that the fertility rate for Palestinians residing in Israel was 3.04 births per woman, while the average Palestinian household size was 4.5 persons. Data reveals that the CBR and CDR reached 23.3 births and 2.8 deaths per thousand respectively, while infant mortality rate was 5.4 deaths per thousand live births. Notably, these figures exclude Arab citizens in the Syrian Golan Heights, citizens in J1 of the Jerusalem governorate as well as Lebanese Arabs who have moved to live temporarily in Israel since it considers all these within its population and as part of the Arab population as a whole (see table 6/2).

According to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) data at the end of 2018 (which also include East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights), Muslims in the 1948 territories counted for 1.598 million comprising 85% of the population, while Druze counted for 143 thousand and Christians 135 thousand comprising 7.6% and 7.2% respectively.¹⁷

c. Jordan

Palestinians living in Jordan at the end of 2019 were estimated at 4.29 million from 4.187 million at the end of 2018, most of whom held Jordanian citizenship (Jordanian citizens of Palestinian descent) (see table 1/2).

According to the Jordanian Department of Statistics, annual population growth was 2.47% in 2016, a percentage that included Jordanian citizens of Palestinian descent. According to PCBS figures in 2010, the total fertility rate among Palestinian women in Jordan was 3.3 births per woman, and the CBR was 29.2 births per thousand people. The infant mortality rate in Palestinian RCs was 22.6 deaths per thousand live births, while the mortality rate for children under five years of age was 25.7 deaths per thousand live births.

According to a study by FAFO Foundation regarding the living conditions in Palestinian RCs in Jordan in 2011, 39.9% of RC residents were under 15 years old,

while those aged 65 and above comprised 4.3%. The average household size was 5.1 persons per household.¹⁸

According to United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), there were 2,376,481 Registered Persons (RPs) in Jordan as of 1/2/2019 compared to 2,327,540 RPs on 1/1/2018. According to 2019 estimates, around 17.3% of them, or 412 thousand, live in the 10 RCs in Jordan.¹⁹

d. Syria

According to UNRWA figures, the total RPs in Syria was 643,142 as of 1/2/2019 compared to 631,111 on 1/1/2018.²⁰

Palestinian refugees in Syria (PRS) have suffered the reverberations of the Syrian crisis and the internal conflict. Action Group for Palestinians of Syria (AGPS) has documented grave physical violations against PRS from the beginning of the war in 2011 until July 2019. It revealed that 5,258 Palestinians have been subjected to physical abuse as a result of the ongoing violence, in addition to thousands of wounded who have been injured for various causes since the start of the war.²¹

In October 2019 AGPS revealed that the number of Palestinian refugees who died or were killed due to the conflict in Syria since 2011 had reached 4,006 refugees, including 487 female refugees and 311 refugees shot by snipers. Most fatalities among refugees were in al-Yarmouk RC in south Damascus.²²

In October 2019, AGPS's monitoring and documentation team revealed 329 documented cases of Palestinian refugees who have been declared missing since the start of the war in Syria, of whom 37 were female refugees.²³

In its report entitled Syria Regional Crisis Emergency Appeal 2020, UNRWA revealed that 438 thousand Palestinian refugees had remained in Syria. It estimated that two thirds of the Palestinian refugees were displaced from their original residence at least once since the beginning of the war, and 40% were still internally displaced as of the end of 2019, where 91% live in absolute poverty. UNRWA also predicted that 27,700 PRS will continue to live in Lebanon in 2020, with 45% living in Palestinian RCs in Lebanon. 89% are in critical need of sustained humanitarian assistance and 55% have no valid legal residency documents.²⁴

Since the eruption of the war, PRS who fled Syria to live abroad were estimated at 183 thousand refugees, according to AGPS figures in February 2020, distributed as follows:

Table 5/2: Distribution of Palestinian Refugees From Syria Abroad
According to AGPS–February 2020²⁵

Country	Lebanon	Jordan	Egypt	Gaza	Sudan	Turkey	Greece	Europe	Total
Number	27,700	17,343	3,500	350	500	10,000	4,000	120,000	183,393

Because of the current political situation and the war in Syria, the available data on the social and family conditions of Palestinians in Syria cover only the period 2009–2010. They indicate that the Palestinian community in Syria is a young one and that, as of 2009, individuals aged under 15 years comprised 33.1% of the total population, while those aged 65 years and above comprised 4.4%. The 2010 data indicate that the total Palestinian fertility rate in Syria was 2.5 births per woman and the CBR 29.2 births per thousand, while the annual growth rate was 1.6%. Palestinian Infant mortality rate in Syria was 28.2 deaths per thousand live births, while the mortality rate among children aged under 5 years reached 31.5 deaths per thousand live births.²⁶

e. Lebanon

According to UNRWA figures, RPs residing in Lebanon as of 1/2/2019 constituted a total of 533,885 of whom 50.7% live in RCs, compared to 524,340 on 1/1/2018.²⁷

The census in Palestinian RCs and gatherings in Lebanon for 2017, published in June 2019, showed that 36% of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon live in Saida, 25% in the North, 15% in Tyre, 13% in Beirut, 7% in the Chouf region and 4% in the Beqaa valley. About 5% of the Palestinian refugees have another citizenship besides their Palestinian nationality.²⁸

The campaign launched by the Lebanese Ministry of Labor on 6/6/2019 regarding “foreign labor” sparked reaction among Palestinian refugees, who felt that they were targeted by the campaign despite their unique political and legal status, as they did not go to Lebanon in search of job opportunities but due to forced displacement carried out by the Zionist gangs in the 1948 war. The Palestinians protested the decision of the Ministry to prevent Palestinians from working without possessing work permits through demonstrations, sit-ins and strikes, which almost paralyzed life in most RCs. The protests lasted for more than two months and came to an end after Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri promised to review the

Ministry's decision, while emphasizing the importance of the document published by the Lebanese parties in January 2017, which stressed Palestinian refugees' right to work.

On 17/10/2019, popular protests were launched in Lebanon against the political echelon, who had failed on the economic, social and political levels, with widespread corruption affecting state institutions. Following that, Lebanese people suffered more economic deterioration that had even harsher reverberations on the Palestinians.

According to the Population and Housing Census in the Palestinian RCs and Gatherings in Lebanon 2017, people aged under 15 comprised 29% while those aged 65 years and above comprised 6.4%. The average household size of the Palestinian family in Lebanon was four members and families headed by women comprised 17.5%. The fertility rate among Palestinian women in Palestinian RCs and gatherings in Lebanon was 2.7 births per woman.

f. General Comparisons Among Palestinians

Before comparing the major demographic indicators summarized in table 6/2, we would like to point out that, occasionally, some data are used for different years, which may disturb the comparison process. Nonetheless, they remain useful as general indicators, according to the latest available statistics. The following are the main observations:

- The percentage of Palestinians under the age of 15 is highest in GS and lowest in Lebanon.
- The percentage of Palestinians aged 65 and over is highest in Lebanon followed by the territories occupied in 1948 (Israel) and Syria, and it is lowest in GS.
- CBRs are highest in GS, then in Jordan and Syria, followed by WB then Lebanon, and the lowest are in the territories occupied in 1948 (Israel). This rate is consistent with the general trend of births in the past years, where GS remained the area with the highest rate of the CBRs, which leads to demographic pressure on the besieged GS, which has a limited capacity.
- CDR remained high in WB and GS reaching 3.7 deaths per thousand in 2019. This was due to Israeli policies pursued over decades, particularly the killing of Palestinians.

Table 6/2: Selected Demographic Indicators of Palestinians by Residence²⁹

Indicator	WB 2019	GS 2019	WB & GS 2019	Israel 2018	Jordan 2011	Syria (2009–2010)	Lebanon 2017
% of individuals under 15 years	36.3	41.4	38.3	32.8 males 31.8 females	39.9	33.1	29
% of individuals 65 years and over	3.6	2.8	3.3	4.4 males 5.3 females	4.3	4.4	6.4
Sex ratio (males per 100 females)	104	102.4	103.2	102.7 (2015)	–	100.4	102
CBR (births per 1,000 population)	27.7	34	30.2	23.3	29.2 (2010)	29.2	25.8 (2010)
CDR (deaths per 1,000 population)	3.9	3.5	3.7	2.8	–	2.8 (2006)	–
Total fertility rate (births per woman)	3.7 (2011–2013)	4.5 (2011–2013)	4.1 (2011–2013)	3.04	3.3 (2010)	2.5	2.7
Average household size (individuals per house)	4.8 (2017)	5.6 (2017)	5.1 (2017)	4.5	5.1	4.1 (2010)	4

3. Palestinian Refugees

The issue of Palestinian refugees remains of crucial importance, especially regarding the right of return. The number of Palestinian refugees reached nearly 8.7 million at the end of 2018, representing around two thirds of the Palestinian population worldwide (66.9%).³⁰ It should be noted here that the estimated number of Palestinian refugees differs from UNRWA's estimates because the Agency limits the number of refugees in statistics to those registered in its five areas of operation: WB, GS, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

Most Palestinian refugees live outside historic Palestine, where the largest group of refugees were displaced due to the 1948 *Nakbah*. According to estimates by BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights, the total refugee population is about 6.7 million, of whom 5.55 million are registered

with UNRWA. The second largest group of refugees was the result of the 1967 *Naksah*, and their number is estimated at 1.237 million. About 42.4% of refugees (2,603,174 refugees) registered with UNRWA reside in WB and GS, in addition to about 415 thousand internally displaced persons (IDPs) inside the Green Line, as of 2019.³¹ The largest refugee population outside historic Palestine is in Jordan with 2,376,481 refugees as of 2019.³²

Table 7/2: Palestinian Refugees and IDPs by Group at the End of 2018³³

	Population	Percentage (%)
UNRWA registered 1948 refugees	5,545,540	63.7
Non-registered 1948 refugees	1,161,812	13.3
1967 refugees	1,237,462	14.2
IDPs in 1948 territories	415,876	4.8
IDPs in 1967 territories	344,599	4
Total	8,705,289	100

Refugee numbers remain estimated figures, especially when it comes to Palestinians abroad, outside UNRWA's operation areas, where there are no official statistics, nor accurate knowledge of growth rates. There is also the difficulty of resolving problems of replication due to changes in country of residence or citizenship, as is the case with the Palestinians of Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, and Palestinians in historic Palestine residing abroad.

Table 8/2 shows that the numbers registered with UNRWA are different from the total number of refugees and IDPs, while statistics by the Agency have been limited to registered refugees in its five areas of operation: WB, GS, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. Thus, these statistics do not accurately reflect the refugee population worldwide as they exclude many refugees residing outside UNRWA's operation areas, and even do not include a lot of those residing in its areas of operations, because they did not need to register with the Agency and benefit from its services. Also, UNRWA's figures exclude the Palestinian refugees who took refuge after the 1967 war, when around 330 thousand Palestinians were displaced from their land. Besides, there are refugees who had to flee Palestine under different circumstances

(other than war) and were prevented from returning. As a result, UNRWA statistics are incomplete and should not be dealt with as factual numbers reflecting the reality of the refugee population in 1948 (except in Syria and Lebanon to some extent). These numbers only reflect those who have registered with UNRWA, and can receive its aid and services, rather than all Palestinian refugees.

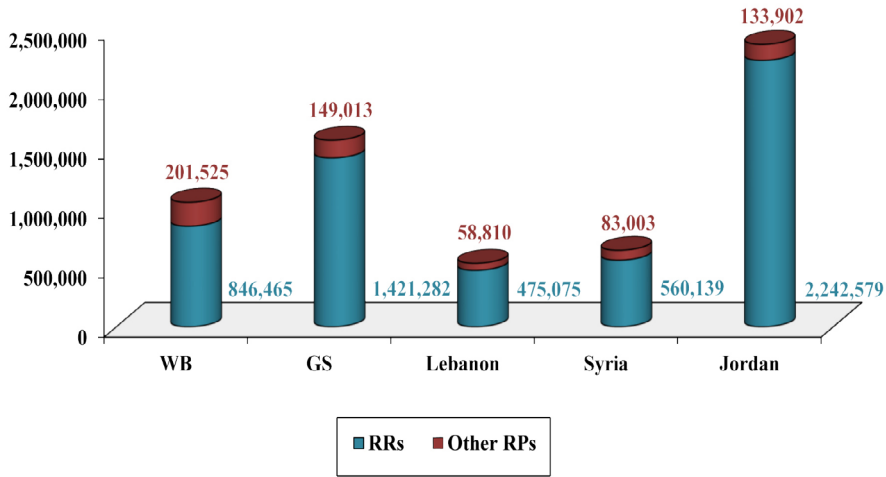
Remarkably, the RPCs (the RPs registered in UNRWA's 58 RCs) are less than a third of the total RPs, based on UNRWA figures. Data shows that the highest percentage of RPCs is in Lebanon reaching 50.7% of RPs, then the GS comprising 37.8% of RPs.

In 2013, UNRWA provided updated statistics regarding the number of refugees in the areas of its operation where recent digitization of UNRWA's registration records has enabled it "to present more detailed beneficiary statistics." UNRWA classified those registered with it into two categories, labeling them "Registered Refugees (RRs)" and "Other RPs." The latter category included those eligible to receive the Agency's services according to the UNRWA website. It is likely that these include beneficiaries who do not qualify for UNRWA's definition of the Palestinian refugee, which is a limited definition that does not cover all categories of refugees.

**Table 8/2: UNRWA-RPs According to Their Area of Operation
as of 1/2/2019³⁴**

	WB	GS	Jordan	Syria	Lebanon	Total
RRs	846,465	1,421,282	2,242,579	560,139	475,075	5,545,540
Other RPs	201,525	149,013	133,902	83,003	58,810	626,253
Total RPs	1,047,990	1,570,295	2,376,481	643,142	533,885	6,171,793
Increase in RPs over the past year	2.5	3.6	2.1	1.9	1.8	2.5
Official camps	19	8	10	9	12	58
RPCs	256,758	593,990	412,054	194,993	270,614	1,728,409
RPCs as % of RPs	24.5	37.8	17.3	30.3	50.7	28

UNRWA's Figures as of 1/2/2019



UNRWA-Total RPs by Area as of 1/2/2019

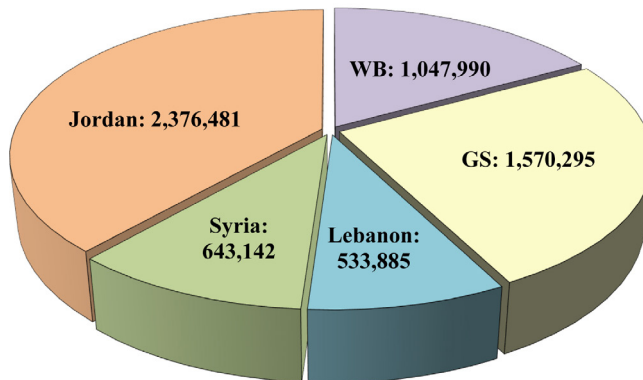


Table 9/2 indicate that the UNRWA refugee communities, like the Palestinians in general, are young, where 30.8% of refugees registered with the Agency are children under the age of 18, with highest rate in the GS (42.5%) and lowest in Lebanon (22.7%).

The 2018 data shows that fertility rates among refugees in WB and GS are the highest among UNRWA's five operation areas (3.6 births per woman), as is the case for the average family size in WB and GS (5.6 individuals per household). The dependency ratio (number of dependent persons per 100 individuals of working age, 15–64 years) among registered refugees is significantly high in the

GS (91.2) mainly due to the high percentage of people aged under 15, which may be challenging in light of the high unemployment and deteriorating economic conditions.

Table 9/2: Selected Demographic Indicators of Palestinians by Residence 2018³⁵

Indicator	GS	WB	Jordan	Syria	Lebanon	Total
% of children less than 18 years	42.5	28.4	26.3	29.2	22.7	30.8
Average household size (individual per house)	5.6	5.6	5.2	4.8	4.7	5.3
Fertility rate	3.6	3.6	3.2	2.7	2.7	3.2
Dependency ratio	91.2	73.1	52.3	63.4	57.9	65.6

The PCBS data in mid-2019³⁶ indicated that refugees in WB and GS are more exposed to unemployment than others, as the unemployment rate among refugees (aged 15 years and over) reached 40% compared to 24% among non-refugees. A significant difference was observed in the unemployment rate between refugees in the WB and GS, which was at 19% in the former compared to 54% in the latter.³⁷ In Lebanon, the unemployment rate among Palestinian refugees (15 years and over) was 55% of labor force, while poverty was above 65%, further exacerbated by the recent deterioration of the economic situation in Lebanon at the end of 2019 (according to a study conducted by the American University of Beirut in 2015).³⁸ The poverty rate among Palestinian refugees living in RCs in WB and GS was 45.4%, 29.4% in the cities and 18.7% in the countryside.³⁹

Regarding education, figures showed that refugees are better educated than non-refugees in WB and GS, where the illiteracy rate was 2.5% among refugees (aged 15 years and over) compared to 3% among non-refugees, while holders of a bachelor's degree and above comprise 16% for refugees and 14% for non-refugees.⁴⁰

4. Demographic Growth Trends

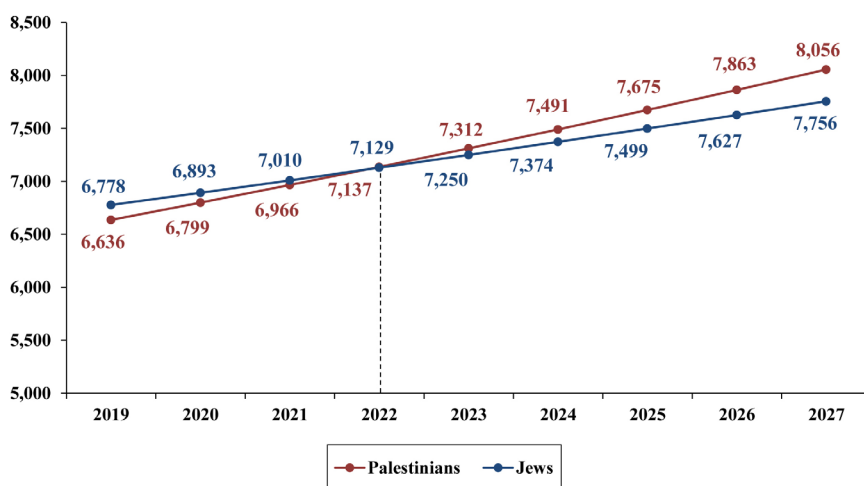
Despite the relative decline in the rate of natural population growth among the Palestinian population, the rate remains high compared to other populations including the Israelis. Based on PCBS estimates, Palestinians in historic Palestine reached 6.64 million at the end of 2019, while Jews reached 6.78 million according

to Israel's CBS estimates. Based on annual growth rates, Palestinians are expected to outnumber Jews in historic Palestine in 2022, 7.14 million Palestinians and 7.13 million Jews, with the trend expected to continue over the coming years.

Table 10/2: Estimated Population Count of Palestinians and Jews in Historic Palestine 2019–2027 (thousands)⁴¹

Year	Palestinians in historic Palestine	Jews
2019	6,636	6,778
2020	6,799	6,893
2021	6,966	7,010
2022	7,137	7,129
2023	7,312	7,250
2024	7,491	7,374
2025	7,675	7,499
2026	7,863	7,627
2027	8,056	7,756

Estimated Population Count of Palestinians and Jews in Historic Palestine 2019–2027 (thousands)



5. Palestinians Outside Palestine and the Right of Return

The Palestinian people continued to resist all attempts to liquidate the Palestine issue, whether through the Deal of the Century or other plans, and events continued within and outside Palestine to reiterate the Palestinians' right to land and holy sites, especially the right of return, in addition to confronting the attempts to liquidate the UNRWA and terminate its mandate. Palestinians outside Palestine, which constituted half of the Palestinian population in 2018–2019, continued to hold events and activities as reminders of their inalienable historical rights to Palestine, reminding younger generations of the importance of clinging to their lands and right of return.

Under the slogan “70 Years on...and We Shall Return,” the Palestinians in Europe Conference held its 16th annual conference on 29/4/2018 in the Italian city Milan; and on 27/4/2019, the 17th annual conference was held in Copenhagen, Denmark under the slogan “With Unity and Steadfastness, We Shall Return.” Thousands of Palestinians and Arabs participated in the two events alongside delegations from across Europe and further afield. The events, held to commemorate the *Nakbah*, were also attended by prominent Palestinian figures from the occupied land and abroad, along with European, Muslim and Arab public figures, and delegations representing pro-Palestine institutions and sectors. The two events were organized by the Palestinians in Europe Conference and the Palestinian Return Centre (PRC), in cooperation with Palestinian-European institutions.⁴²

In January 2018, the Popular Conference for Palestinians Abroad (PCPA) launched a Twitter campaign under the theme “Jerusalem Electronic Day” with hashtag “Jerusalem brings us together.” The campaign was meant to support occupied Jerusalem and to emphasize rejection of US President Donald Trump's decision recognizing the city as the capital of Israel. The campaign called for a continued Arab, Islamic and international movement in support of Jerusalem and Palestine.⁴³

On 14/3/2018, the PCPA launched popular and national events marking the 70th anniversary of the *Nakbah* under the slogan “We Shall Return.” The events were launched in collaboration with different Palestinian foundations to support the Palestine issue together, activate the role of Palestinians abroad and shed light on the suffering of Palestinian refugees in RCs.⁴⁴ In this context, the PCPA, in

collaboration with the Turkish Association for Solidarity with Palestine (*Filistin Dayanışma Derneği*—FİDDER), organized a literary and artistic festival in Istanbul in April 2018.⁴⁵ In the same month they called for organizing demonstrations on Fridays in places of Palestinian presence and wherever possible, in support of the Marches of Return in Gaza.⁴⁶

The PCPA conducted visits to pave the way for new international relations and mobilize efforts in support of the Palestine issue, including a visit to India in April 2018 and another to Turkey in the same month and on 19/12/2018. The PCPA organized many events related to Jerusalem, refugees, the right of return, the Jewish Nation-State Law, the situation in the GS, and normalization.⁴⁷

Latin American and Caribbean countries remain supportive of Palestinian rights, and the Palestinians there constitute a human and economic bloc of significant weight. Throughout 13–16/6/2019, prominent leaders of the communities there called for holding the first constituent conference in Latin America and the Caribbean, in San Salvador in El Salvador, where they announced the establishment of the Palestinian Union of Latin America (*Unión Palestina de América Latina*—UPAL) to represent the Palestinian communities. This Union presented a balanced national discourse commensurate with the political environment there, as it emphasized national unity, the rejection of division, and the recognition of the PLO as a sole legal representative, while holding on to Palestinian fundamentals. UPAL demanded an exit from the Oslo Accords, reiterated the right of return and support for resistance, based on international law.⁴⁸

Second: Economic Indicators in WB and GS

1. GDP in PA Territories (WB and GS)

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is used to measure economic development locally, regionally and internationally, a widespread indicator that reflects overall economic activity and is expressed in real value after excluding price changes. Because of the importance of this indicator, countries around the world are keen to measure it and make its data available for researchers and decision makers, and the PCBS regularly issues GDP data, including current development and future forecasts.

a. GDP Growth

According to PCBS, there was a discrepancy in GDP growth during 2013–2018. While the growth rate fell to 0.2% in 2014 due to the Israeli war, it increased over 2015–2017, at an average of 4.7%, then fell again in 2018 to 1.2% with the sharp deterioration in the GS economy and the growth of the WB economy at a slower pace.

Developments on the global and regional levels negatively affected the performance of the local economy in light of a resurgence of the slowdown in various regions of the world, including developed and industrial countries.⁴⁹

In 2019, annual growth rate reached 4.1% in the first quarter (Q1) followed by a decline in the second quarter (Q2) to 2.3%, in light of the clearance revenue crisis and diminishing grants, then a sharper decline to about 0.6% in the third quarter (Q3), when demand was affected by the prevailing financial crises. The annual growth rate in the fourth quarter (Q4) also decreased, reaching 0.9%, hence annual growth rate for 2019 reached 1.2%.⁵⁰

Thus, the average growth for 2018–2019 remained low and stood at 1.2%, reflecting the repercussions of Israeli policies preventing Palestinians from using their resources and taking independent decisions in addition to the reverberations of the Palestinian internal division.

As for 2020, we tend to adopt forecasts for the baseline scenario issued jointly by the Palestine Monetary Authority (PMA) and PCBS expecting a GDP growth of 2.4%. For 2021, we expect growth of 3.9%, which is within the overall trend trajectory of 2013–2020 and reflects the circumstances in the PA territories over this period. Thus, average growth of 2020–2021 is anticipated to be 3.15%, which will barely cover average population growth.

Table 11/2: GDP in PA Territories 2013–2021 at Constant Prices (\$ million)⁵¹

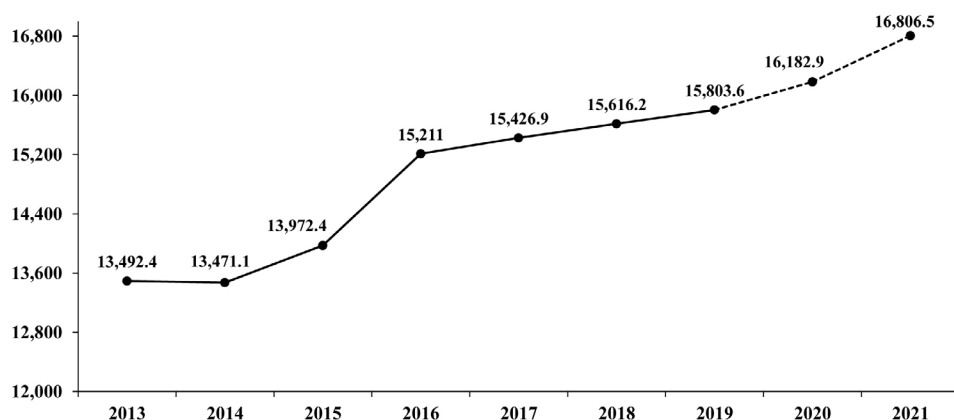
	Actual							Forecasts	
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021*
GDP	13,492.4	13,471.1	13,972.4	15,211	15,426.9	15,616.2	15,803.6	16,182.9	16,806.5
Annual growth rate (%)	+4.7	−0.2	+3.7	+8.9	+1.4	+1.2	+1.2	+2.4	+3.9

* Based on the trend trajectory 2013–2020 at 2.5%.

Note: The data excludes those parts of Jerusalem, which were annexed by Israel in 1967.

The base year is 2015. This will be applied to all the following tables in this chapter.

GDP in PA Territories 2013–2021 at Constant Prices (\$ million)



b. GDP Growth in WB and GS

There was significant variation in GDP growth rates between WB and GS in 2018 and 2019. In GS, GDP went down by 3.5% in 2018 and up by 1.6% in 2019, compared with growth in WB by 2.3% and 1.1% for 2018 and 2019 respectively. As for share in GDP by region, there is obvious deterioration in the GS share since 2014, declining from 24.6% in 2013 to 18.1% for 2018–2019, indicating weak GDP growth in the GS. Thus, there is an urgent need to increase Palestinian GDP growth. In return, the WB share was 81.9% of total GDP in 2019, although its share of the population is 60% compared to 40% in the GS.

Table 12/2: GDP in WB and GS 2013–2019 at Constant Prices (\$ million)⁵²

Year	WB		GS		WB & GS	
	GDP	Percentage (%)	GDP	Percentage (%)	GDP	Percentage (%)
2013	10,171.9	75.4	3,320.5	24.6	13,492.4	100
2014	10,610.4	78.8	2,860.7	21.2	13,471.1	100
2015	11,072.3	79.2	2,900.1	20.8	13,972.4	100
2016	12,046.1	79.2	3,164.9	20.8	15,211	100
2017	12,505.5	81.1	2,921.4	18.9	15,426.9	100
2018	12,797.3	81.9	2,818.9	18.1	15,616.2	100
2019*	12,938.6	81.9	2,865	18.1	15,803.6	100

* There are no detailed data for each of the WB and GS; thus, figures were estimated based on available data, which took into consideration the GDP of the first three quarters and Palestinian GDP growth rate.

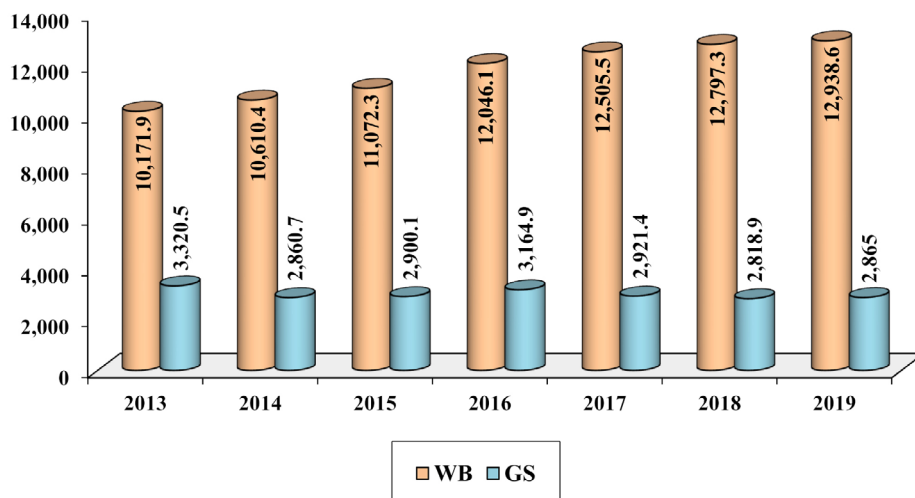
GDP in WB and GS 2013–2019 at Constant Prices (\$ million)

Table 13/2: GDP Growth in WB and GS 2013–2019
at Constant Prices (\$ million)⁵³

		Actual						Estimates
		2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019*
WB	GDP	10,171.9	10,610.4	11,072.3	12,046.1	12,505.5	12,797.3	12,938.6
	Average annual growth or deterioration (%)	+3.7	+4.3	+4.4	+8.8	+3.8	+2.3	+1.1
GS	GDP	3,320.5	2,860.7	2,900.1	3,164.9	2,921.4	2,818.9	2,865
	Average annual growth or deterioration (%)	+8.9	−13.8	+1.4	+9.1	−7.7	−3.5	+1.6

* There are no detailed data for each of the WB and GS; thus, figures were estimated based on available data, which took into consideration the GDP of the first three quarters, the Palestinian GDP growth rate and population count.

c. GDP in PA Territories and Israel

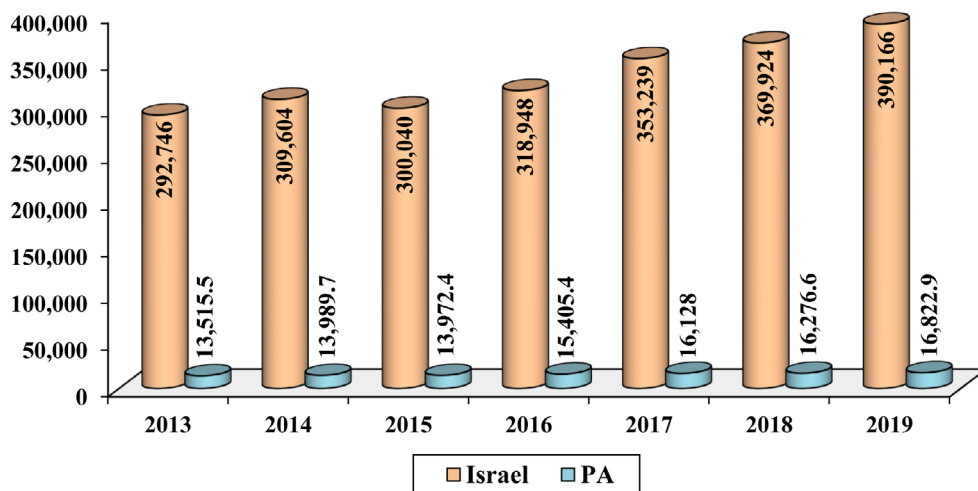
Examining the Israeli GDP at current prices, which reached \$369.924 billion in 2018, and \$390.166 billion based on the estimates of the first three quarters of 2019, we note that Israeli GDP is 23 times the size of its Palestinian counterpart (2,273% and 2,319% for 2018 and 2019 respectively). This is a clear indication of the nature of the Israeli occupation and its impact on the Palestinian economy, the extent to which it exploits Palestinian resources, and prevents Palestinians from realizing the free and efficient use of their energies and potentials.

Table 14/2: GDP in PA Territories and Israel 2013–2019
at Current Prices (\$ million)⁵⁴

Year	PA	Israel	% Palestinian GDP to Israeli GDP
2013	13,515.5	292,746	4.6
2014	13,989.7	309,604	4.5
2015	13,972.4	300,040	4.7
2016	15,405.4	318,948	4.8
2017	16,128	353,239	4.6
2018	16,276.6	369,924	4.4
2019*	16,822.9	390,166	4.3

* Based on estimates of the first three quarters of 2019.

GDP in PA Territories and Israel 2013–2019 at Current Prices (\$ million)



2. GDP per Capita in PA Territories

GDP per capita reflects the average per capita share of achieved or anticipated GDP and is directly related to the GDP growth and inversely related to the population growth. The GDP per capita is an important measure of real per capita

income but, despite its importance, it does not show the reality of the differences of individual incomes, and the large gap between the rich and the poor as well as between governorates.

a. Average Growth of GDP per Capita

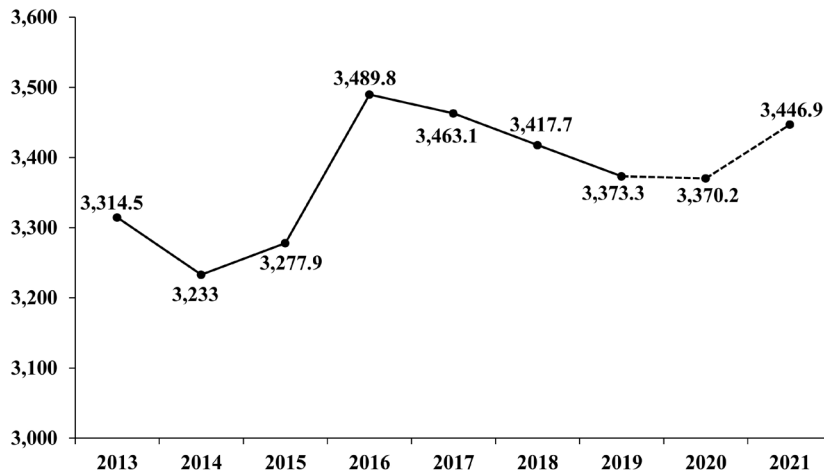
The GDP per capita in the PA territories reached \$3,373 in 2019 compared to \$3,418 in 2018. Table 15/2 shows that the GDP per capita decreased to 1.3% for 2018 and 2019 due to weak overall growth and high population growth. Comparing per capita income between the WB and GS shows that the disparity is large and the former is higher despite its limited growth during the same period, while GS witnessed a decline where the GS per capita income represented 46.3% and 29.6% of that of WB for the years 2013 and 2019 respectively. These differences are mainly due to the blockade and the ongoing internal division as well as an absence of specific policies to help maintain production in this situation (see table 16/2).

Forecasts for 2020 anticipated negative growth by around 0.1%, whereas in 2021, it is anticipated to be 2.3%, i.e., an average of 1.1% based on the overall trend trajectory. A remarkable deterioration of growth in GS is expected along with a relative improvement in WB, indicating that the gap in GDP per capita between the two regions will continue to widen.

Table 15/2: GDP per Capita in PA Territories 2013–2021
at Constant Prices (\$) ⁵⁵

	Actual							Forecasts	
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021*
GDP per capita	3,314.5	3,233	3,277.9	3,489.8	3,463.1	3,417.7	3,373.3	3,370.2	3,446.9
Average annual growth or deterioration (%)	+2.2	-2.5	+1.4	+6.5	-0.8	-1.3	-1.3	-0.1	+2.3

* The year 2021 was calculated based on the 2013–2020 trend trajectory, which is 0.5%.

GDP per Capita in PA Territories 2013–2021 at Constant Prices (\$)**b. GDP per capita in WB and GS**

The GDP per capita was high in WB relative to GS in 2018, amounting to \$4,854 versus \$1,458 in GS, with a difference in their respective growth rates relative to the previous year. According to estimates, there was a decrease in the GDP per capita in WB in 2019 to \$4,812 or 0.9% from 2018, and a decrease to \$1,439 in GS by 1.3% (see table 16/2).

The average per capita income in GS is currently a third of that of WB, knowing that it was 85% on average over 1994–2000.⁵⁶ This was the direct result of the disparity in output and financial inflows between the two regions, in addition to the Israeli blockade of GS, and Egypt's closure of the border with GS most of the year. This deterioration on the level of the WB and GS was partially compensated for by the fact that the per capita real gross domestic income (per capita real GDI) achieved partial improvement in the following years reaching \$3,784.5 in 2018.⁵⁷

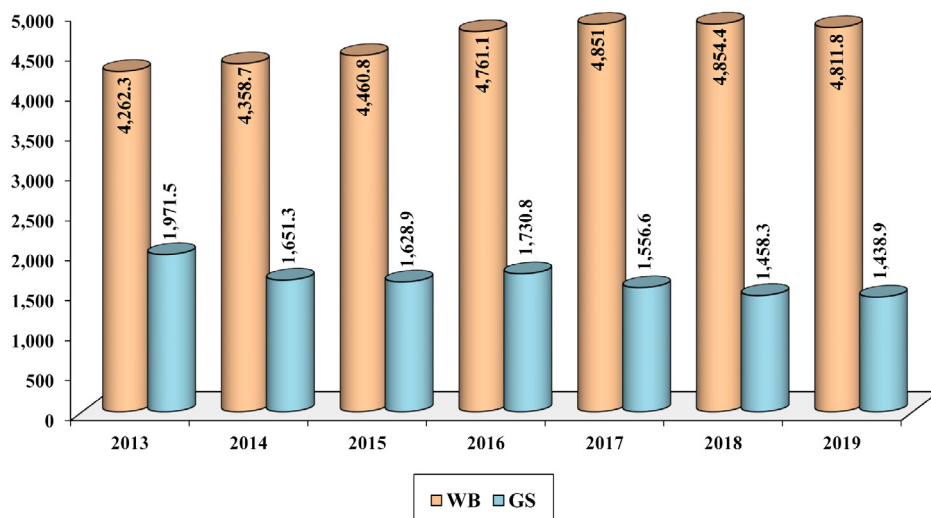
The above suggests giving greater attention to the causes of this gap, identifying how wealth is concentrated and distributed, and highlighting the need to adopt appropriate economic policies to improve output and performance to correct the current situation.

**Table 16/2: GDP per Capita in WB and GS 2013–2019
at Constant Prices (\$) ⁵⁸**

		Actual						Estimates
		2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
WB	GDP per capita	4,262.3	4,358.7	4,460.8	4,761.1	4,851	4,854.4	4,811.8
	Average annual growth or deterioration (%)	+1.6	+2.3	+2.3	+6.7	+1.9	+0.1	−0.9
GS	GDP per capita	1,971.5	1,651.3	1,628.9	1,730.8	1,556.6	1,458.3	1,438.9
	Average annual growth or deterioration (%)	−4.9	−16.2	−1.4	+6.3	−10.1	−6.3	−1.3

Note: There are no detailed data concerning WB and GS in 2019; thus, figures were estimated based on available data, while taking into consideration the GDP per capita for the first three quarters, average Palestinian growth and population count.

GDP per Capita in WB and GS 2013–2019 at Constant Prices (\$)



c. Comparison of GDP per Capita Between PA Territories and Israel

There is a significant gap between GDP per capita in PA territories and Israel. At current prices, it was \$3,562 and \$3,602 in the PA territories in 2018 and 2019 respectively, while in Israel (at current prices) it was \$41,654 and \$43,218 for the same period. This means the latter was 12 times higher than the former. This

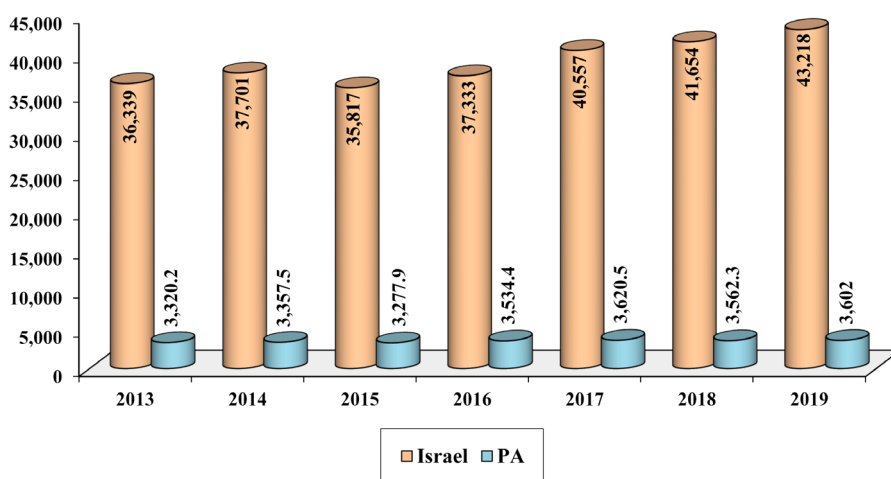
is primarily due to the Israeli occupation and its policies that prevent the normal growth of the Palestinian economy, leading to a decline in Palestinian GDP. This has happened at a time when Palestinians experienced higher rates of population growth than the Israeli side and worked in harsh conditions under occupation, which had a negative impact on wages, living standards, and savings. Furthermore, the huge gap between the two sides has allowed Israeli individuals to enjoy a far higher standard of living than Palestinians.

Table 17/2: GDP per Capita in PA Territories and Israel 2013–2019
at Current Prices (\$) ⁵⁹

Year	PA	Israel	% Palestinian GDP per capita of Israeli GDP per capita
2013	3,320.2	36,339	9.1
2014	3,357.5	37,701	8.9
2015	3,277.9	35,817	9.2
2016	3,534.4	37,333	9.5
2017	3,620.5	40,557	8.9
2018	3,562.3	41,654	8.6
2019*	3,602	43,218	8.3

* Based on estimates for the first three quarters of 2019.

GDP per Capita in PA Territories and Israel 2013–2019
at Current Prices (\$)



3. Public Debt

Public debt is an exceptional source of public revenue meant for specific purposes, which enable the debtor to pay the debt and its interest on specific dates. It is also important as it relates to social justice and to the present and future standard of living, especially when the debt accumulates and its arrears become due, as happened after the Trump administration halted its annual financial aid and Israel failed to transfer clearance revenues regularly. Public debt is the result of the PA's fiscal policy and the current budget deficit alongside the fragile and unsustainable financial situation. Its increase is due to the growth of uncontrolled public spending, the institutional expansion of the PA in addition to Israel's control of local resources and clearance revenues. Government borrowing is subject to the Public Debt Law No. 24 of 2005 where existing public debt stock may not exceed 40% of GDP.⁶⁰

The PA has always borrowed (especially locally) to cover its public budget deficit rather than funding productive or development projects. As the deficit gap continues, debt is perpetuated, pay obligations or to perform much-needed services.

Table 18/2: PA Government Public Debt 2013–2021 (\$ million)⁶¹

	Actual							Forecasts*	
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Domestic debt	1,268	1,128	1,467	1,440	1,501	1,338	1,577	1,586	1,635
External debt	1,109	1,089	1,071	1,044	1,042	1,032	1,218	1,113	1,119
Total public debt	2,377	2,217	2,538	2,484	2,543	2,370	2,795	2,698	2,754
Gross public debt growth rate	–4.3	–6.7	+14.5	–2.1	+2.4	–6.8	+17.9	–3.5	+2.1
GDP at current prices	13,515.5	13,989.7	13,972.4	15,405.4	16,128	16,276.6	16,822.9	17,537	18,132
Total public debt as % of GDP	17.6	15.8	18.2	16.1	15.8	14.6	16.6	15.4	15.2

* Based on the trend trajectory for 2013–2019.

PA Government Public Debt 2013–2021 (\$ million)

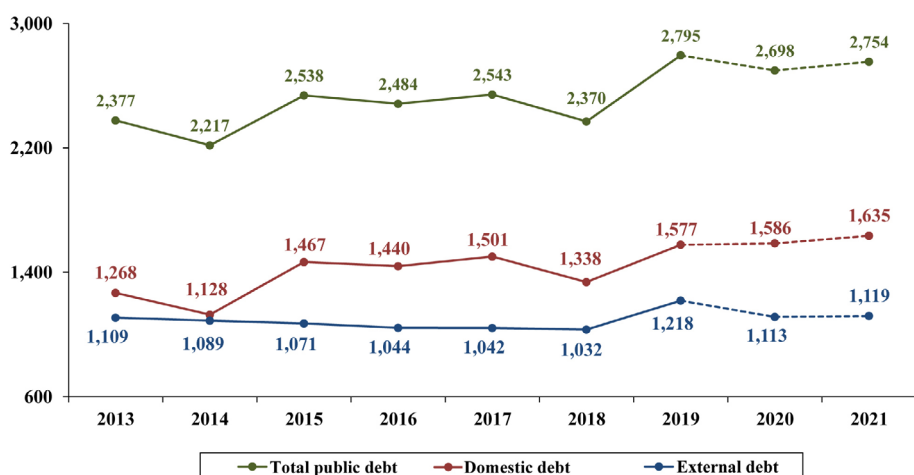


Table 18/2 shows that domestic debt grew in 2019 at a rate of 17.9% compared to the previous year, and its share of total public debt increased from 53.3% in 2013 to 56.4% in 2019 due to the ease of obtaining it with simple lending procedures, justified by the need to activate lending institutions and its supposedly positive impact on the Palestinian economy.

External debt has remained relatively stable over the period under examination with fluctuating debt-to-GDP ratio, while total debt increased by 17.9% in 2019 compared to the previous year, and its ratio to GDP remained stable with some fluctuation. Notably, the changes in debt are partially related to changes in the dollar exchange rate against the shekel; therefore, the value of debt varies from time to time according to the currency used.⁶²

As the PA has sought to hide the risks of public debt, it introduced a new term “debt arrears,” a category of domestic debt with deferred repayment aiming to show that debt is within acceptable limits, due to the government’s influence, despite the damage caused by this step. These arrears are distributed and diversified, but their net accumulated value at the end of Q4 2019 amounted to \$3,900 million, down by 5% compared to the end of Q3 2019, and by 14% compared to the end of Q4 2018.⁶³ This high percentage of debt arrears represents 23.1% of GDP on an annual basis, and when added to the public debt, the total debt becomes \$6,695 billion, 39.8% of GDP, close to the permissible percentage amounting to 40% only. Ultimately, the Palestinian net debt per capita is approximately \$1,329.

The 2019, government debt interest reached \$52.6 million (187.9 million shekels), of which \$46.9 million (167.5 million shekels) were paid. This interest has placed additional burdens on the public treasury and drain its resources, which requires limiting them as much as possible.⁶⁴

Therefore, the total debt will decline by 3.5% in 2020, then increase by 2.1% in 2021 with an average of 0.7%, which is an indicator of the fluctuation in the rise of debt and the severity of the public debt crisis. This is because the debt increased sharply in 2019, and in 2021 it is expected to increase, according to the overall trend trajectory.

4. The PA's General Budget

The general budget is part of the government's sovereign financial responsibility, which include the collection of funds under certain legislation. This collection enables the competent authority to carry out its activities. The Ministry of Finance and Planning strives, by virtue of its jurisdiction, to provide an annual budget consistent with available resources and taking into account political changes and internal developments, while striving to increase revenue.⁶⁵ However, the PA did not issue the 2019 budget and instead issued an emergency budget.

Table 19/2 shows that total net revenues, which include local, clearance and tax revenues, decreased by 5.2% in 2018 due to the decline in clearance funds. Also, total net revenue continued to deteriorate in 2019 to about 5.3% due to the continued decrease in clearance and local revenues.

Current expenditures include wages and salaries as well as non-wages the majority of which are transfer expenditures as social and operational allocations to conduct business, net loans deducted by Israel in exchange for various services, and other allocations such as taxes and revenues which are due for local government bodies.

Current expenditures increased by 8% in 2019 causing a large deficit in the general economic balance. Yet, this deficit is expected to follow a declining trend in 2020–2021 compared to 2019, since the increase in net public revenues is expected to be higher than the increase in total current expenditures, part of which is due to the decrease in salaries of GS employees, large numbers of whom were forced to retire while the salaries of others were halted.

The deficit of the overall balance, excluding grants and foreign aid, as a result of adding development expenditures spent on new facilities or the development of

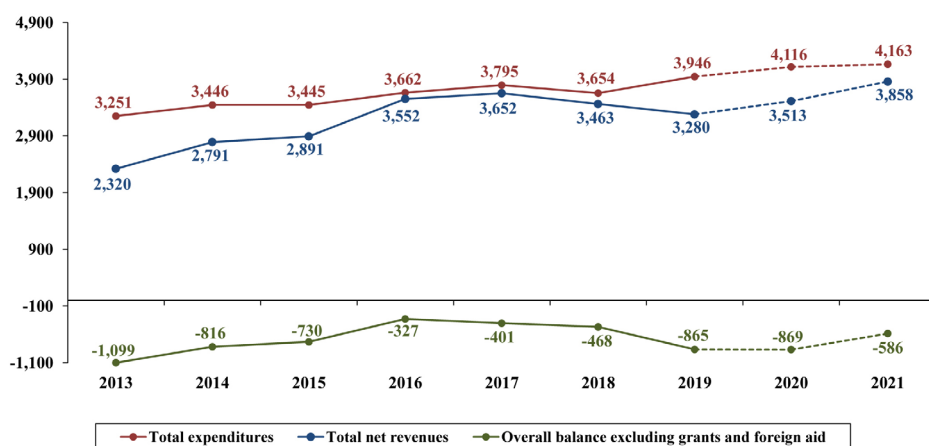
existing facilities, increased over 2018–2019 to around \$865 million in 2019, which was mostly covered by grants and foreign aid. After grants and foreign aid were delivered, the deficit decreased to around \$377 million, which is usually covered by local bank financing such as borrowing or delaying the payment of arrears or trying to reschedule the dues of some external debts. However, these policies, in dealing with the public budget deficit, have a negative impact on production and economic growth. Remarkably, grants and foreign aid remain of great importance whether in converting the budget deficit to a surplus in many years or in reducing the deficit to the lowest possible level.

Table 19/2: PA Fiscal Operations 2013–2021 Cash Basis (\$ million)⁶⁶

	Actual							Forecasts*	
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Total net revenues	2,320	2,791	2,891	3,552	3,652	3,463	3,280	3,513	3,858
Domestic revenues	852	875	913	1,317	1,222	1,346	1,214		
Clearance revenues	1,691	2,054	2,047	2,332	2,483	2,255	2,203		
Tax returns	–223	–138	–69	–97	–53	–138	–138		
Total expenditures	3,251	3,446	3,445	3,662	3,795	3,654	3,946	4,116	4,163
Salaries and wages	1,814	1,900	1,760	1,927	1,954	1,658	1,862		
Non-wage expenditure	1,226	1,259	1,352	1,421	1,533	1,682	1,693		
Net lending	211	287	301	270	266	268	319		
Earmarked payments	0	0	32	44	42	46	73		
Current balance	–931	–655	–554	–110	–143	–191	–666	–603	–305
Development expenditures	168	161	176	217	258	277	199	266	281
Overall balance excluding grants and foreign aid (deficit)	–1,099	–816	–730	–327	–401	–468	–865	–869	–586
Grants and aid	1,358	1,230	797	766	720	664	488	444.4	372.4
Overall balance including grants and foreign aid	259	414	67	439	319	196	–377	–425	–214

* Based on the trend trajectory for 2013–2019.

PA Fiscal Operations 2013–2021 Cash Basis (\$ million)



Thus, there is a need to benefit from the experiences of others in facing the challenges of the budget deficit, the decrease in external support and the increase in government debt. Undertaking fundamental reforms is a major factor in dealing with the high public debt and inefficient government services, including the adoption of policies to enhance fiscal transparency and predictability,⁶⁷ especially as the government's finances face risks and uncertainties amidst reliance on foreign aid and grants, as well as on local borrowing. Notably, there is need more than ever to prepare an exceptional emergency budget, which takes into account the developments of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) and its health, financial and economic reverberations.

5. Work, Unemployment and Poverty

Labor force is one of the economic resources which engage in productive work. It is characterized by the management capabilities; planning and taking executive decisions.

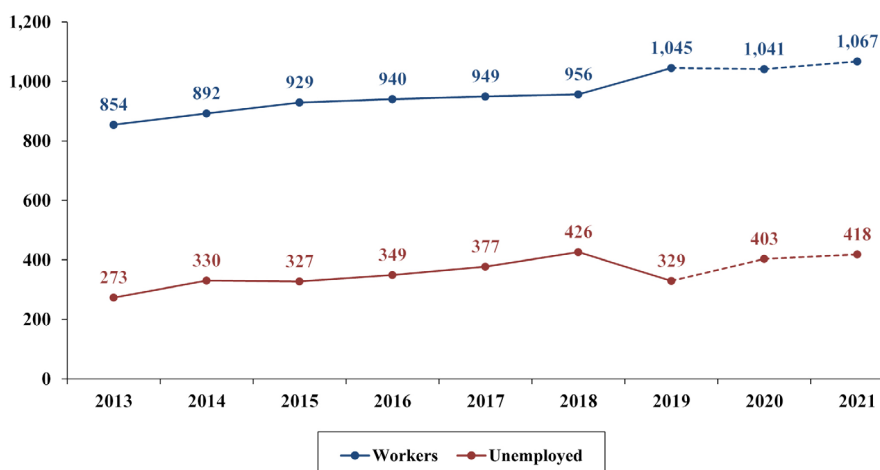
The Palestinian territories have a large manpower resources due to high population growth which totaled 5.039 million in 2019 of whom 3.02 million reside in WB and 2.019 million in GS.⁶⁸

Table 20/2: Distribution of Palestinians Aged 15 Years and Above in WB and GS by Labor Force and Unemployment 2013–2021 (thousands)⁶⁹

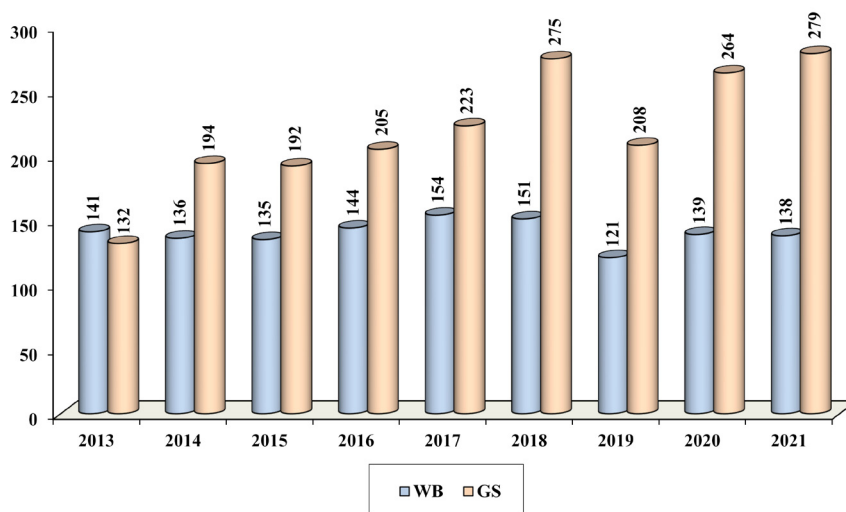
		Actual							Forecasts*	
		2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
WB	Labor force	732	778	788	797	824	853	886	901	924
	Workers	591	642	653	653	670	702	765	762	786
	Unemployed	141	136	135	144	154	151	121	139	138
	% of unemployment	19.3	17.5	17.1	18.1	18.7	17.7	13.7	15.4	15
GS	Labor force	395	444	468	492	502	529	488	543	560
	Workers	263	250	276	287	279	254	280	279	281
	Unemployed	132	194	192	205	223	275	208	264	279
	% of unemployment	33.4	43.7	41	41.7	44.4	52	42.7	48.7	49.9
WB & GS	Labor force	1,127	1,222	1,256	1,289	1,326	1,382	1,374	1,444	1,484
	Workers	854	892	929	940	949	956	1,045	1,041	1,067
	Unemployed	273	330	327	349	377	426	329	403	418
	% of unemployment	24.2	27	26	27.1	28.4	30.8	24	27.9	28.1
Workers in Israel		99.1	101.8	112.3	116.8	122	127	133	139	145
Workers in settlements		–	–	22.4	20.8	21	22	23	–	–

* Based on the trend trajectory for 2013–2019.

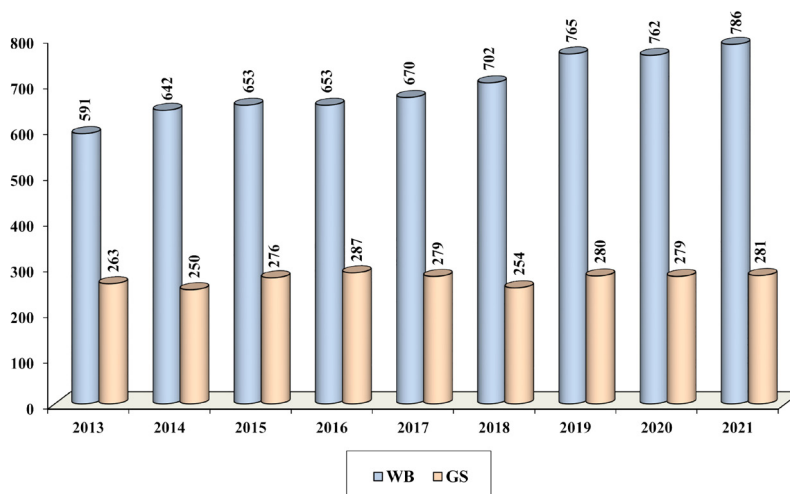
Distribution of Palestinians Aged 15 years and Above in WB and GS by Labor Force and Unemployment 2013–2021 (thousands)



Unemployed Palestinians in WB and GS 2013–2021 (thousands)



Palestinians Workers in WB and GS 2013–2021 (thousands)



The labor force and its distribution in Palestine witnessed structural changes in 2019 as a result of adopting the labor underutilization definition, which makes the number of the unemployed less. However, it is important to stress that discouraged workers should not be ignored as these are not included among the unemployed. Accordingly, the size of the labor force decreased in 2019 compared to 2018, and the number of unemployed declined sharply.

Workers suffer in many forms, as some work part-time or intermittently, and many work at low wages or are not paid at all. About 40 thousand people, one third of whom are youths, enter the labor market annually, while the Palestinian labor market absorbs about 8 thousand at most.⁷⁰ The number of Palestinians working in Israel and the settlements in 2019 reached about 133 thousand, including 23 thousand in settlements (see table 20/2).

Child labor in WB and GS is high, reaching 3% (5% in WB and 1% in GS), the figures revealing significant differences between both regions.⁷¹ Notably, this category has lost its right to a minimum basic education and remains unskilled, less productive and subject to onerous tasks, long working hours and low wages.

There has also been an increase in cases of disabilities affecting the ability of workers to perform their work in part or in full, permanently or temporarily. Most of these cases constitute wasted production capacity, depriving families of the income necessary to meet their needs and achieve food security.⁷² There is keenness to establish new bodies and institutions or to activate established ones, such as the Palestinian Fund for Employment and Social Protection, to be a national umbrella supporting youths and graduates in financing their projects and transferring experience to them,⁷³ in collaboration with foreign institutions. There is also the Advisory Council on Women's Issues, which provides consultations on women's policies and future work trends.⁷⁴

Graduates were encouraged to have online businesses, away from internal division and the blockade, yet these efforts remain limited and require support in order to expand.

While the Palestinian unemployment rate generally increases, fluctuating from time to time, it has decreased significantly since 2019 due to the exclusion of discouraged workers from the unemployment rate. Accordingly, the unemployment rate in WB and GS decreased from 30.8% in 2018 to 24% in 2019. Yet, the difference in unemployment rates between the WB and GS are huge, reaching 13.7% in the former and 42.7% in the latter in 2019. As for discouraged workers, given that their rates in GS are high, their exclusion in 2019 led to a decrease in the unemployment rate from 52% in 2018 to 42.7% in 2019 (see table 20/2).

The government works diligently, in partnership with the relevant parties, to link between general education and the labor market and to explore students' aspirations and specialization interests. It spreads awareness to change society's perception of vocational and technical training, classifies universities in line with the labor market and stops the recurrence of programs, closing some of them.⁷⁵ Nonetheless, these steps and associated policies fall short of seriously addressing the problem.

The general poverty rate (without financial assistance) in GS reached 59.8% at the end of 2017 compared to 42.3% for deep poverty, rates reflected in the food insecurity situation.⁷⁶

Palestinian government policies did not limit high poverty and high unemployment rates, while production projects, which provide additional job opportunities or achieve job stability, were not supported sufficiently. In 2020–2021, the unemployment rate is expected to increase with a widening gap between WB and GS, which will require policies commensurate with the severity of the problem, despite the fact that large numbers of workers, especially from WB, still work in Israel and the settlements, and mostly lack job stability and guaranteed workers' rights.

6. Industrial Activity

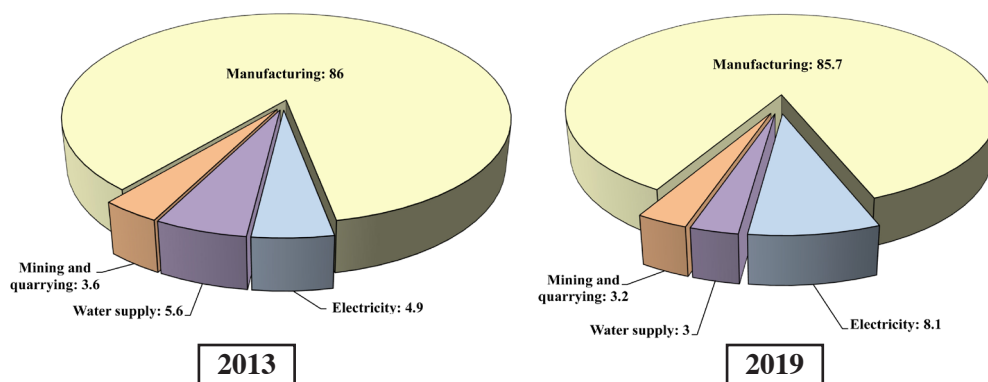
Industrial activity represents one of the most important commodity production activities, especially in the developed world and emerging countries. It includes exploring potential wealth and preparing it for local use as well as for exportation, expanding motive power, providing manufacturing inputs, handling waste, supplying the local market with its needs and exporting its surplus, thus reducing trade deficit.

Table 21/2: Industrial GDP in PA Territories 2013–2019
at Constant Prices (\$ million)⁷⁷

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019*
Mining and quarrying	65.5	59.3	48.7	46.4	43	66.7	66.8
Manufacturing	1,582.1	1,437.9	1,302.4	1,499.6	1,756.8	1,762.8	1,766.3
Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply	89.6	123.6	158.2	158.6	171.2	165.9	166.2
Water supply, sewerage and waste management	103.1	99.9	120.4	124.8	123.2	61.2	61.4
Total	1,840.4	1,720.7	1,629.7	1,829.4	2,094.2	2,056.6	2,060.7
% of GDP	13.6	12.8	11.7	12	13.6	13.2	13
Average annual growth or deterioration (%)	+4.8	−6.5	−5.3	+12.3	+14.5	−1.8	+0.2

* The total was calculated from the annual growth rate, and industrial branches were calculated according to the activity growth rate.

% Industrial Sector Activities of GDP, 2013 and 2019



Industrial GDP in PA Territories 2013–2019 at Constant Prices (\$ million)

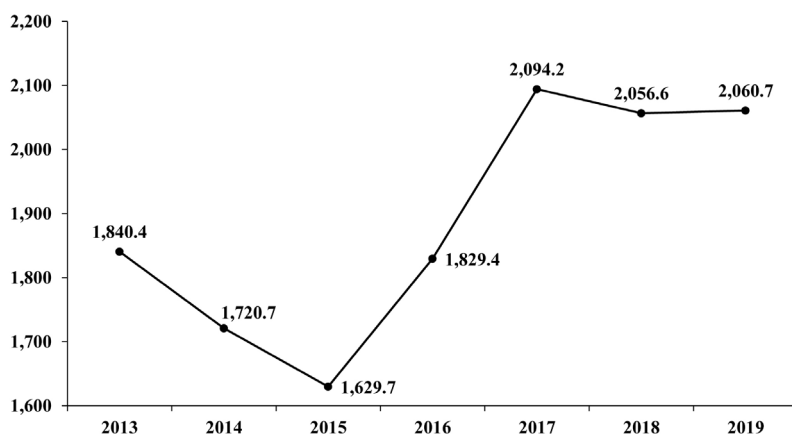


Table 21/2 indicates that industrial activity decreased 1.8% in 2018 and then witnessed limited (0.2%) improvement in 2019 with a trend towards volatility and relative stability. The table also shows that manufacturing dominated most industrial activity despite the importance of other industrial branches. Mining achieved a significant recovery in 2018, while manufacturing achieved a limited increase in 2019 with stability and slight improvement. The building stone was the most exported product with a value of \$150.7 million and 13% of total exports of 2018.⁷⁸

Electricity supply decreased by 3.1% in 2018, then improved slightly in 2019. Activity related to water and sanitation also decreased, with a huge drop of 50.3%, without an obvious explanation for the decline, despite the increase in demand for water, and the increase in wastewater and waste due to population growth.

The overall trajectory for the period 2013–2020 indicates the possibility of growth in total industrial activity reaching 3.7% in 2021, with an average of 3.3% for 2020–2021.

As for the current industrial strategies and policies, the following is noted:

- The PA's reliance on clearance funds, as the most prominent source of public revenue has contributed to the increase of imports beyond export growth at the expense of developing and encouraging national industry.
- There is an interest in industrial cities and new industrial areas, such as Tarqumiya, whose plans have been developed, and their first stages are due to start in 2020, where windows for investment are open to complete the transactions smoothly.⁷⁹ Development projects are also being launched using alternative energy.

- c. Industrial enterprises face the challenge of technicians' underdeveloped skills and inexperience, and low levels of education. Thus, they need rehabilitation, for they are unable to keep pace with advanced production technologies.⁸⁰
- d. The success of disengagement from Israel requires well thought out methodologies within the aim of increasing public and private investments, while organizing and developing the industrial sector, protecting national product, implementing relevant laws and the national industrial strategy for the next 10 years. Yet these steps did not achieve their goals except for remarkable growth in 2017, which deteriorated again later.⁸¹ The return of such relations with the Arab countries may be of great importance for the development of this industry, such as the cases of Jordan, Iraq, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and more recently with the Russian Federation. However, this remains subject to overcoming Israeli impediments.

7. Agricultural Activity

Agricultural activity is productive work characterized by providing for the needs of food crops such as grains, legumes, vegetables and fruits, as well as livestock and fish products. It is also important in enabling benefitting from arable land, cultivation and creating job opportunities. This activity achieves food security, includes exporting the surplus, while using agricultural products in manufacturing industries, especially food.

Agriculture has an important social, economic and cultural role in the life of Palestinians, in terms of preserving their identity and connection to the land, whose cultivated area has shrunk to about 1,627 million donums (1.6 million km²), one sixth of the original area in 1967.⁸² This is due to settlement expansion and Israel depriving the Palestinians of opportunities to cultivate their land and harvest their crops.

Table 22/2: Agricultural GDP in PA Territories 2013–2019
at Constant Prices (\$ million)⁸³

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Agricultural GDP	1,049.4	1,077.9	1,035.2	1,142.9	1,074.1	1,091.1	1,080.2
Average annual growth or deterioration (%)	–3.4	+2.7	–4	+10.4	–6	+1.6	–1
% of GDP	7.8	8	7.4	7.5	7	7	6.8

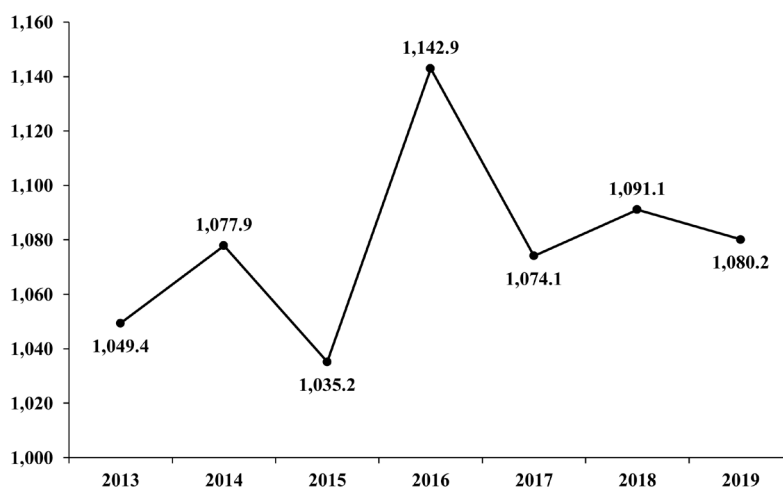
Agricultural GDP in PA Territories 2013–2019 at Constant Prices (\$ million)

Table 22/2 shows sharp fluctuations in agricultural GDP with limited improvement in 2018 and a 1% decline in 2019, reflecting weak networking with manufacturing industries, especially food. For a quarter of a century, the Palestinian economy has suffered structural distortions in agriculture, as a source of income, employment and food security.⁸⁴ Palestinians still depend on Israel to import most of their plants, animals and crops under intense competition, with Israel always keen to impede agricultural activity and seize more land.

Weak economic growth reflected the decline in agricultural GDP by an average of 6.9% in 2018–2019, while in 2013–2017, it was 7.5%.

As for 2020, based on the joint forecasts of the PMA and the PCBS, 2.2% agricultural growth is expected, with the possibility of a limited increase of 0.4% in 2021, based on the overall trend trajectory, hence a limited 1.3% average growth in 2020–2021. This is in the context of the major challenges to agricultural activity on the one hand, and the attempts to improve input efficiency and self-reliance on the other.

However, given the political conditions, policies related to agricultural activity need to be reconsidered, to improve and increase GDP, in order to support and preserve the land itself and achieve greater national resilience.

8. Trade

Trade is one of the most prominent forms of international economic relations. It is essential for societies that can obtain various commodities with the highest specifications, according to the standards of the World Trade Organization, which seeks to liberalize trade and accelerate its easy flow.

Table 23/2: Commodity Trade Balance in PA Territories 2013–2021
at Current Prices (\$ million)⁸⁵

	Actual							Forecasts	
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021*
Trade volume	6,065	6,627	6,183	6,291	6,919	7,695	6,844	7,193	7,485
Exports	901	944	958	927	1,065	1,155	1,068	1,160	1,192
Imports	5,164	5,683	5,225	5,364	5,854	6,540	5,776	6,033	6,293
Deficit	-4,263	-4,740	-4,268	-4,437	-4,789	-5,385	-4,708	-4,873	-5,101
% Deficit to total imports	82.6	83.4	81.7	82.7	81.8	82.3	81.5	80.8	81.1
% Deficit to GDP	31.5	33.9	30.5	28.8	29.7	33.1	28	27.8	28.1

* Based on the trend trajectory.

PA Trade Indicators 2013–2021 (\$ million)

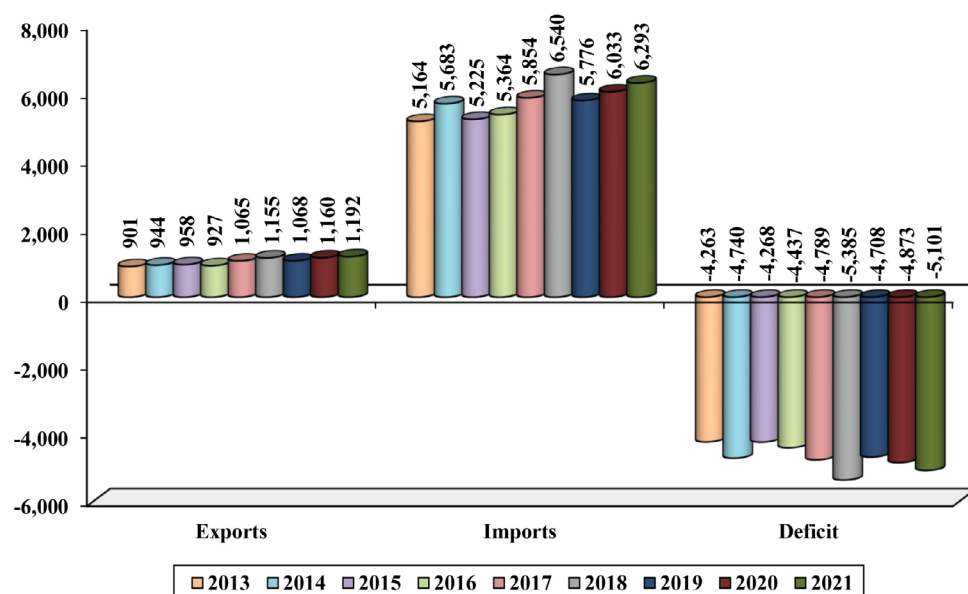


Table 23/2 shows an 11.2% increase in trade volume in 2018 by and an 11% decrease in 2019. A 5.1% and 4.1% increase are anticipated for 2020 and 2021 respectively, which emphasizes the deep international economic relations enjoyed by Palestine despite fluctuations in trade exchange from one year to another.

The trade deficit in 2019 was about \$4,708 million, a 12.6% decrease when compared to the previous year, constituting 28% of the GDP. However, this deficit will increase by 3.5% in 2020 based on the baseline scenario of PMA and PCBS statistical forecast.

In 2018, building stone, plastic bags, olive oil, scrap iron and cigarettes were among the top 10 exports, while electrical energy, diesel, portland cement, gasoline, and cigarettes were among the top 10 imports.⁸⁶

Israel accounted for the largest share of Palestinian imports with 55.3% and 55.5% during 2017 and 2018, respectively. Turkey ranked second with 10%, and then China with 7.3% in 2017 and 10% in 2018. At the level of Palestinian exports, Israel also continued to receive the majority, with 82.5% and 83.7% during 2017 and 2018 respectively, which meant that Israel was interested in isolating Palestinians from other partners and keeping them dependent (see table 24/2).

To reduce the large trade deficit, the PA has tried to gradually disengage from Israel, diversify its import sources, organize the needs of the local market from oil derivatives and import them from licensed Jordanian companies, and increase Jordanian electric supply at a lower cost.⁸⁷ Import sources include Iraq, Egypt, the Russian Federation and Turkey, which contributes to reducing the trade deficit remains high to the benefit of Israel.⁸⁸ But in general, the preferential dealings the PA enjoyed with a number of countries did not facilitate the entry of Palestinian products to foreign markets.⁸⁹ Ultimately, Palestinian statistics need to cover all evidenced trade so that official authorities' data would can cover the entire trade exchange and be an effective factor in shaping successful economic policies.

At the time of writing, no data was available on PA imports and exports in 2019. Yet, according to the preliminary PCBS data, regarding foreign trade in goods in December 2019, imports from Israel accounted for 56% of total PA imports, while exports to Israel accounted for the majority of the PA exports (83%).⁹⁰

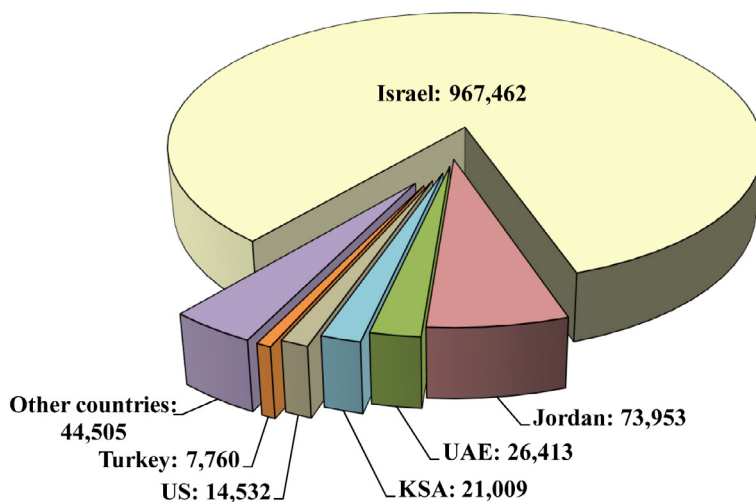
Notably, the Israeli CBS provided different figures regarding the 2018 trade with the PA, where Palestinian imports from Israel reached \$3,994 million, which was higher than the Palestinian figure by around \$362 million, while the Palestinian exports to Israel reached \$859 million, which is lower than the Palestinian figure by \$108 million.⁹¹

Table 24/2: Volume of Palestinian Trade, Exports and Imports in Goods in PA Territories to/ from Selected Countries 2017–2018 (\$ thousand)⁹²

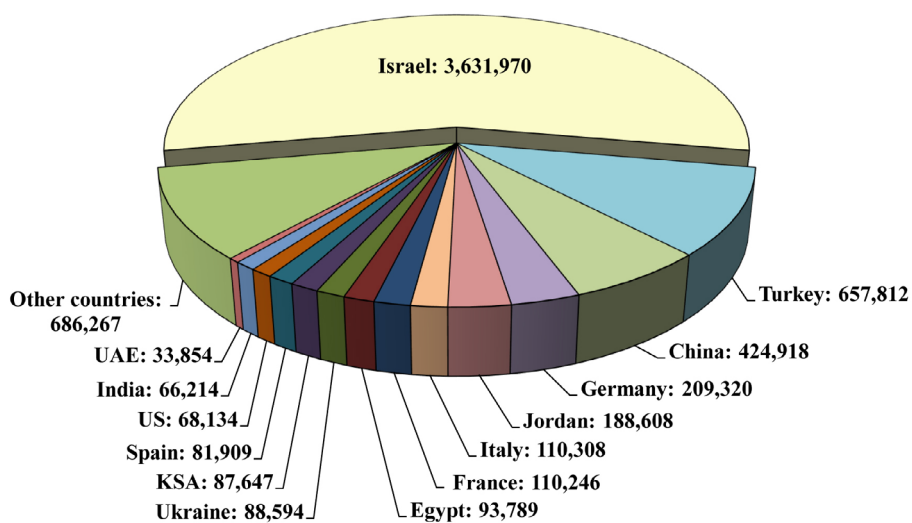
Country	Trade volume		Palestinian exports to:		Palestinian imports from:	
	2018	2017	2018	2017	2018	2017
Israel	4,599,432	4,113,402	967,462	878,617	3,631,970	3,234,784
Turkey	665,572	587,055	7,760	7,846	657,812	579,208
China	425,407	428,698	489	19	424,918	428,680
Jordan	262,561	230,405	73,953	77,197	188,608	153,208
Germany	211,409	216,280	2,090	1,635	209,320	214,645
Italy	111,415	108,416	1,108	1,410	110,308	107,006
France	111,124	81,783	878	2,450	110,246	79,333
KSA*	108,655	92,513	21,009	15,247	87,647	77,266
Egypt	93,799	69,587	9	119	93,789	69,469
Ukraine	88,594	66,360	–	–	88,594	66,360
US	82,665	75,498	14,532	13,871	68,134	61,627
Spain	82,036	70,828	127	329	81,909	70,499
India	66,658	46,207	444	153	66,214	46,054
UAE	60,267	65,152	26,413	26,701	33,854	38,451
Other countries	725,630	666,550	39,360	39,290	686,267	627,260
Total	7,695,224	6,918,734	1,155,634	1,064,884	6,539,590	5,853,850

* Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA).

Palestinian Exports in Goods in PA Territories to Selected Countries 2018 (\$ thousand)



Palestinian Imports in Goods in PA Territories from Selected Countries 2018 (\$ thousand)



9. External Financing and Its Impact

External financing has remained a major source of support for the Palestinian treasury, and sometimes turned the budget deficit into a surplus. There are various forms of external financing to Palestinians, as well as various sources and uses, with the difficulty of assuring its continuity or regularity, unlike other forms of humanitarian project support.

The PA has largely depended on US aid, which reached a peak of \$918 million in 2009, with an annual average of \$527.7 million during 2008–2018. However, US aid has decreased and was used as leverage to extract more Palestinian concessions, until it reached a low point in 2018 at \$147 million.⁹³

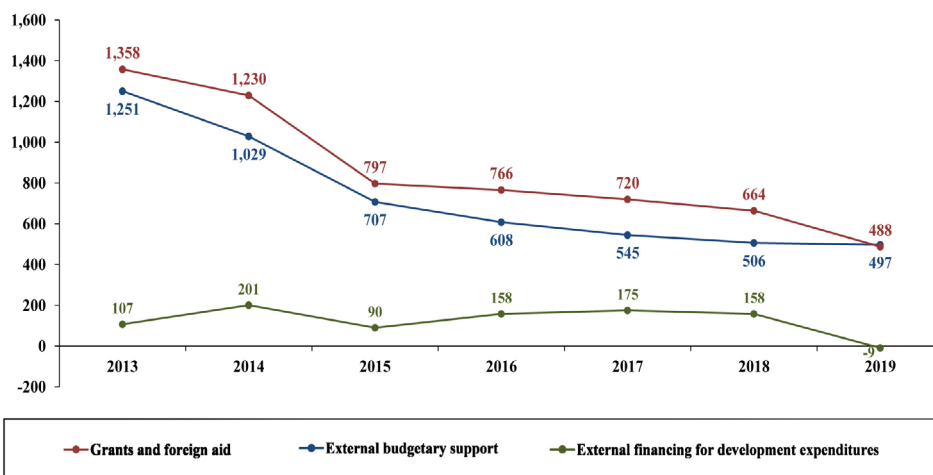
Table 25/2 shows that total foreign aid decreased significantly to \$488 million in 2019 with a decrease of 26.5% compared to 2018, and 64.1% compared to 2013. Also, support for development projects did not receive sufficient attention, remained low and volatile with a sharp decline in 2015, reaching \$90 million, down by 55.2% compared to 2014, and this decline and volatility continued at a negative level in 2019.

Table 25/2: External Financing to the PA 2013–2019 (\$ million)⁹⁴

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
External budgetary support	1,251	1,029	707	608	545	506	497
External financing for development expenditures	107	201	90	158	175	158	–9*
Grants and foreign aid	1,358	1,230	797	766	720	664	488
Average annual growth or deterioration (%)	29.7+	–9.4	–35.2	–3.9	–6	–7.8	–26.5
% of Development expenditures out of total external financing	7.9	16.3	11.3	20.6	24.3	23.8	–

* This is because the Ministry of Finance returned \$124.8 million to the US Consulate in response to the US position on Jerusalem.

External Financing to the PA 2013–2019 (\$ million)



In 2020–2021, foreign aid seems set to be governed by new and unstable considerations, most importantly the US attempts to impose Trump’s deal on the PA along with developments related to the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). Generally, foreign aid is politicized and costly rather than being a straightforward humanitarian donation, thus, for sustainable Palestinian development, it will be necessary to adopt a strict strategy to gradually eliminate it. Therefore, the general budget deficit gap should reach the lowest possible level to have a completely balanced budget within a few years, based on specific agendas and policies.

As for donors in 2019, the Mécénisme Palestino-Européen de Gestion et d’Aide Socio-Economique (PEGASE) topped the list with \$196.1 million, then the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) with \$176.4 million, followed by The World Bank with \$64.9 million. As for 2018, the KSA led with \$222.4 million, followed by PEGASE with \$183.8 million and Kuwait with \$52.6 million (see table 26/2).

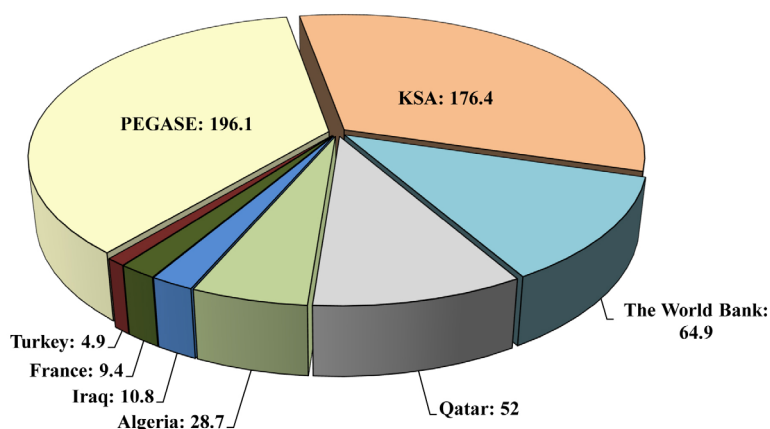
Arab funding increased again in 2018–2019, after falling to \$213 million in 2016. In 2018, it exceeded international financial aid by 45.4%, while in 2017, it constituted 36.4% of international support.

Table 26/2: Sources of External Financing for the PA 2016–2019 (\$ million)⁹⁵

Donor	2016	2017	2018	2019
Arab donors	212.9	145.2	305.5	267.9
– KSA	183	92.1	222.4	176.4
– Algeria	26.7	52	26.7	28.7
– Qatar	–	–	–	52
– Egypt	3.2	1.1	3.6	–
– Kuwait	–	–	52.6	–
– Iraq	–	–	–	10.8
International donors	393.6	399.3	210.1	275.3
– PEGASE	205	240.3	183.8	196.1
– The World Bank	94.4	76.2	10.4	64.9
– US	76.5	73.6	–	–
– France	17.7	9.2	9.5	9.4
– Turkey	–	–	6.4	4.9
Development financing	153.9	175	160	–9.4*
Total	760.4	719.5	675.6	533.8

* This is because the Ministry of Finance returned \$124.8 million to the US Consulate in response to US position on Jerusalem.

Note: External financing and development financing figures are different in tables 25/2 and 26/2, because of the difference in shekels exchange rate adopted as an annual average between the PMA and PA Finance Ministry.

Sources of External Financing for the PA 2019 (\$ million)

10. Economic Repercussions of the GS Siege

The GS siege has negatively affected all aspects of life and made 2019 economically the worst year on record, with production and income levels deteriorating. Commercial stores, institutions and companies were forced to close, due to their inability to survive amidst direct and indirect monthly losses estimated at \$100 million.⁹⁶ Palestinian MP Jamal al-Khudari, head of the Popular Committee Against the Siege, stated that 100% of Gaza's factories were totally or partially affected by the Israeli blockade and successive attacks, while hundreds of factories and shops closed, causing hundreds of thousands of workers to be laid off.⁹⁷ Israel has been controlling imports and exports under security pretexts, while other events have exacerbated the suffering, such as repeated Israeli attacks and the targeting of the production and urban structure. The GS Ministry of Finance revealed that 400 trucks enter the Strip daily through the Karm Abu Salem crossing, while 20 trucks per day carry exports.⁹⁸ In addition, Israel continued with its endeavor to destroy the fishing sector, a vital sector for the Palestinian and household economies; thus, making those working in this sector among the poorest in GS.⁹⁹ The economic situation in GS was exacerbated by the punitive policies the PA imposed on the employees there.¹⁰⁰

The World Bank warned that the GS's conditions have steadily deteriorated, and stressed that the economy could not survive without access to external markets, noting that the manufacturing sector has shrunk by as much as 60% over the last 20 years.¹⁰¹ The World Bank also warned that the GS economy was collapsing, suffering from a decade-long blockade and a recent drying up of liquidity, with aid flows no longer enough to stimulate growth.¹⁰² Mounir Kleibo, International Labour Organization representative in WB and GS, said that the levels of poverty and deprivation in GS were unparalleled in modern history, and that there was an urgent need to change Gazan's conditions after 12 years of blockade.¹⁰³

In 2018 and 2019, the unemployment rates in GS increased by 52% and 42.7% respectively, with a remarkable difference between unemployment rates in WB and GS. In Q4 2019, the unemployed counted for 121 thousand and 208 thousand in WB and GS respectively (see table 20/2). Also, Gaza's contribution to GDP declined from 34.7% in 2004 to 18.1% in 2018.¹⁰⁴ The GDP per capita in Gaza in 2019 was 29.2% of that of WB, which indicates the huge differences between the WB and the GS. The infrastructure in GS remains destroyed in the field of electric supply, sanitation and water salinity.

The UN launched a \$348 million plan at the end of 2019, 76% of which targeted GS to meet Palestinians' urgent humanitarian needs during 2020.¹⁰⁵ There was a limited breakthrough, from the beginning of 2019, in the movement of people and goods through the Rafah crossing between GS and Egypt, where quantities of goods such as oil derivatives, cooking gas and construction materials entered.¹⁰⁶ Departures from GS for humanitarian reasons increased, in addition to the easing of procedures at the Beit Hanoun crossing (Erez).

The GS remains the region most vulnerable to damage, serious health risks and economic repercussions in light of the spread of COVID-19, which puts the Strip in urgent need of reintegration into the Palestinian homeland as a preventive tool in the face of explosive risks.

11. Outlook for PA Economic Performance 2020–2021

Palestinian economic performance is challenged by uncertainty, extreme fluctuations, and high level of risks, thus it varies significantly according to local and external developments, the most important of which are:

- a. Doubts about the Palestinian government implementing the Sectorial Strategy for Development of the National Economy 2017–2022, building an independent economy to reduce dependency, establishing an attractive business environment for investment, regulating the internal market and protecting the consumer.¹⁰⁷ There are also doubts regarding ending the occupation, strengthening the national product and boycotting Israeli products as well as achieving sustainable and balanced development. By restoring national capabilities and harnessing them to serve the strategic goal, sustainable and balanced development can create jobs and fight unemployment and poverty, especially as the government has adopted a cluster-based development policy.¹⁰⁸
- b. The ability to overcome the division and bolster the national position in addition to conducting legislative and presidential elections.
- c. The continuation of Israeli practices obstructing development, such as intensifying roadblocks across WB and the complete control of the crossings, in addition to Israel's evasion of its obligations, and its insistence on holding the equivalent of financial allocations to the prisoners, the wounded, and the families of the killed.

- d. The ability to implement the US decision supporting the two-state solution, rejecting the policy of annexation, settlement, and fait accompli in addition to unilateral measures, and acknowledging the aspirations of the Palestinian people to establish their own state. In addition, the ability to invest this decision,¹⁰⁹ in light of the US president's announcement of the "Deal of the Century," under which Israel plans to annex the Jordan Valley and large parts of the WB, while undermining the two-state solution.¹¹⁰
- e. The ability to deal with huge Israeli impediments including preventing Palestinians from reaching and exploiting resources such as Area C, with estimates of annual losses due to this deprivation of around \$4.3 billion according to the World Bank.¹¹¹ The easing of restrictions on dual-use goods will result in an additional cumulative growth of 6% in WB and 11% in GS starting 2025.¹¹² The losses of Palestinian companies were estimated at \$1.1 billion due to the expansion of the work of the Israeli communication networks in the WB.¹¹³ Moreover, there are problems related to the PA itself, especially regarding its seriousness in adopting international recommendations and the recommendations of the Coalition for Integrity and Accountability—AMAN, notably that Palestine ranks high on the Global Corruption Barometer of Transparency International.¹¹⁴
- f. The possibility of presenting an exceptional general budget commensurate with the state of emergency declared since March 2020 to face the repercussions of the COVID-19.

The outcome of the aforementioned repercussions makes it difficult for a breakthrough during the present crises. The variables, ongoing uncertainty and new developments, especially the worldwide COVID-19 crisis, mean it is difficult to rely on a specific scenario to predict the present and the future. However, the scenario of deficit gaps continuing is the most likely, in light of fluctuation of foreign financing and the tendency for deterioration and the consequent need for expanded domestic borrowing, while keeping most of it as deferred-payment arrears. This would be coupled with the negative impact on performance and a likely limited GDP growth with an average of 3.15% for 2020–2021, would not be enough to improve the current standard of living.

Conclusion

Half of the Palestinian people remain steadfastly living in their historic land; and more than three quarters of the Palestinians in diaspora are still residing in the countries surrounding Palestine, which indicates that the Palestinians are committed to their land and aspire to return. Significantly, the number of Palestinians continues to increase in historic Palestine, and they are expected to outnumber Jews within a few years, which is a threat to the core of the Zionist settlement project.

Although about two thirds of the Palestinian people are “refugees” living in harsh suffering under the occupation and in the diaspora, they continue to stand firm holding on to their right to return and end the occupation.

The economic data concerning the PA indicates the extent of the Israeli exploitation of Palestinian natural resources, and the severity of the blockade and the suffering of the Palestinian people under the occupation. Data also shows Israel’s dominance over the PA’s exports, imports, and border ports; hence the PA’s economic dependence on Israel. This dependency is evident in the figures, which show that 84% of PA exports and 56% of its imports are from Israel. Also demonstrated in the figures is Israeli GDP being 2.3 times more than PA GDP, in addition to the fact that the Israeli per capita income is 12 fold that of the per capita income in PA territories.

The PA budget continues to suffer from fundamental crises, mainly because its revenues are fundamentally linked to tax revenues collected by the Israeli authorities; and to external grants and support, which are usually conditional and “politicized.”

In such conditions, it is imperative to break away from Israeli economic hegemony and strive to build a resistance economy, which is not subject to the pressures and requirements of the occupation.

Endnotes

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Chapter Three

The Land and the Holy Sites

The Land and the Holy Sites

Introduction

President Donald Trump's decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem in December 2017 marked the beginning of a potentially decisive battle over the fate of Jerusalem, nearly a 100 years after its occupation by Israel began. Unprecedentedly deep US cover granted Israel an opportunity to determine the city's identity through aggression, imposition of facts on the ground, and the expulsion of Jerusalemites. For what had been impossible before the decision has now become possible, and what was thought to arouse international rejection has become doable, or least that is the belief the Israeli government relied on.

The two years following Trump's decision saw US-backed Israeli attempts to resolve Jerusalem's identity, which was met by popular confrontations that had limited Palestinian government support. The result was Israeli retreating on some fronts but achieving breakthroughs on other fronts.

First: Islamic and Christian Holy Sites

1. *Al-Aqsa Mosque*

a. Control of the Mosque's Administration

Since the year 2000, the attempt to control the administration of *al-Aqsa* Mosque has become a general Israeli policy. In 2001, the then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon formed a ministerial committee to study admitting tourists, as well as settlers, under the direct management of the Israeli police, while this authority was originally that of the Jordanian Ministry of Awqaf, Islamic Affairs and Holy Places.¹ Sharon's plan was followed by settlers storming into the Mosque on 20/8/2003, and allowing the admittance of tourists, under direct police supervision.² In 2005, a network of thermal sensors and cameras to control the vicinity of *al-Aqsa* Mosque was installed,³ and a judicial decision allowing collective storming of the Mosque in "non-Muslim prayer times," was issued. In 2010, a force for rapid intervention in *al-Aqsa* Mosque called the "Temple Mount Unit" was formed, which conducted

exercises.⁴ Israel also obstructed construction work and prevented the entry of building materials into the mosque, without prior approval of the municipality in Jerusalem pursuant to the recommendations of the report by State Comptroller presented in 2010.⁵ In September 2015, there were attempts to impose complete temporal division by preventing Muslims from entering *al-Aqsa* Mosque on Jewish holidays, and in July 2017, there were moves to impose electronic gates to control Muslims' entry to the Mosque.

This trend continued throughout 2018–2019, with the usurpation of Awqaf's exclusive restoration authority for the first time since the occupation of *al-Aqsa* Mosque, as well as other Israeli attempts to complete the process of controlling the Mosque administration as set out below.

1. Endeavors to Take over Gate of Mercy⁶

On 17/2/2019, Israeli police put a new lock on the external gate of the Gate of Mercy (*Bab al-Rahmah*), the culmination of a 16-year-old plan to isolate the building and its surroundings on the eastern side of *al-Aqsa* Mosque from the rest of it. On 9/2/2003, Israeli authorities issued a decision to criminalize the Islamic Heritage Committee affiliated with the Administration of Jerusalem's Awqaf, which worked from its offices at the Gate of Mercy in restoration and endowment projects. Thus, the Israeli army closed the Committee's offices there⁷ as if it was closing down any other building.

Under the pressure of this decision, the Administration of Jerusalem's Awqaf dealt with the Gate of Mercy—whose construction dates back to the Umayyad era—as a “hall of honor.” The Awqaf wanted to prevent the complete closure of the building and to avoid a confrontation with the Israeli police. Hence, the building was opened annually twice; every year for Al-Aqsa Islamic Schools to hold examinations, as well as to receive official delegations including from Jordan.⁸

The last time Gate of Mercy was used, before the Israeli police locked it, was for the meeting of the Administration of Jerusalem's Awqaf, which was reconfigured and expanded on 14/2/2019 to include Palestinian figures such as Sheikh 'Ikrima Sabri, head of the Supreme Muslim Council in Jerusalem; Hatim 'Abdul Qadir, former Jerusalem Minister who is responsible for the Jerusalem dossier in Fatah; 'Adnan al-Husseini, the-then Jerusalem Minister; Mazen Sinokrot, a Jerusalem businessman and Minister of National Economy in the first Hamas government under Isma'il Haniyyah (29/3/2006); and Sheikh Muhammad Hussein, the PA

Mufti of Jerusalem.⁹ Apparently, the Israeli authorities considered the expansion of the Awqaf council as a hostile move against them, and thus locked the gate and took it over, a goal that had been sought by Israel for a long time.

On 18/2/2019, a day after the gate's closure, the public response began¹⁰ with the Gate of Mercy uprising, which led to the reopening of the building on Friday 22/2/2019, a development that will be discussed later in this chapter.

The Gate of Mercy uprising dealt a serious blow to Israel's intention of spatially dividing *al-Aqsa* Mosque, a long-term plan that started in 2003 with the security closure decision and continued with Israel allocating the eastern region of the Mosque for settlers' raids and biblical rituals. Then, in 2013, a spatial division scheme was proposed by the ruling Likud party, based on the annexation of the Gate of Mercy and its immediate vicinity, so that it would become a center for Jews in *al-Aqsa* Mosque, while closing an adjacent area during Jewish holidays for prayers and rituals,¹¹ in addition to the draft proposed the same year by the Yishai Association to build a domed synagogue to the south of the Gate of Mercy.¹² Other measures to enforce spatial division included the ban imposed by the Israeli police on the eastern side of *al-Aqsa* Mosque from July 2018,¹³ and a new Border Police post atop the Gate of Mercy in retaliation to Jerusalemites' presence in the region during the month of Ramadan.¹⁴

This long-term process was disrupted by the Gate of Mercy uprising, when the huge Islamic presence returned to the *Musalla* (area allocated for prayer) of the Gate of Mercy and its environs. This scene was more clear in the month of Ramadan of 2019, when the *Musalla* was carpeted, Qur'an lockers were placed in it and wooden boards were installed to separate men and women during joint prayers, while shoe cabinets were placed at the entrance.¹⁵

The Israeli authorities could not approve the opening of the Gate of Mercy, hence they made attempts to isolate the building and close it once again. These endeavors can be divided into the three stages below:

- **Preventing the daily opening of the *Musalla*:** Israeli police wanted to prevent Palestinians from keeping the Gate of Mercy open, hence they launched an arrest campaign against the guards, who on 22/2/2019 had started opening the *Musalla* daily. The police claimed that the guards had violated a court order. Simultaneously, Israeli wanted to reaffirm the court's closure order, so on 17/3/2019 the Magistrate's Court in Jerusalem extended its temporary order

to close the Gate of Mercy for another 60 days,¹⁶ a rule that was rejected by the Administration of Jerusalem's Awqaf and the Jordanian government.¹⁷ The Israeli authorities wanted to weaken *al-Aqsa* guards' apparatus by arresting its members and banning their daily entrance. Amidst this situation, and after the arrest of 14 guards, on 3/3/2019, *al-Aqsa* guards appealed for support,¹⁸ and the Jerusalem community responded where young volunteers showed up for several days to open the Gate of Mercy in the morning. Remarkably, Jerusalem families pledged that their youths would open the *Musalla* on specific days,¹⁹ forcing the Israeli police to abandon their policy.

- **Preventing its dedication as a *Musalla*:** Ramadan was a turning point in restoring the Gate of Mercy to its original status; i.e., being an inseparable part of *al-Aqsa* Mosque, for it was furnished with all the *Musalla* requirements amid the heavy presence of worshippers. After Ramadan, the Israeli authorities sought to prevent the dedication of the building as a *Musalla*, and thus targeted the simplest symbols of a place of worship, such as shoe storage units, removing the Qur'an lockers and as shoe cabinets from the *Musalla* repeatedly,²⁰ as well as removing the dividers used to demarcate women's prayer spaces during daily prayers. In return, worshippers would put back the removed furniture, benefitting from heavy Muslim presence.
- **The attempts to reclose the Gate of Mercy before its opening anniversary:** The Israeli police tried to keep Muslim worshipers away from the Gate of Mercy and its vicinity, taking advantage of the long Jewish holiday season, which begins every year with Jewish New Year (*Rosh Hashanah*) followed by the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) and ending with the Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkot*). Thus, it announced that Muslims were prohibited from approaching the terraces facing the building and the olive tree there.²¹ This move was countered by the determination of a few *Murabitun* (*al-Aqsa* Mosque defenders), who stood in front of the Gate of Mercy and read Qur'an there, thus the yard facing the gate turned into a hotbed of confrontation.²² In return, old Jerusalemite women began inviting each other to eat breakfast there in the mornings, where the police would arrest them to keep them away. Also, collective iftars were held for the youth, elderly and women, who fasted on Mondays and Thursdays, and whom the police would forcibly disperse, beat and arrest.²³ The very next day, youths would respond with an increased presence in the *Musalla* for the Maghrib and Isha' prayers. As of the time of writing, the Gate of Mercy is still a potential flashpoint, and is likely to explode amidst Israeli attempts to close the place and popular efforts to counter these endeavors. These confrontations have

been a major motive for launching the Great Dawn campaign, which started in *al-Aqsa* Mosque, on 10/1/2020,²⁴ and is expected to be one of the major means for defending the Mosque's identity in the next two years.

2. Usurping Restoration Powers

Interference in the restoration of *al-Aqsa* Mosque has been an Israeli policy since 2000. The first attempts aimed to prevent the restoration of the Mosque's southern wall near al-Khutniya School, and the southeastern wall near the huge gates of al-Marwani Mosque, which were reopened a few years ago. In 2000, cracks appeared in them, but since it was the same year in which *al-Aqsa Intifadah* started, Israeli authorities delayed the restoration until 2003. Only then did the Administration of Jerusalem's Awqaf begin the restoration, which needed four years to finish due to repeated Israeli obstruction.

In 2003, the Israeli authorities placed umbrellas based on metal pillars and concrete foundations on the Moroccan Hill, while preventing its restoration or reinforcement; consequently, the Hill collapsed on 15/2/2004 during a snowstorm. Since then, and from that spot, the Israelis intervened in the reconstruction of the entrances and walls of *al-Aqsa* Mosque. They put up, in place of the Hill, a wooden ramp and then emptied the sand of the Moroccan Hill,²⁵ and proposed building an iron or stone bridge in its place to link the Western Wall Plaza to *al-Aqsa* Mosque. However, Ayyubid stone arches forming the basis of the Moroccan Hill were discovered, and the bridge project was suspended. This crisis established a new dynamic in which Israel's opinion is to be sought regarding the reconstruction of the entrances to *al-Aqsa* Mosque.

Attempts to intervene in the reconstruction of *al-Aqsa* Mosque continued through Temple Mount organizations, which objected to the reconstruction of the Dome of the Chain and the Dome of the Rock, and demanded the Israeli government stop it, claiming that some of the works "damaged some...archaeological evidence."²⁶ The internal restoration of the Dome of the Rock saw similar objections by Temple Mount groups and the Israeli authorities, with the latter repeatedly arresting restoration workers. The Jerusalem municipality authorities wanted to oversee all restoration works in *al-Aqsa* Mosque, by compelling the Administration of Jerusalem's Awqaf to submit their restoration plans in advance to the municipality for approval.²⁷ Such restoration disruptions continue, unless "proper permits" from the municipality are granted, and the most prominent developments during the period covered by this report are outlined below:

- **The restoration of the southwestern wall from the outside:** On 23/7/2018, Israeli cameras installed to the south of the destroyed Moroccan Hill documented the fall of a large stone from the center of *al-Aqsa*'s southwestern wall. The stone fell on a temporary wooden ramp installed to establish a wide upper plaza for Jewish worshippers, located beside the Moroccan Gate, which is part of Natan Sharansky's plan.²⁸

The Israeli authorities took advantage of incident and sent Israeli engineering crews to transport the stone and examine the location, while the Waqf engineering team was prevented from inspecting the site.

On 16/1/2019, the Jerusalem municipality installed a five-level scaffold and restored the site where the stone fell, marking the first time an Israeli authority had taken direct responsibility for restoration work in *al-Aqsa* Mosque since its occupation in 1967. Thus, this could be the most dangerous incident concerning the taking over of the restoration authority of the Administration of Jerusalem's Awqaf. It was a further step in the Jerusalem municipality intervention, which might not remain limited to the walls and the surrounding of the Mosque.²⁹ The walls of *al-Aqsa* Mosque are an integral part of the site, hence Israel may be tempted to reach inside.

Jordan issued just two statements of condemnation; one by Minister of Awqaf, Islamic Affairs and Holy Places,³⁰ 'Abdul Nasser Abu al-Basal, and the other by the Foreign Ministry.

The Five-Level Scaffold Installed by the Israeli Authorities at *al-Aqsa* Southwestern Wall from the Outside on 16/1/2019



- **The restoration of the Jumblatt Solitude Place:** Israeli police occupied the Jumblatt Solitude Place near the Dome of the Rock, and transformed it into a police headquarters to support its forces in storming *al-Aqsa* Mosque and monitoring the *Murabitun* and worshippers from inside the Mosque. During the month of Ramadan, on 25/7/2014, in the Night of Power, the solitude place was completely burned,³¹ and the police could not use it until after one month. In the interim, the staff of the Administration of Jerusalem's Awqaf restored the site, since it is an integral part of *al-Aqsa* Mosque, before the Israeli police reopened it as its headquarters on 19/5/2015.³²

During the Gate of Mercy uprising, on 12/3/2019, the area was burned,³³ so the Israeli forces immediately closed *al-Aqsa* Mosque, and their teams entered to make necessary restorations, then the Mosque was reopened for Muslims the following day. This was the second time Israeli forces usurped the restoration authority, where the first happened inside the Mosque. On 29/5/2019, the Israeli police carried out new restoration work in the Jumblatt Solitude place³⁴ by installing a firefighting sprinkler system in it and its lower storage.

- **The restoration of the southern wall:** On 5/1/2020, restoration authority was again usurped as Israeli forces installed scaffolds at the southern wall of *al-Aqsa* Mosque, and kept them for 10 days. However, the reasons for their removal or what was done remained unclear.³⁵ The Jerusalem Waqf condemned the incident on the same day.
- **Disrupting restoration works in al-Aqsa Mosque:** Throughout 2018–2019, the Israeli policy of disrupting restoration works and trying to ban them completely continued. On 16/1/2018, the Israeli police informed the construction official Taha 'Uwaida that all restoration work in the Dome of the Rock was prohibited.³⁶ On 7/11/2018, the Administration of Jerusalem's Awqaf began restoration work south of the Gate of Mercy to repair the corridor's tiles in that area;³⁷ however, the Israeli authorities halted work the following day.³⁸ The renovation was eventually completed in April 2019 thanks to the initiative of a group of *Murabitun*, which also included the insulation of the dome of the Gate of Mercy. On 25/9/2019, the Israeli police raided the office of *al-Aqsa* Reconstruction Committee and arrested its head and some engineers, in an attempt to stop the restoration of the

Dome of the Rock from the inside.³⁹ Prior to that, on 13/6/2019, Israeli police arrested the director of the Reconstruction Committee and three of its engineers for replacing a broken tile in the steps leading to the Cotton Merchant's Gate, west of *al-Aqsa* Mosque.⁴⁰

3. Weakening the Role of *al-Aqsa* Mosque Guards

Al-Aqsa guards are the human shield of the Mosque. After banning the Ribat (defense of Islamic land) institutions and the Islamic Movement of the 1948 occupied territories, on 17/10/2015, the role of guards in defending *al-Aqsa* Mosque from Israeli aggression became even more vital. Subsequently, the Jordanian Ministry of Awqaf, Islamic Affairs and Holy Places increased their number; however, the situation became difficult for Jordan, because Israeli pressure increased at a time it was seeking to avoid any confrontation with Israel. As a result, Israel was able to weaken the role of the guards, preventing them,⁴¹ in September 2018, from walking beside the settlers raiding the Mosque, and urging them to stay at ten meters away from the special units walking behind the settlers to protect them. It also launched successive campaigns of arrests and bans, and on 20/1/2019, it prevented five guards from entering the Mosque for 4–6 months.⁴² Arrests and bans then began on 22/2/2019 targeting activists, who opened the Gate of Mercy, and on 23/2/2019 targeted the guard Samer Qabbani, who was arrested and prevented from entering the Mosque after opening the *Musalla* that day.⁴³ On 24/2/2019, the Israeli authorities took things a step further with a ban imposed on Sheikh 'Abdul 'Azim Salhab, head of the Administration of Jerusalem's Awqaf, as well as Sheikh Najih Bkeirat, the deputy director,⁴⁴ in addition to the arrest and ban of Sheikh Raed Dana, the then director of preaching and guidance, on 26/2/2019.⁴⁵ The campaign of banning guards continued and included Mohammad al-Salhi on 3/3/2019,⁴⁶ Samer Abu Quwaider on 4/3/2019,⁴⁷ and Ihab Abu Ghazaleh on 5/5/2019. Ban orders continued on daily basis until April 2019.

The Israeli police benefitted from the long Jewish holiday season in October 2019, imposing new restrictions on *al-Aqsa* guards, and preventing them from escorting and photographing groups of settlers raiding the Mosque.⁴⁸ These conditions gave settlers unprecedented freedom of movement, manifested in performing public biblical rituals and prayers in *al-Aqsa* Mosque, while pictures and videos documenting these developments could only be captured from afar.

4. Raiding *al-Aqsa* Mosque in Muslim Holidays

The year 2019 saw a rare crossover of the Hebrew and Hijri calendars, as the Hebrew year is based on lunar months and solar years, and thus adjusts itself by adding a month approximately every three years. After adding a month to the Hebrew year, which ended in early October 2018, this rare coincidence became clear with two major Jewish holidays related to the Judaization of *al-Aqsa* Mosque, coinciding with Islamic holidays in 2019, 2020, and 2021.

Temple groups and extremists benefit from four Jewish religious and national Zionist holidays as peak seasons to Judaize *al-Aqsa* Mosque. These holidays include the Passover, which occurs between March and April in the Gregorian calendar; Jerusalem Day, celebrating the occupation of East Jerusalem in 1967, occurring between May and June; and the Jewish holiday known as *Tisha B'av*, commemorating the destruction of the Temple, which occurs between July and August. There is also the long holiday season starting with the Jewish New Year then the Day of Atonement and ending with the Feast of Tabernacles; this season lasts three weeks and occurs between September and October.

In 2019, Jerusalem Day was on 2/6/2019, coinciding with the 28th of Ramadan. Despite the heavy presence of worshippers on Friday 31/5/2019, or the 26th of Ramadan, and on Saturday eve 1/6/2019, or the 27th of Ramadan (the Night of Power), only few *Murabitun* were present in the Mosque on the morning of Sunday 2/6/2019, or the 28th of Ramadan. As a result, the Israeli police were able to secure a long incursion where settlers toured the *al-Aqsa* Mosque and repeated religious chants and public prayers, while the police attacked the *Murabitun*, among whom were women and children.⁴⁹ This incursion was a blow to the Jerusalem popular movement which, at the beginning of 2019, had been able to re-open the Gate of Mercy.

The second occasion was *Tisha B'av*, commemorating the destruction of the Temple. It coincided with the first day of *al-Adha* Eid when approximately 100 thousand worshippers went to the Mosque according to the estimates of Administration of Jerusalem's Awqaf.⁵⁰ Yet, despite repeated calls and public threats of a raid on the Mosque by Temple organizations and Israeli Minister of Public Security Gilad Erdan, and despite the decision of the Islamic committees

in Jerusalem to postpone Eid prayers until 7:30 a.m.,⁵¹ the masses soon dispersed. This situation was exacerbated by a psychological war led directly by the Israeli Prime Minister's office, which issued official news, reported by various Arab media outlets, saying that Netanyahu had decided to prevent incursions on that day. Apparently, Temple activists knew that such news was issued to spread confusion, hence they did not move from the wooden bridge at the Moroccan Gate and remained determined to raid the Mosque.

The number of *Murabitun*, who stayed in *al-Aqsa* Mosque until late at night was estimated at 1,500, who performed *Duha* (forenoon) prayers and faced the Israeli police,⁵² who in their turn soon attacked the *Murabitun* with tear gas and sound bombs, injuring a number of people. Ultimately, the police allowed Temple extremists to raid the Mosque entering from the Moroccan Gate and leaving from the Chain Gate, a distance of 60 meters.⁵³ This symbolic incursion was considered a moral victory for the Israeli government and the police over the defenseless *Murabitun*, as it was the first raid of *al-Aqsa* on a Muslim holiday since the occupation of the Mosque in 1967. However, it simultaneously provided proof of the *Murabituns*' steadfastness, making Israeli forces use hundreds of bombs to secure a 60-meter long incursion.

In the overall scheme, the storming of *al-Adha* Eid was a second moral blow to the Jerusalemite popular movement. It gave moral support to the Temple groups, the government and the police, after the blow dealt to them during the Gate of Mercy Uprising.

This course is expected to persist and develop in 2020 and 2021, as in 2020 Jerusalem Day coincides with the final Friday of Ramadan on 22/5/2020, while *Tisha B'av* will be on Thursday 30/7/2020, coinciding with the Day of '*Arafah* or the first day of *al-Adha* Eid. In 2021, Jerusalem Day will be on 10/5/2021, which is expected to coincide with 28 Ramadan, while *Tisha B'av* will be on Sunday 18/7/2021, and could coincide with the Day of '*Arafah* or the day preceding it.

5. Performing Biblical Rituals in *al-Aqsa* Mosque

Since the concept of division was first introduced, when Ariel Sharon stormed *al-Aqsa* Mosque in 2000, Temple groups' actions were taken in harmony with Israeli courts, which have gradually changed the interpretation of the Protection of

Holy Places Law. This law was enacted by the Knesset in 1967 after the occupation of east Jerusalem, its wording was made loose, making the government of the day relatively free to act as it deems necessary.

With the rise of the Temple groups and their moves to Judaize *al-Aqsa* Mosque, changing the interpretation of the law was the starting point. In 2003, the Israeli Magistrate's Court allowed Jewish settlers to enter the Mosque, thus changing the role of the Israeli police there. In 2005, a court ruling was issued allowing collective incursions during "non-Muslim prayer times," but without Jewish religious symbols; however, this situation changed in 2013, after meetings were held between the Knesset speaker and the police leadership, upon the requests of the Temple groups. They also tried to legalize presenting sacrifices in *al-Aqsa* Mosque on Passover, however, their attempts failed as the court feared the repercussions of the case and dismissed it.⁵⁴

In 2018, this course gained momentum again as Temple groups filed a suit demanding that they be allowed to conduct Passover rituals at the gates of *al-Aqsa* Mosque, the court ruled in their favor on 25/3/2018.⁵⁵ Consequently, Jewish extremists can perform their rituals yearly, every holiday, at the gates of the Mosque, notably at the Ghawanima, Chain and Moroccan Gates in the Feast of Tabernacles. On 4/12/2018, they lit a candlestick and performed rituals and dances around al-Ghazali Square in front of the Lion's Gate to celebrate Hanukkah.⁵⁶ On 17/4/2018, an Israeli court approved settlers praying loudly and shouting while storming *al-Aqsa* Mosque,⁵⁷ which they did on 10/10/2019, when Israeli police told *al-Aqsa* guards that they had permitted Jewish public and collective prayers in *al-Aqsa* Mosque.⁵⁸ Since then, these prayers were documented dozens of times, and some had even taken place some time before that.

b. Constructions and Excavations Under *al-Aqsa* Mosque and in Its Vicinity

1. Constructions in the Vicinity of the Mosque

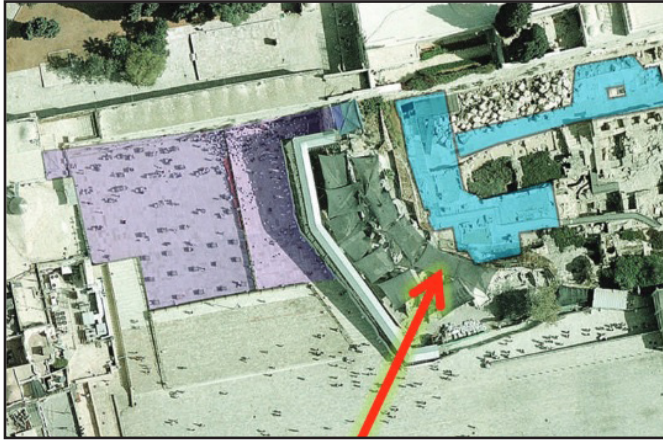
There are many Israeli construction sites in the vicinity of *al-Aqsa* Mosque, the most prominent of which is *Beit Haliba* (Heb. Core House), a structure the foundations of which are being built in the far west of al-Buraq Plaza. On

10/2/2019, a synagogue was approved to be added to the site.⁵⁹ Another project was the new co-ed prayer space at the Western Wall, also known as the Sharansky Project, still in the approval stages due to continuous disagreement between Orthodox and Reform Jews about the permissibility of the mixed prayer section.⁶⁰ There is also the elevator between the Jewish Quarter and al-Buraq Plaza aiming to facilitate access for the largest number of Jews to the Plaza from inside the Old City; the work on this project has begun and the elevator is expected to be operational in 2022.⁶¹ A new development was witnessed regarding the Tiferet Yisrael Synagogue, located in the Jewish Quarter about 200 meters west of *al-Aqsa* Mosque, whose foundation stone for its renovation was laid on 27/5/2014 by Uri Ariel, the Minister of Housing and Construction from the Jewish Home Party. However, on 31/12/2018, a new ceremony for laying the cornerstone of this synagogue was also held with the participation of Minister of Jerusalem Affairs Ze'ev Elkin, then Minister of Construction Yoav Galant besides the new Jerusalem Mayor, Moshe Lion. A total of 50 million shekels (\$15 million) were allocated to rebuild the synagogue, whose total height is expected to be 25 meters. Apparently, works there to date focused on excavations and archeological digs, and for the past four years, its construction works have not started in earnest.⁶²

Work Development in *Beit Haliba* Biblical Compound



Site of Co-Ed Prayer Site

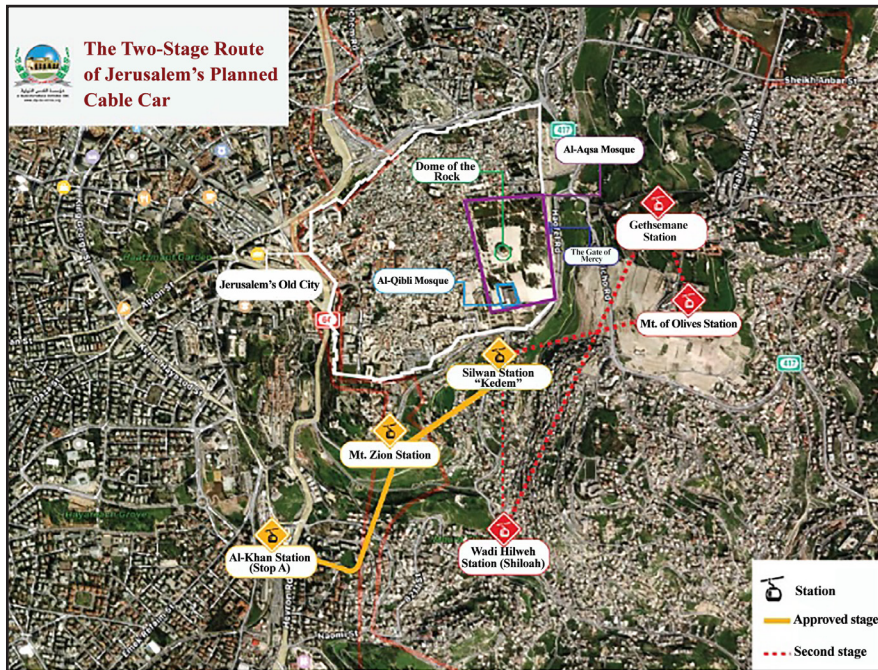


In 2018–2019, there were two significant developments related to the construction projects in the vicinity of *al-Aqsa* Mosque:

Approval of Jerusalem Cable Car Project

The cable car project was first presented in 2007 in Jerusalem's Old City Project "Kedem Yerushalayim." In 2013, it was presented to the planning committees but not approved. Ultimately, a legal amendment was introduced, to make it a national priority project, whose first phase was approved in January 2019. It was then approved by the ministerial housing committee on 4/11/2019 after a delay imposed by an internal Israeli political crisis. According to the plan's first stage, the cable car will depart from the Ottoman railway station in west Jerusalem to the Kedem Center supervised by the right-wing Ir David Foundation (Elad) on confiscated land in Silwan. The cable car covers 1.4 kilometer and has 40 cars running on 15 large concrete pylons. Its construction will be carried out by either the Austrian company Doppelmayr or the Italian company Leitner.⁶³

The cable car project would sabotage the Old City skyline and marginalize the history and identity of its streets, buildings and sanctuaries, in addition to expelling the people of Silwan, thus it is the most dangerous project threatening to change the identity of Jerusalem since the occupation of the city. However, and despite internal and external opposition, the transitional government, led by Netanyahu and endorsed by extremist right-wing parties and Temple groups, has approved the project, and is apparently determined to implement it, making it a stage for political and field confrontations throughout the next two years.

Map 1/3: The Two-Stage Route of Jerusalem's Planned Cable Car

Launching the Jewish Yemeni Heritage Center in Silwan

On 1/8/2018, the Jewish Yemeni Heritage Center in Silwan was launched in a big celebration attended by Israeli Culture Minister Miri Regev, Jerusalem Affairs Minister Ze'ev Elkin and a number of their supporters. The center was established on property seized by the Israeli authorities in 2015, and aims to commemorate the alleged cultural heritage of Yemeni Jews,⁶⁴ who resided in Silwan as refugees between 1881 and 1929. Yemeni Jews were rejected by the emerging settler community, whose first immigrants came from Europe.

Security Structures in the Vicinity of Damascus Gate

The Damascus Gate and the plaza that faces it were an important meeting point for Jerusalemites, a vital public space playing an important role in strengthening the Jerusalem community's fabric and expressing its aspiration for liberation. Attempts to control the plaza and Judaize it remain a major part of the conflict over the identity of Jerusalem; and with Trump's declaration of the city as the capital of Israel, the Damascus Gate Plaza became an important space for public movement, which the Israeli forces interrupted and dispersed. During Ramadan

and Muslim holidays, Jerusalemites gather in the same square especially in the evenings; while for the settlers, the Damascus Gate plaza is the central meeting point for the annual flag march. This march takes place on “Jerusalem Day,” a celebration of the occupation of East Jerusalem in 1967.

In early 2018, Israeli authorities consolidated their hold on the Damascus Gate and the plaza by establishing three major security facilities: on 16/2/2018, a security monitoring room based on iron platforms was installed at the Gate; on 16/3/2018, three watchtowers in the plaza were completed and on 19/6/2018, a fourth was installed, in addition to the observation post atop the Damascus Gate.⁶⁵

New Security Installations in the Vicinity of the Damascus Gate in 2018⁶⁶



2. Excavations

Numbers have become insufficient for describing the size of excavations under *al-Aqsa* Mosque. Since the supervision of the excavation works moved from the Hebrew University (as a partner with the Israel Antiquities Authority—IAA) to the Ministry of Tourism and the Company for the Reconstruction and Development of the Jewish Quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem Ltd. in 2001, the goal of excavations has shifted. At first, the goal was to dig deep and excavate antiquities, whereas now excavation sites themselves are being renovated and linked together to form a network of multiple entrances and exits; the goal has become the projection of the Israeli narration of the history of the site. The Israelis took advantage of the form of

the stones and tunnels and their revelations, in addition to showing new collection of exhibits displayed in these tunnels, such as the Gallery of Glass and Light called the “The Chain of Generations Center” on the western side of *al-Aqsa* Mosque.

Another factor that changed the aims of these excavations was the introduction of the right-wing Ir David Foundation (Elad), which seeks to establish the “City of David” in Silwan according to biblical conception. It is one of the executive arms directly undertaking tenders for the rehabilitation of excavations and the establishment of Judaization centers, funded by the government and municipality. Today, Elad is a direct party in the construction of Kedem Center and the funding of multiple sections of the Herodian Road, most notably the Pilgrims’ Road.

In total, there are 47 known excavation sites, some of which include several sections such as the Herodian Road, which will connect the Silwan Pool to the southwestern wall of *al-Aqsa* Mosque. The Western Wall tunnels’ three level network, starts from the northeastern corner of *al-Aqsa* Mosque to the farthest northwestern side of the Mosque while being divided into sections. Hence, some sources count 64 excavation sites,⁶⁷ where every renovated section of these tunnels is considered a separate excavation.

Excavations Under *al-Aqsa* Mosque and its Vicinity⁶⁸



A Map of the Excavations Under *al-Aqsa* Mosque and its Vicinity until 1/8/2019 (in Arabic).

The most important development among these excavations was the opening of the Pilgrimage Road, part of the Herodian Road, connecting the Silwan Pool in the south to the Wadi Hilweh neighborhood in the north. The opening of the tunnel ceremony took place on 30/6/2019, and was attended by the Israeli Prime Minister's wife, Sara Netanyahu, the White House envoy Jason Greenblatt, the US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman, and the right-wing casino mogul and Trump donor Sheldon Adelson. During the inauguration, Friedman said: "This place is as much a heritage of the United States as it is a heritage of Israel."⁶⁹

This was the second time this tunnel had been opened, as Israel Culture Minister Miri Regev previously opened the same section of the tunnel on 31/12/2016, while criticizing outgoing President Barack Obama.⁷⁰ On 23/12/2016 Regev requested that the US refrain from vetoing UN Security Council Resolution 2334 condemning settlement building. Apparently, the Ir David Foundation (Elad) and Jerusalem's municipality considered the inauguration a political opportunity to reinforce their claims of legitimacy of the tunnels under *al-Aqsa* Mosque and in its vicinity following Trump's decision, so they decided to reopen the tunnel with high-level US participation.

Despite this inauguration, the Herodian Road tunnel still needs around 13 years to be completed. At the time of writing, work is focused on the section passing under Wadi Hilweh neighborhood and reaching beneath the Old City walls. Alarming, the digging and rehabilitation works in this huge tunnel have devastating effects on Palestinian properties above it, and the Wadi Hilweh Information Center documented damage to 70 houses there during the winter of 2018–2019.⁷¹

2. Jerusalem's Islamic Holy Sites

Cemeteries are the second goal of the occupation in Jerusalem, after *al-Aqsa* Mosque, and for two main reasons. Firstly, they represent vast real estate that used to be located on the city outskirts, which is why cemeteries surround the four sides of Jerusalem's Old City. However, with the expansion of the borders of Jerusalem and urbanization beyond the Old City, ancient Islamic cemeteries became located in the heart of Jerusalem. This applies to four major cemeteries: Mamilla to the west, Mercy to the east and to its north the Yusufiyah, and al-Mujahidin adjacent to Herod's Gate to the north. Secondly, these cemeteries bear witness to the historic identity of the city's inhabitants. That is why Israel is establishing a large Jewish

cemetery on the Mount of Olives, parallel to its obliteration of neighboring Islamic cemeteries, trying to erase Jerusalem's identity even at the level of graves and tombstones.

a. The Mercy Cemetery

Targeting cemeteries throughout 2018–2019 was mainly focused on the Mercy Cemetery, where the Israelis started to execute the plan published by the municipality in December 2017 aiming to appropriate a large segment of the cemetery and convert it to a national park. On 15/3/2018, Israel Nature and Parks Authority took measurements of the area,⁷² then on 29/4/2018, it destroyed a grave belonging to al-‘Abbasi family in the north of the cemetery,⁷³ and uprooted olive trees in its vicinity the following day.⁷⁴ On 2/5/2018, it started placing iron partitions, separating some areas of the cemetery, and on 9/5/2018, it tried to prohibit visitors.⁷⁵ The Jerusalemites, especially from Silwan, countered this aggression by cleaning and weeding the cemetery, and restoring the tombstones, in addition to destroying the iron partitions every Friday, starting on 11/5/2018.⁷⁶ This reaction made the Israelis targeting the cemetery retreat gradually.

Israelis have focused on Mercy Cemetery, since it is part of the spatial division plan of *al-Aqsa* courtyard. Taking hold of the Mercy Cemetery is an essential prerequisite to opening and putting to use the Mercy and Repentance gates. Indeed, targeting the cemetery made Jerusalemites realize that the real target was the opposite side, inside *al-Aqsa* Mosque, and this could be considered one of the drivers of the Gate of Mercy uprising nine months later.

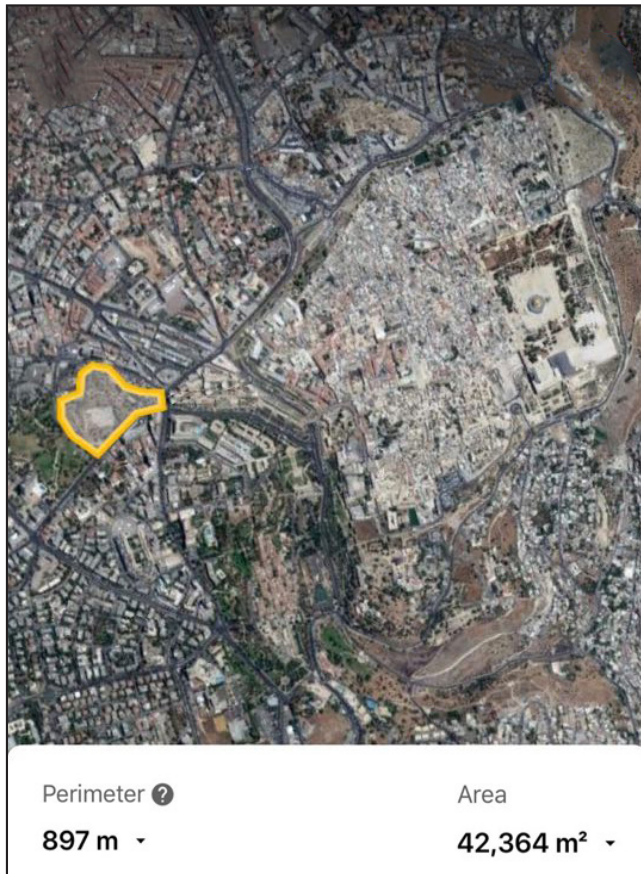
Temple extremists joined the confrontations, raiding the cemetery and performing biblical rituals when celebrating their holidays. Such aggressions occurred on 10/12/2018, in April 2019 and on 29/11/2019.⁷⁷

b. The Mamilla Cemetery⁷⁸

On Monday 11/2/2019, media outlets and activists on social media platforms circulated an advertisement posted by the Jerusalem municipality, revealing the municipality's intention to widen a pedestrian walkway in the cemetery to become a street for cars, giving a 60-day notice for any objection starting 11/1/2019. This expansion was a prelude to the inauguration of the Center for Human Dignity—Museum of Tolerance (MOT), which was built on the cemetery and is expected to be inaugurated in 2020.

Although Arab sources say that the remaining part of the cemetery is 20 donums only, area calculation via Google Earth after accurate identification of the corners of the cemetery shows that the remaining area is 42 donums,⁷⁹ including the Mamilla Pool, which covers six donums of Waqf property dedicated for the cemetery. These remaining donums are likely to be the target of repeated aggression as Israel views the cemetery as land in a strategic location, on which it would establish important commercial, governmental and touristic facilities.

**Map 2/3: The Remaining Part of the Mamilla Cemetery
Including the Mamilla Pool**



c. Al-Mujahidin Cemetery

Al-Mujahidin Cemetery is less frequently targeted than other Jerusalem cemeteries. However, it witnessed an incident on 12/3/2018, when Israeli forces raided the cemetery and destroyed the headstones of the graves of those killed in

the 2015 Knives *Intifadah*, in an attempt to obliterate such symbols of the *Intifadah*, while imposing continuous siege on their families and neighborhoods.⁸⁰

d. Attacks on Mosques

During the period covered in this report, settlers attacked many mosques, among which was Sheik Makki Mosque in the Old City in the end of February 2019, repeating the attack on 11/3/2019.⁸¹ Also, on 12/9/2019, Israeli forces launched tear gas in al-Arba'in Mosque in 'Isawiyyah, where a number of worshippers suffocated.⁸²

3. The Islamic Holy Sites in the Rest of Palestine

a. The Ibrahimi Mosque

Israel considers the division of the Ibrahimi Mosque a successful model to be emulated in *al-Aqsa* Mosque. The Protocol Concerning the Redeployment in Hebron (aka the Hebron Protocol) signed on 17/1/1997 between the PLO and Israel, frustrated the Palestinian resistance and divided Hebron into two areas; H-1 and H-2. Area H-2 is completely under Israeli control, and it includes al-Shuhada Street, al-Hisba, Tel Rumeida, the Old City and the Ibrahimi Mosque all the way to the settlements of Kiryat Arba and Givat Harsina.⁸³ Area H-1 is under Palestinian administration and includes the rest of the city's neighborhoods. In fact, this agreement was a reward for the settlers, even after the massacre they committed in 1994, as it has placed the Mosque on their side of the city.

Although the Ibrahimi Mosque and the Old City were among the main axes of confrontation during *al-Aqsa Intifadah*, a lull prevailed from 2006 to 2019. However, during the 2017–2019 period, the media exposed developments in the Ibrahimi Mosque especially settlers escalating their attacks on the Mosque during Jewish holidays such as Passover, the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles. In return, on 31/5/2018, the Hebron Municipality Community Center launched a campaign to support the popular initiative “Resist with your Prayers,” which started in 2012 and was held annually during Ramadan despite attracting limited numbers.⁸⁴ This media awakening was followed by the emergence of a youth movement in October 2019 under the name “Protectors of the Ibrahimi Mosque,” inviting people to gather for Friday dawn prayers, while reassuring the participants that there were measures to prevent the recurrence of a massacre against them. The youths stood around the worshippers in the Mosque and outside

as they performed prayers.⁸⁵ This initiative was launched on Friday 22/11/2019, and was titled the Great Dawn campaign.⁸⁶ Eight weeks later, on Friday 10/1/2020, the campaign was emulated in *al-Aqsa* Mosque,⁸⁷ and in the tenth week, on Friday 24/1/2020, it spread throughout the WB mosques as well as outside Palestine.⁸⁸ The Great Dawn campaign continues as of the time of writing.

Throughout 2018–2019, the Ibrahimi Mosque was targeted by 1,429 Israeli attacks, shown in the table below:⁸⁹

Table 1/3: Israeli Attacks Against the Ibrahimi Mosque 2018–2019⁹⁰

Attacks	2018	2019
Worshippers entry obstructions	57	43
Intrusions and performing biblical rituals	28	27
Constructions altering its surrounding features and excavations	15	20
Mosque Closure	17	16
Arrests inside the Mosque	12	4
Beating worshippers	3	3
Against the infrastructure	5	13
Interfering in crews' work	3	5
Preventing popular events	n/a	5
Adhan Ban	631	522
Total	771	658

Note: The data here is for the Jan-early Dec 2019 period.

b. Attacks in other Regions of Palestine

Attack statistics on holy sites are unavailable due to the Israeli closure of concerned specialized institutions, including the International Solidarity Foundation for Human Rights in Nablus and Al-Aqsa Association for Waqf and Heritage which were closed in 2014 and 2015.

Alternative statistics were published by the Palestinian Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, which stated that the holy sites in the GS and WB, including East Jerusalem, were subjected to 1,300 attacks in 2018,⁹¹ while figures for 2019 had not been published at the time of writing. Most attacks outside Jerusalem and the Ibrahimi Mosque were focused on two sites: Joseph's Tomb in Balata, which witnessed repeated raids and the performance of biblical rituals, and Bilal bin Rabah Mosque in Bethlehem, which Israelis claim is Rachel's Tomb.

4. Christian Holy Sites in Jerusalem and Palestine

The historic case of Orthodox Christians in Palestine still affects their presence and holy sites. The Israeli authorities have taken advantage of the rift between national Orthodox Christians and the religious leadership of Greek clergy, to seize vital Church properties throughout Palestine. This rift has been the main reason for the depletion of the Christian presence in Palestine as it pushes lots of Orthodox Palestinians towards migration to escape the Israeli occupation and the Greek hegemony over the Patriarchate.⁹²

a. Final Ruling on Real Estates at Omar Square

On 29/5/2019, the Israeli Supreme Court issued its ruling concerning the selling of the Petra and Imperial Hotels in Omar Square facing Jaffa Gate, to the west of the Old City, and the shops in al-Malik al-Mu'azzam 'Issa Street, to the north of the Old City, referred to as "al-Mu'azzamiya Palace" in the case documents. It ruled in favor of the settlers who have bought the properties.⁹³

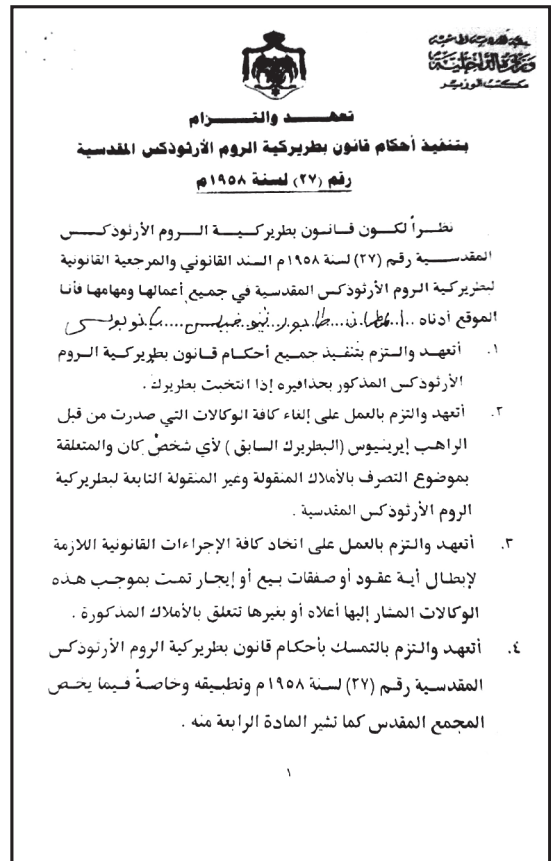
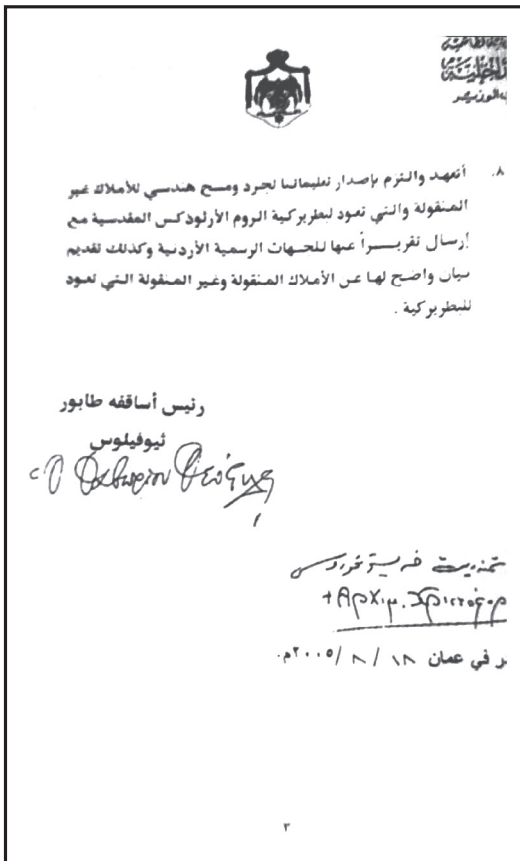
The ruling has cast doubts on the seriousness of the vows by the Patriarchate and Patriarch Theophilos III to annul the deal. Indeed, the National Orthodox Movement has always questioned that seriousness saying that the way the Patriarchate was managing the judicial course was doomed to failure. For its part, the Patriarchate responded by refuting the accusations and questioning the intentions of the Movement; it even employed an Israeli PR company to defend it in the media.⁹⁴

Ultimately, matters reached the point the national Orthodox activists had long warned against; and, strangely, the Israeli judge who pronounced the ruling expressed his surprise at the way the Patriarchate managed this case, stating that the latter did not challenge the signatures of its agent, Nikolas Papadimos, even

though it has accused him of signing the deal without its knowledge or approval. Nor did it take the initiative to return the sums it received from the front companies representing settlement organizations in exchange for leasing these properties for 99 years. Here, the judge said in his decision that “the Patriarchate cannot hold both ends of the rope claiming, on the one hand, the invalidity of the deals, and on the other hand keeping the funds for itself.”⁹⁵

Patriarch Theophilos III had previously signed a pledge to nullify the Omar Square deal as a condition for his assumption of the Patriarchate as successor to Patriarch Irenaios I, who was dismissed after the disclosure of that deal in 2005. With the issuance of the final ruling in this case, Theophilos III has failed to fulfill that pledge, 14 years after his signature before the Jordanian government, which means that he violated the condition that enabled him to take charge of the patriarchate.⁹⁶

The Document Signed by Theophilos



Following the decision, the United Orthodox Organization and the Movement of Truth, led by national Orthodox activists, issued a statement saying that “The Orthodox public’s concerns about all Theophilos III’s actions during this case, which lasted for nearly 14 years, were validated. Theophilos III, who has sold thousands of donum [...], cannot be faithful to Jaffa Gate endowments, which are in the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict.” Theophilos III and his legal team tried to make a case in front of the Supreme Court, by presenting new evidence, so that the case would be reviewed.⁹⁷ Only time will tell if these endeavors will succeed.

b. Attacks on Churches and Monasteries

The Case of the Monastery of Sultan:

On 23/10/2018, Coptic monks carried out a sit-in in protest at the Israeli attempt to carry out restoration work in the Monastery of Sultan, which is the historical share of the Copts in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The following day, Israeli police used force to suppress the peaceful monks and arrested several of them.⁹⁸ The Israeli police started the renovation of the monastery, effectively assuming the role of supreme authority over the Church or the guardian of Christian holy sites in Jerusalem. These actions served Israel in its endeavors to reinforce its sovereignty over the city and consider itself an inherent authority.

The Monastery of Sultan is a monastery located on the roof of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher,⁹⁹ and was dedicated as the share of the Copts according to the status quo established by the Treaty of Berlin between the Ottoman State and the European powers signed after the Russian-Ottoman War in 1878.¹⁰⁰ The monastery is usually headed by the bishop of the Metropolitan of Jerusalem.

The dispute over this monastery is between the Coptic Church and the Ethiopian Church, two churches that were separated in 1959. Their dispute began in 1820, when restoration works required its evacuation,¹⁰¹ and the Ethiopian monks feared that the Copts would not allow them to return. Although they were allowed back, the plague of 1837 ended their limited presence in Jerusalem.¹⁰² Since then, they have sought to maintain a permanent presence in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher by claiming eligibility in the Monastery of Sultan. Britain used this situation as an appropriate opportunity to change church administration arrangements that were confined to the three Orthodox sects: the Romans, the Armenians, and the Copts,

and since then a long period of conflict began which intensified with the separation of the Ethiopian Church from the Coptic Church.

For the Israeli authorities, this conflict was deemed an important opportunity to limit the Arab Christian presence in Jerusalem, especially as the Coptic Church was one of the three Churches of the East, which were historically entrusted with managing the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Thus, Israel sided with the Ethiopians and broke into the Monastery in 1970, installed new keys and handed them over to the Ethiopian monks.¹⁰³ Israel still uses this dispute as an excuse for its direct intervention in the administration, maintenance, and reconstruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, thus adding points of strength in its relationship with the West and the Christian world in general.

Closing the Church of the Holy Sepulcher Crisis:

In addition to the issue of the Monastery of Sultan, a crisis erupted when the heads of the three churches: the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox and Roman Catholic, announced the closure of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher on 25/2/2019. Their step was to object to Israel's imposition of Arnona tax on church properties. Israel wanted to benefit from Trump's decision and enforce Israeli sovereignty on Jerusalem and its Christian holy sites. However, the Israeli government had to back off three days after the churches took their stance.¹⁰⁴

In 2019, churches were attacked twice: first on 14/5/2019 when unidentified assailants broke into the Church of God in 'Aboud, west of Ramallah;¹⁰⁵ and the other on 25/12/2019 when a knife-wielding settler stormed the Church of the Holy Sepulcher during Christmas Mass causing panic among worshippers.¹⁰⁶

c. Decrease in the Number of Arab Christians in Jerusalem

By the end of 2017, the number of Arab Christians in Jerusalem was 12,600, comprising 4% of Arab Jerusalemites and 2.2% of the residents of eastern Jerusalem. Adding 3,200 non-Arab Christian residents, the total number was 15,800. If this number is compared to the total population of Jerusalem, Christians would comprise 1.8%, the lowest rate of Christian presence in Jerusalem since the emergence of the church in the city 2000 years ago.¹⁰⁷

Second: Population Under Occupation

1. The Reality of the Demographic Battle

By the end of 2017, the demographic balance in Jerusalem was as follows:

Table 2/3: Demographic Balance in Jerusalem as of 2017¹⁰⁸

Area	Arabs		Jewish settlers*		Total**
	Number	Percentage (%)	Number	Percentage (%)	
East Jerusalem (occupied in 1967)	337,400	61	215,900	39	553,300
West Jerusalem (occupied in 1948)	3,900	1	343,900	99	347,800
Total	341,300	38	559,800	62	901,100

* Since 1995, this number represents the “Jews and others” category in Israeli statistics. It includes non-Arab Christian residents and those not classified in terms of religion, such as Buddhist, Hindu, and non-Jewish immigrants, in addition to the Lahd army agents who fled to Israel after the liberation of southern Lebanon in 2000.

** Numbers are from the source, however, there might be slight differences in the hundredths as a result of rounding.

The demographic concern has been essential in shaping Israeli expulsion policies since the formation of the Inter-ministerial Committee to Examine the Rate of Development in Jerusalem (the Gafni Committee) in 1972, which determined that the demographic balance should be maintained at 30% Arabs and 70% Jews, but it is clear that those goals were not attainable. In the beginning of the current millennium, Sergio DellaPergola, an Israeli demographer and statistician, conducted studies on the population balance in Jerusalem, which became an official part of the Jerusalem Master Plan 2020. DellaPergola predicted, using statistical models, that the population balance would reach 40% Arab and 60% Jew. Thus, the Plan aimed to prevent these percentages being realized by 2020 using all possible means of planning,¹⁰⁹ including organization, construction, mass displacement, increasing financial burdens, spatial pressure, controlling public space for the benefit of settlements, settlement roads, and transportation projects. However, it is obvious that this percentage will be reached despite all these measures, and even if it is not fully realized, keeping it in favor of Jewish

settlers will be in measuring to the decimal tenths, unless the Israeli government modifies Jerusalem's borders before 2020.

2. Attempts to Expel the Palestinian Population

In the period covered in this report, Israel pursued the mass expulsion of Palestinians from the Khan al-Ahmar and Batn al-Hawa neighborhoods in Silwan, and the appropriation of property in other areas of Silwan and in the Old City. As for ID withdrawal, on 29/4/2018, blue residency cards were withdrawn from Jerusalem MPs and its former minister: Muhammad Abu Tair, Ahmed 'Atun, Muhammad Totah and Khaled Abu 'Arafah. This was after the Knesset approved a legal amendment authorizing the Minister of Interior to revoke the permanent residency of Jerusalemites.¹¹⁰ Previously, on 13/9/2017, the Israeli Supreme Court overturned a decision by the Minister of Interior to withdraw permanent residency cards from the Jerusalem MPs and its former minister, since it fell outside his jurisdiction.¹¹¹

a. Attempts to Evacuate Khan al-Ahmar

Since 2012, Israel has sought to evacuate Khan al-Ahmar while facing popular resilience and steadfastness from several gatherings, whose residents reconstructed them every time they were destroyed. This was despite the fact they had witnessed the army's destruction of a number of communities of the Jahalin Bedouins, who populated that area after a previous displacement. Foreign solidarity and Jerusalemite public sympathy with the cause of the Jahalin Bedouins helped their steadfastness, which was one of the reasons the completion of the Separation Wall from the eastern side of Jerusalem was disrupted.

Following Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, Israeli authorities deemed it an opportune moment to expand the geographic scope of this decision. They tried to evacuate Khan al-Ahmar to complete the Separation Wall around the Adumim settlement bloc, to the east of Jerusalem, and announce extended borders of the city which coincide with the Separation Wall, at an estimated area of 290 kilometers square. This ultimately meant that Trump had not only recognized Jerusalem but "Greater Jerusalem" as well.

The evacuation attempt, however, faced two major difficulties: The first was international rejection, mainly by the Russians and Europeans, and even by the US Democratic Party, who deemed the expansion of Jerusalem to the Jordan Valley

would mean an end to the two-state solution and any political process based on it, especially as the expansion was based on a geographical barrier, the Separation Wall.

The other difficulty was the popular movement, especially in the Abu Nawwar community, whose residents (only 180 persons) spearheaded the resistance,¹¹² despite the area threatened with demolition having a population estimated at 2,400 people. This popular movement benefitted from two factors: the first was that the PA considered the evacuation of Khan al-Ahmar an existential threat, so it adopted the popular action and Fatah activists widely participated, thus encouraging activists from other movements to participate; and the other was the participation of foreign solidarity activists, who have been concerned with Khan al-Ahmar since the evacuation project started in 2012.

On 24/5/2018, the Israeli Supreme Court approved the destruction of Khan al-Ahmar communities,¹¹³ and on 23/6/2018, Israeli forces announced their readiness to carry out the destruction and popular activities began in response. On 3/7/2018, the Israeli authorities ordered the closure of the roads leading to Khan al-Ahmar and the sealing of its entrances, and on 4/7/2018, Israeli forces raided the community and clashed with protestors leaving 35 injured. The raids were renewed on 11/7/2018 but the occupation forces could not carry out the destruction. On 15/7/2018, Israeli forces installed iron gates at the entrance of Abu Nawwar community to besiege it, but when they tried to destroy it on 16/9/2018, after two months of siege, they were faced with the same protests. Israel's attempts were repeated on 23/9/2018 through the distribution of demolition notices to the Abu Nawwar community in Khan al-Ahmar,¹¹⁴ and on 17/10/2018 and 19/10/2018.

On 17/10/2018, a new international development emerged in the case of Khan al-Ahmar, as the International Criminal Court (ICC) Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda announced that the demolition of Khan al-Ahmar constituted a war crime, and that she would not hesitate to take any appropriate action.¹¹⁵ This announcement was the major point that urged the Israeli government to retreat, and Netanyahu declared on 20/10/2018 the indefinite postponement of Khan al-Ahmar demolition.¹¹⁶

This postponement dealt a major blow to the US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, for amending the borders of the city was the first official Israeli

step to transform that recognition into a reality. This made the retreat an important setback which the Israelis could not easily accept, and they are likely would try again at the earliest favorable opportunity. However, it would necessarily be in a sudden and swift manner in order to prevent an accumulation of popular movements. Nevertheless, if international support and media coverage are maintained, the return of the Israelis will be difficult. In addition, providing the Khan al-Ahmar communities, who rely on grazing and dairy production, with reasons to stay would undermine Israel's strategic reliance on their slow migration, and perhaps this last element has been the most misunderstood in this issue.

b. Appropriations of Jerusalemites' Houses

In 2018, major Jerusalem properties were taken over by Israel, mainly in Silwan and the Old City, which had been part of the Judaization goals since the beginning of the twentieth century. Remarkably, the Israeli authorities disclosed these properties in October 2018:

- **Fteiha property in Silwan:** On 3/10/2018, media outlets disclosed the transfer of a plot of land with two apartments built on it, owned by the Fteiha family and located near Silwan Spring.¹¹⁷
- **Joudeh al-Husseini property in Aqaba Darwish:** On 4/10/2018, it was announced that a transfer occurred of a three-story property owned by Joudeh al-Husseini, located in Aqaba Darwish on the road to King Faisal Gate, one of the most important gates of *al-Aqsa* Mosque. What was striking about the circumstances of this loss was that it was the result of an internal Fatah dispute. Fadi El-Salameen, a Palestinian activist living in the US and an associate of ex-Fatah leader Muhammad Dahlan, tried to buy a Joudeh al-Husseini property in 2015, and signed a preliminary contract with the owners before the PA intelligence services led by Majid Faraj interfered, according to El-Salameen's narrative, and prevented the money transfer. After a year, Muhammad al-‘Attari, a businessman said to be close to Faraj, stepped in to buy the property and transfer its ownership to a settler-owned company registered in one of the international tax havens. Al-‘Attari, in turn, denied his involvement in the leak and accused the landlords of being responsible for it.¹¹⁸
- **Al-‘Alami property in Aqaba Darwish:** On 24/10/2018, news emerged about the transfer of a property, 60% of which is owned by al-‘Alami family and 40%

by al-Halabi family. It was revealed that the property was sold to Palestinian organizations by a broker named ‘Issam ‘Akel, the Director of the Association of Palestinian Local Authorities of the Ministry of Local Government. Palestinian security forces arrested ‘Akel, and, after an investigation committee confirmed his involvement, a PA court sentenced him on 31/12/2018 to life imprisonment.¹¹⁹ During ‘Akel’s detention, Israel and the US pressured the PA to free him, and the Israeli forces arrested a number of PA leaders, including Jerusalem Governor ‘Adnan Ghaith. They also prevented the Minister of Jerusalem Affairs ‘Adnan al-Husseini from traveling for three months, and withdrew the VIP card of Ahmad Barak, the PA Prosecutor who ordered the apprehension of ‘Akel.¹²⁰ Ultimately, US pressure led to handing ‘Akel over to the US on 17/1/2019, after 17 days of his life imprisonment sentence.¹²¹ On 5/3/2019, the issue of al-‘Alami property came to an end as settlers seized it with Israeli police protection.¹²²

- **Abu Sbeih property in Silwan:** Late on 22/10/2018, the Israeli police stormed a three-story apartment building in the Batn al-Hawa neighborhood in Silwan, to seize it. Later, it was revealed that the person involved in the property transfer was Yusuf Abu Sabei, a broker who has previously transferred the property of a family in Bab al-Hadid in Jerusalem’s Old City. The next day, Yusuf’s family issued a statement that disavowed him and confirmed that any sale by any family member must be presented to the Family Council.¹²³

This synchronization in the transfer announcements, each of which takes many years of preparation and processing, was probably not accidental. Rather, it was planned to affect Jerusalemites’ morale and make them believe that their resilience was futile and that their fortifications would collapse from within at the hands of traitors.

The transfer of property in Jerusalem has led to major losses in recent years, including 53 housing units in Batn al-Hawa in Silwan, and 21 housing units in al-Hara al-Wusta in 2014, in addition to strategic real estate in the Old City, such as al-Yuzbashi property in al-Sa‘adiya neighborhood in 2016, and the aforementioned al-Husseini property. Still, the percentage of transfers remains limited, estimated at 73 housing units in the Old City, and 114 housing units in Silwan.

3. Demolition of Houses and Structures

The total number of structures demolished in Jerusalem between 2000 and 2019 was 1,688 structures, mostly residential buildings. This number was reached after adding those destroyed in 2018–2019 to the 1,352 residential structures demolished throughout 2000–2017.¹²⁴

Table 3/3: Demolition of Structures in Jerusalem in 2018¹²⁵

Neighborhood	Silwan	Shu‘fat RC	Beit Hanina	‘Isawiyyah	Mukabbir Mount	Other neighborhoods	Total
Number of structures	30	21	19	18	17	38	143

Table 4/3: Demolition of Structures in Jerusalem in 2019¹²⁶

Neighborhood	Mukabbir Mount	Silwan	Sur Baher	Beit Hanina	Shu‘fat and Shu‘fat RC	Other neighborhoods	Total
Number of structures	47	42	29	23	23	9	173

The period following Trump’s Jerusalem decision witnessed unprecedented demolition, not witnessed since *al-Aqsa Intifadah*. On 20/11/2018, Israeli forces broke into the Shu‘fat RC with six bulldozers destroying 16 commercial shops and their contents in two days.¹²⁷ On 22/7/2019, they demolished 100 apartments in six buildings in Wadi Hummus, east of Sur Baher, most of which were under construction and were intended to be populated by around 350 Jerusalemites, while many apartments were populated by a total of 24 Jerusalemites. Thus, this was the largest demolition in Jerusalem since the demolition of the Moroccan Quarter in 1967.¹²⁸

4. The Field Situation in Jerusalem

Since 2013, Jerusalem has experienced confrontations, which waxed and waned, but did not stop. During this period, confrontations passed through four peaks: Abu Khudeir uprising in July 2014; the Knives *Intifadah* in October 2015; Lion’s Gate uprising in July 2017; and the Gate of Mercy uprising in February 2019. With the beginning of 2020, the situation seemed to be heading to a fifth peak with the Great Dawn campaign.

The general pattern of these peaks shows a state of unrest, but fall short of an overall *Intifadah*, with an average of 18 months separating one peak from the other. Significantly, the uprisings were popular movements, which erupted in response to attacks against individuals or against *al-Aqsa* Mosque, and in the latter case, the three movements succeeded in forcing the Israeli forces to retreat.

Location wise, the uprisings were concentrated in neighborhoods in Jerusalem's center: the Old City, Silwan and al-Tur, in addition to 'Isawiyyah and the Shu'fat RC in the north, and Mukabbir Mount to the south, albeit to a lesser degree. Although the Shu'fat RC and Mukabbir Mount were at the heart of confrontations in the first years of these uprisings between 2013 and 2015, they maintained calm in later years, whereas Jerusalem's central neighborhoods and 'Isawiyyah remained the hotbed of confrontations until 2020. Apparently, the isolated locations of Beit Safafa and Sur Baher to the south of Jerusalem and Kafr 'Aqab to the north influenced their connection with the city's fabric and its confrontations. As for Beit Hanina, the suburb housing of the richer Jerusalemites, it continued to be the calmest throughout those years, even though it connects different northern neighborhoods.

In 2018 and 2019, Jerusalem witnessed the following attacks:

Table 5/3: Attacks in Jerusalem 2018–2019¹²⁹

Year	Stabbing and stabbing attempt	Car ramming	Shooting	Explosive device	Total
2018	17	0	4	7	28
2019	13	1	2	15	31

In Jerusalem, five persons were killed in 2018, and six others in 2019.¹³⁰

5. 'Isawiyyah: A Hotbed of Confrontations

In addition to its academic role, the Hebrew University was a central starting point in northeastern Jerusalem, for the northern settlements were built around it after 1967, the French Hill is to its north, Ramat Eshkol to its northwest and Ma'ale Adumim parallel to it from the East. Consequently, 'Isawiyyah became located in the middle of these settlements and thus has been the location receiving a heavy share of attacks in all uprisings, and the one affected most by the policies of land grabbing, building prevention and home demolitions. The construction of

the Border Police Base in the far north of Sheikh Jarrah increased the exposure of ‘Isawiyyah to land grab, as it became the closest Arab neighborhood to that base, and the suppression of its residents turned into one of the basic training rounds of its members.

On 24/1/2018, Israeli forces broke into ‘Isawiyyah, supported by helicopters, and on 27/1/2018, they imposed a closure which lasted for several days. On 30/1/2018, six commercial stores were demolished, and on 1–2/2/2018, clashes took place due to the siege, where 20 Jerusalemites were injured. On 13/2/2018, two commercial stores were demolished, and on 18/2/2018 the siege was still intact while four youths were arrested. In response, on 9/3/2018, the ‘Isawiyyah people held their Friday prayers at the eastern entrance of their town and the confrontations resumed the following week, where 15 young men arrested.

On 15/4/2018, the clashes returned to ‘Isawiyyah as Israeli forces stormed the town with municipality crews to carry out new demolitions, but seemingly did not; and on 8/5/2018, they destroyed a gas station in the town. This targeting declined for a while, when the Israeli forces tried to evacuate Khan al-Ahmar given the geographical proximity of the two areas. When the evacuation was postponed, the forces stormed ‘Isawiyyah on 6/11/2018, warning that they would demolish a stadium there. Raids recurred on 12–13/11/2018, during which a Musta‘ribeen (*Mista‘arvim*— an elite Israeli undercover unit) unit arrested two children, and on 20/11/2018 and 7/12/2018, the town was stormed and clashes took place.

‘Isawiyyah experienced a peak of Israeli aggression during May-August 2019. On 15/5/2019, Israeli forces stormed the town and handed over 20 demolition notices, imposing a security curfew the next day. Confrontations escalated as the curfew continued until 27/6/2019, when Israeli forces shot the youth Muhammad Samir Obeid at point blank range in the head, killing him. After that, ‘Isawiyyah expressed its rage and demanded the Israeli forces hand over Obeid’s body, who was buried on 1/7/2019. Israeli forces wounded 56 Jerusalemites on the day of the funeral, and 80 the following day, while the security curfew remained intact. Israeli raids of the town and confrontations continued throughout July and August 2019, and in August the Israeli Army arrested the father of Muhammad Samir Obeid.

6. Targeting Symbols of Palestinian Sovereignty in Jerusalem

In 2018–2019, Israel continued disrupting the work of Jerusalem Governor ‘Adnan Ghaith by arresting him, placing him under house arrest and banning him from entering Jerusalem. The same policy was pursued towards Fadi Hidmi, the Minister of Jerusalem Affairs who was appointed when the Palestinian government was formed on 13/4/2019. The situation escalated on 20/11/2019 when Israeli forces closed the headquarters of the Education Directorate, which operated under the Administration of Jerusalem’s Awqaf, as well as the headquarters of the Arab Health Center and the Palestine TV office in the city.¹³¹ Thus, Israel disrupted the political, educational, and media presence of PA institutions in Jerusalem despite their limited effectiveness. Such was Israel’s policy in 2018–2019, through which Netanyahu’s government tried to capitalize on Trump’s decision.

Third: Judaization and Settlement in Jerusalem

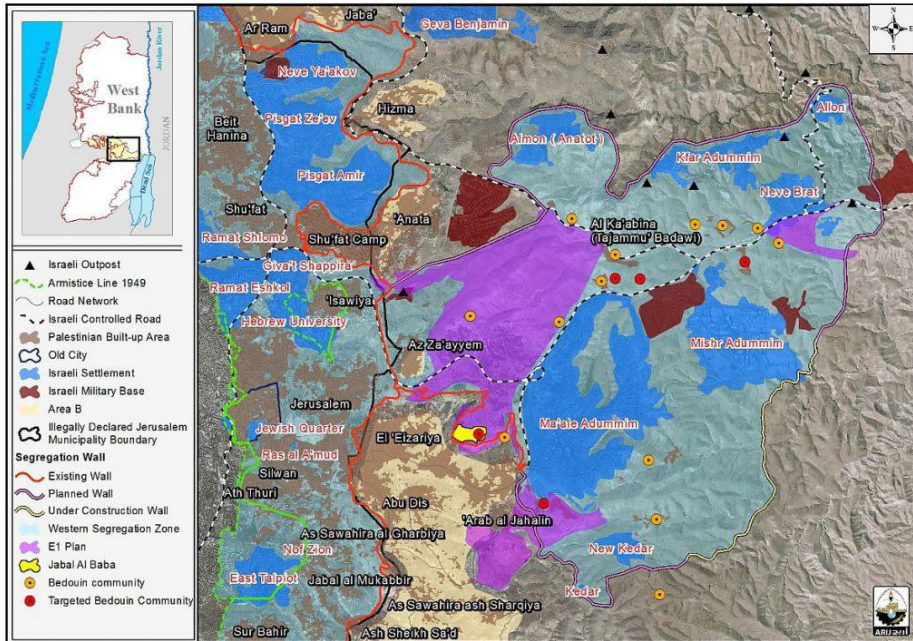
The Return to Expansion Based on the Geopolitical Role of Settlements

Over the past decade, Israel’s settlement expansion was based on their demographic function and their ability to attract more settlers to East Jerusalem, however, Trump’s decision apparently brought geopolitical considerations back to the forefront. Therefore, when drawing city boundaries was being taken into consideration, most of the expansion went in two directions:

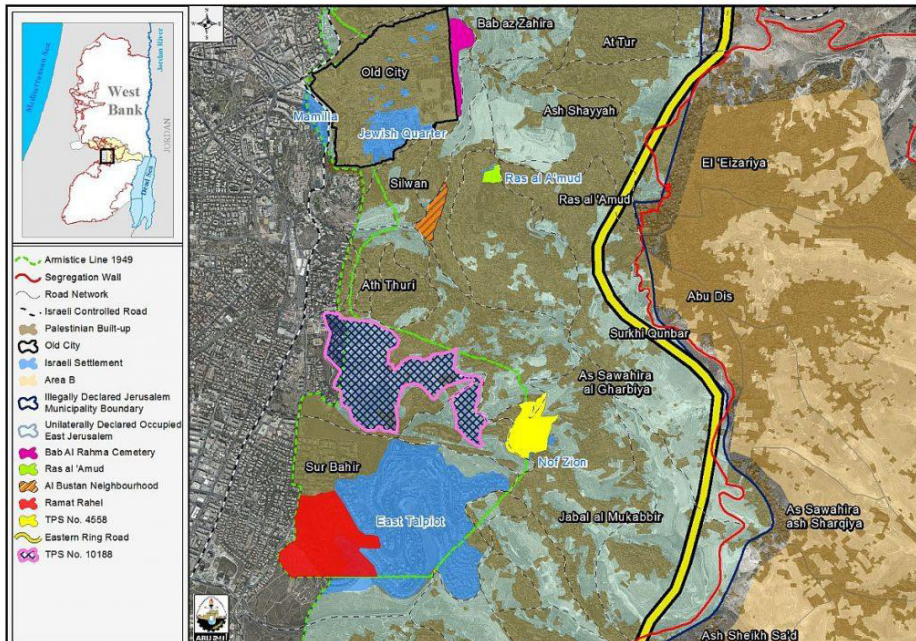
The first direction was expansion in the outer ring of settlements, especially the eastern and northern settlements, including Giv’at Ze’ev, Neve Ya’akov and Pisgat Ze’ev, besides the Ma’ale Adumim settlement bloc, juxtaposed with the plan to evacuate Khan al-Ahmar and promote east Ramallah settlements. This course reflected Israel’s determination to link Jerusalem to the slopes of the Jordan Valley, and prevent southern and eastern suburbs of Ramallah from expanding in this direction, while dividing the WB into northern and southern blocs (see map 3/3).

The second direction was the strengthening of the settlement presence in the center of Jerusalem, through the expansion of Talpiot bloc including Talpiot and East Talpiot settlements, and linking it to Nof Zion settlement built on Mukabbir Mount. This would isolate Sur Baher from the Arab fabric of Jerusalem, transforming it into a besieged suburb like Sharafat and Beit Safafa south of Jerusalem (see map 4/3).

Map 3/3: East Jerusalem Settlements and Bedouin Communities at Risk of Eviction



Map 4/3: Expansion of Talpiot – Nof Zion Bloc to Promote Israeli Presence in the Center of Jerusalem



Other expansion was mostly in Ramot bloc in the north, and to a lesser extent in the Gilo settlement to the south, since they were witnessing settler population growth contrary to other blocs, which developed on a geopolitical basis. These have historically succeeded in spatial annexation but fallen short of attracting settlers. The statistical tables below reveal the central trends throughout 2018–2019:

**Table 6/3: Approved Residential Units in the Settlements of Jerusalem
2018–2019¹³²**

Location	Settlement	2018		2019		Total
		No. of units approved or proposed for construction	Total units	No. of units approved or proposed for construction	Total units	
Jerusalem	Ramat Shlomo	1,243	3,357		5,720	9,077
	Ma'ale Adumim			1,303		
	Pisgat Ze'ev	250		1,070		
	Giv'at Ze'ev	196		110		
	Alon	325		325		
	Beit Orot			36		
	Geva Binyamin (Adam)	370		180		
	Neve Ya'akov			235		
	Har Adar	70				
	Kfar Adumim	92				
	Ma'ale Mikhmas	48				
	East Talpilot	711		603		
	Talpilot			641		
	Mukabbir Mount	48		100		
	Shepherd Hotel (Sheikh Jarrah)			13		
	Ramot			640		
	Gilo	4		464		

Table 7/3: Approved Residential Units in Outer Ring Settlements and Talpiot – Nof Zion Bloc Compared to Other Parts of the City 2018–2019¹³³

Settlement units	Number*	Percentage (%)	Expected household capacity
Approved in the outer ring	4,610	52.5	15,670
Approved in Talpiot–Nof Zion Bloc	2,103	22.5	7,150
Approved in other Jerusalem settlements	2,364	25.1	8,020
Total approved units	9,077	100	30,840

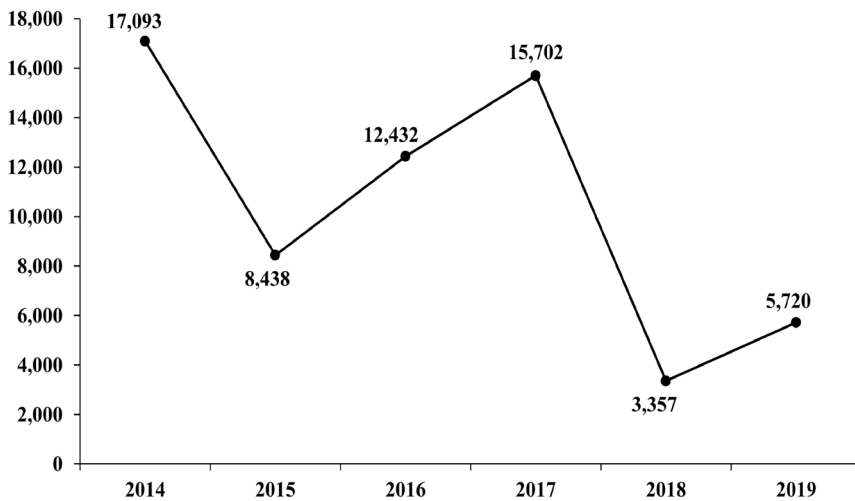
* These statistics reflect approved plans, posted tenders, and issued permits of residential units, hence, overlapping may occur, and their accumulative calculation needs revision.

Note: Figures are based on table 6/3.

It is noteworthy that the number of units that witnessed development in planning or building throughout 2018–2019 saw growth at lower than previous rates, where 2018, the year after Trump’s decision, recorded the lowest number of settlement units to progress in their approval and construction stages (see table 8/3).

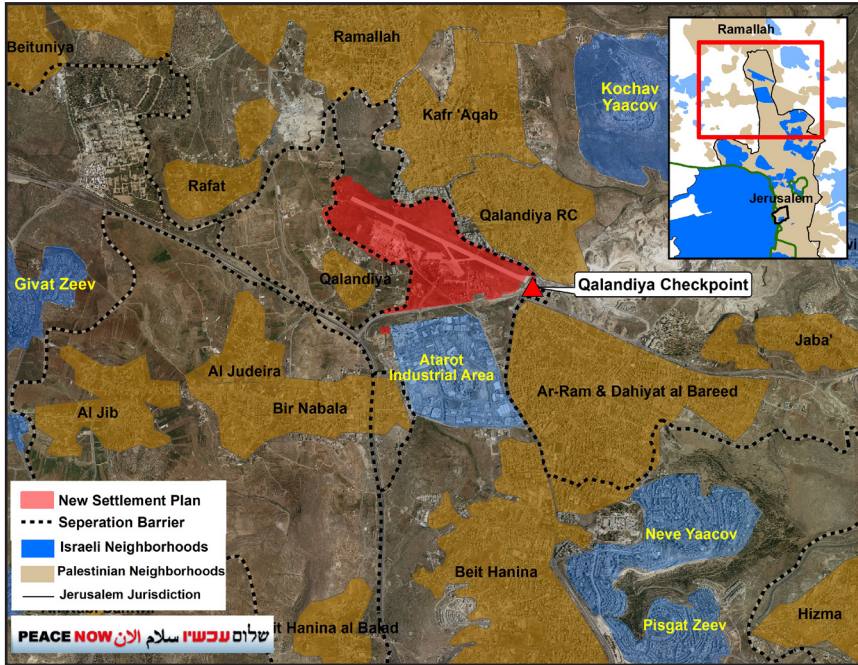
Table 8/3: Approved Residential Units 2014–2019¹³⁴

Year	Settlement units
2014	17,093
2015	8,438
2016	12,432
2017	15,702
2018	3,357
2019	5,720

Approved Residential Units 2014–2019**Atarot Settlement Project on the Site of Qalandiya Airport**

On 11/2/2020, the Ministry of Construction and Housing submitted a building plan to the Jerusalem municipality for the construction of a new settlement at the site of the closed Qalandiya Airport, in order to begin the process of studying it and adopting it in the local and district committees. This would mark the first time in a quarter of a century that the establishment of a new settlement in East Jerusalem began, since the establishment of Har Homa in place of Jabal Abu Ghneim in 1997. Giv'at HaMatos is a similar precedent, however, it was an expansion of an already established settlement nucleus. This settlement is expected to include 9,000 housing units,¹³⁵ and forms part of Israel's attempts to establish the final borders of Jerusalem, while being an impediment, alongside the Separation Wall, to prevent the expansion of Kafr 'Aqab and al-Ram and its connection with Beit Hanina. Therefore, it would exclude the possibility of connecting Ramallah and the outskirts of Jerusalem with Jerusalem's outer neighborhoods.

Map 5/3: Suggested Location of Atarot Settlement Amidst Arab Neighborhoods That are Likely to Become Connected



Fourth: Israeli Settlement Expansion in WB

1. Development of Settlement Expansion in WB

In 2018, the planning and building of 9,426 residential units in WB progressed, noting that Jerusalem's residential units were analyzed in detail in the previous section. In 2019, there was progress in 9,413 settlement units, making the total 18,839 units over the two years. Adding the number of approved residential units in Jerusalem during the same period, the total was approximately 30 thousand. Notably, examining the number of units approved over recent years, we see a significant increase since President Donald Trump started his tenure in early 2017, when compared to the final two years of the Obama administration. Nevertheless, these figures are close to those of 2014. Here we stress that in order to understand better the expansion of settlements in WB, it is necessary to analyze the number of residential units and study their general context, while taking into consideration the sources providing these numbers and their methods of calculation.

**Table 9/3: Approved Residential Units in WB Settlements
(Excluding Jerusalem) 2014–2019¹³⁶**

Year	Settlement units
2014	8,688
2015	2,292
2016	2,655
2017	9,896
2018	9,426
2019	9,413

As for figures concerning settlement expansion, the following should be noted:

- Reports issued by Peace Now movement on settlements, are the main source for the numbers of settlements, which are in turn published by international reports and the media. These figures depend on plans and tenders published by Israeli authorities in approved newspapers.¹³⁷ We also need to take into consideration the fact that only 13 of all WB settlements are obliged to publish tenders for building new residential units.¹³⁸ Also, the method for counting settlement units results in the magnification of their total number as some units are counted when they are initially or locally approved, and when they are approved at the level of the ministerial committee as well as when they are submitted in construction tenders.
- There is lack of sources regarding the geographic distribution of residential units in various WB settlements. Peace Now relies mainly on the plans published by the settlement councils, which do not provide detailed information, as they are subject to amendment and review, and sometimes for redistribution before approval. Many of the settlement expansion projects also depend on previously approved plans, which extend beyond the covered period. The lack of sources is reflected in the mismatch of the figures in the aggregate tables and the detailed tables presented later in this chapter, as the latter rely almost entirely on media coverage of settlement expansion to compensate for the absence of accurate monitoring of this expansion.
- Despite the fluctuation in the number of housing units, those actually constructed in WB remained fixed during the past two years.¹³⁹ This could be a result of

several factors, the availability of logistical supplies and budgets as well as private sector investment, which depends on the demand for housing units. Nevertheless, some projects might be advanced due to funding from religious associations, regardless of regular market laws.

- The publication of construction plans does not necessarily crystallize in actual building in the years following the publication. For example, the period covered in this report saw the construction of 215 units in Avnei Hefetz in Tulkarem and Alei Zahav in Salfit based on plans approved in 1998,¹⁴⁰ which means 22 years between approval and actual construction.
- The rise in approved residential units throughout 2018–2019 was partly due to the bias of the US administration. In late 2019, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated that the “establishment of Israeli civilian settlements in the West Bank is not per se inconsistent with international law.”¹⁴¹ Furthermore, it also reflected the political balances within Israel, for when a transitional government is formed by the Likud and the extreme right, it allows small parties to impose their agendas, and the Israeli prime minister increase his popularity through explicit support for settlement building. However, this might also mean that the approval of expansion plans is less likely to be executed in the near term, due to the fact that settlements are more related to the political climate than to the actual settlement activity.

2. Settler Population Growth and its Relation to Settlement Expansion in the WB

Although the increase in the number of settlement units remained at around nine thousand annually during the past three years, the population growth rate in the settlements decreased from 4.8% in 2017 to 3.1% in 2019, which is the lowest growth rate recorded during the last decade, except in 2016, when it was 2.1%. This confirms that these expansions were governed by geographic control rather than actual population growth (see table 10/3).

Settler population growth is generally characterized by an increase, which has fluctuated in the past five years between 2.1% and 4.8%. This growth depends mainly on natural increase, especially among religious Jews, and on internal migration between settlements, while the numbers of new settlers is the third driver,¹⁴² which raises the question about the real ability of Israel to build and populate all the settlement units it has approved in recent past years.

Table 10/3: Population Growth in WB Settlements 2010–2019¹⁴³

Year	Number of settlers	Increase	Percentage of increase (%)
2010	311,100	–	–
2011	325,500	14,400	4.6
2012	341,400	15,900	4.8
2013	356,500	15,100	4.4
2014	370,700	14,200	3.9
2015	385,900	15,200	4.1
2016	394,300	8,400	2.1
2017	413,400	19,100	4.8
2018	427,800	14,400	3.4
2019	441,100	13,300	3.1

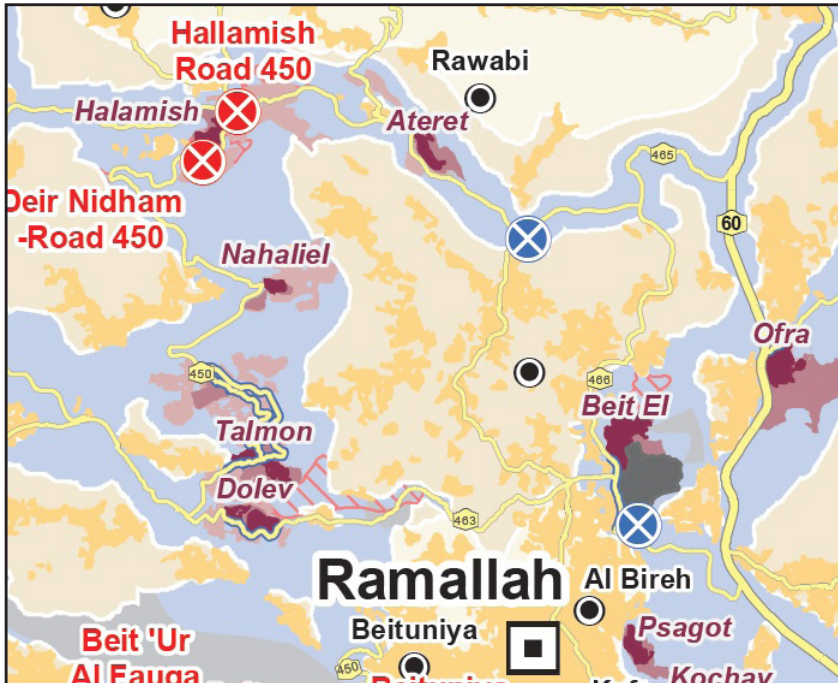
3. Analyzing Major Trends of Settlement Expansion in WB

A detailed analysis of settlement expansion, whether in terms of planning or construction, during 2018–2019, shown in tables 11/3 and 12/3 below, leads to the conclusion of the following basic trends:

- Permanently isolating Ramallah from Jerusalem: This is sought through focusing construction in settlements east and southeast of Ramallah, and in the eastern and northern outer ring of Jerusalem from the opposite side.
- Promoting deep settlement fingers starting from the Green Line deep into WB, including Qedumim finger in Qalqilya and Ariel finger in Salfit. Notably, more than two thousand settlement units were constructed in pursuit of this strategy.
- The consolidation of ideological-based settlement in the east Hebron settlements, which have remained stable in size for many years yet became the leading factor, besides Jerusalem, in deciding the Zionist identity according to Israel's vision. This was evident in Netanyahu's repeated visits to Hebron and his visits to the Ibrahimi Mosque in 2019 and 2020. Around 600 settlement units have been allocated for this purpose.

- Tightening Israel's grip over the northern Jordan Valley, and promoting the settlements on the road between Nablus and the Jordan Valley in Gilgal, Tomer, Petza'el and Ma'ale Efraim, at the expense of Duma, Fasayil and al-'Auja.
- Deep settlement incursion: Over the past two years, a large number of residential units were allocated to expand small settlements and outposts, which were established by settlers and had previously not been recognized by the Israeli government. In Ramallah, for example, more than a thousand residential units were allocated to expand the scattered settlements in the west, including Dolev, Talmon, Zayit Ra'anana (see table 11/3) and Halamish, so as to be contiguous and become a bloc, similar to Beit El in the east. This scene, together with limiting Ramallah from the south with Jerusalem envelope settlements, and limiting it from the north with the 'Atara crossing and Ateret settlement, which also disrupts its communication with Salbit, makes it reasonable to deduce that this approach means to prevent the expansion of Ramallah and limit its population within the current geographic sphere.

Map 6/3: West Ramallah Settlements Sought to Become One Bloc



- The same approach has been also pursued in Bethlehem. Despite the presence of a coherent bloc isolated by the Separation Wall, which is meant to annex it to Jerusalem from the west, analysis of the figures in table 12/3 shows that half of the expansion allocated to it went to the settlements of Nikodim east of Beit Sahour and Asfar to its south. These settlements are pressuring the towns of Bethlehem from the east and preventing their communication with the towns of north Hebron. In December 2018, the Israeli government approved the allocation of 1,200 donums of Khirbit al-Nahle lands for the Israeli Ministry of Construction and Housing to establish a new settlement called Givat Eitam,¹⁴⁴ thus completing the isolation of Bethlehem from the south of WB. This is part of the E2 project, seeking to entrap the Palestinian presence in the city and give the area a Jewish character, so it can become an Israeli tourist destination, capitalizing on the more than 1.5 million tourists who visit Bethlehem annually.
- The Israeli government resorts to building new types of settlements in areas where it is difficult to establish large population centers, especially in the Jordan Valley and eastern WB areas. These settlements include the construction of horse farms for recreation, where the Israeli leftist Kerem Navot Foundation documented the building of 37 stables and horse farms in Jordan Valley since 2000.¹⁴⁵ They also include the construction of touristic and industrial centers such as a motor park, whose construction is to be located between Central Jordan Valley and Ramallah governorate, and will include 120 hotel rooms.¹⁴⁶
- Turning Jerusalem into an urban center for WB settlements so that their transportation systems are connected to it. The far-right Minister of Transportation Bezalel Smotric approved the plan and prepared to implement it. This explains why he rejected the comprehensive transportation plan in Israel, submitted on 27/6/2019, because it “discriminated” against WB settlers, ignored the development of transportation in the WB and did not invest enough to connect these settlements to Israeli cities.¹⁴⁷ In 29/11/2019, Smotrich announced a plan for the construction of a section of Highway 60 connecting Gush Etzion settlements to it, considering it the first of a dozen or so roads, which will require investments of money and time to be transformed into an integrated transportation network.¹⁴⁸

**Table 11/3: Approved Residential Units in Northern WB Settlements
2018–2019¹⁴⁹**

Location	Settlement	2018		2019		Total
		No. of units approved or proposed for construction	Total units	No. of units approved or proposed for construction	Total units	
Ramallah	Ofarim	583	1,645		678	2,323
	Beit El	189		296		
	Zayit Ra'anana	503				
	Beit Aryeh	8				
	Halamish	60				
	Talmon	180				
	Psagot	9				
	Dolev	28		382		
	Givat Assaf	85				
Salfit	Peduel	107	1,099		148	1,247
	Alei Zahav	166		40		
	Etz Efraim	108		108		
	Kfar Tapuach	26				
	Bruchin	71				
	Revava	27				
	Ganei Modi'in	194				
	Ariel	400				

Location	Settlement	2018		2019		Total
		No. of units approved or proposed for construction	Total units	No. of units approved or proposed for construction	Total units	
Jericho and Jordan valley	Gilgal	234	764	98	280	1,044
	Givat Sal'it	94				
	Maskiot	27				
	Tomer	55				
	Fasayil	55				
	Ma'ale Efraim	299				
	Vered Yeriho			182		
Qalqilya	Karnei Shomron	85	1,554		130	1,684
	Kiryat Netafim	84				
	Imanuel	208		60		
	Nofim	278				
	Tzofim	435				
	Kedumim	464		70		
Nablus	Allon Shevut	15	71		207	278
	Barakha			207		
	Itamar	56				
Jenin	Tal Menashe	79	159		0	159
	Hinanit	80				
Tulkarem	Einav	81	211		0	211
	Avnei Hefetz	130				

**Table 12/3: Approved Residential Units in Southern WB Settlements
2018–2019¹⁵⁰**

Location	Settlement	2018		2019		Total
		No. of units approved or proposed for construction	Total units	No. of units approved or proposed for construction	Total units	
Bethlehem	Ibei HaNahal		841	98	1,502	2,343
	Efrat	106		300		
	Kfar Etzion	464				
	Kfar Eldad	84		105		
	Nikodim	4		770		
	Elazar	68				
	Metzad	100		207		
	Allon Shevut	15		22		
Hebron	Adora	60	1,523		152	1,675
	Ma'on	27				
	Sansana	128				
	Otniel	128				
	Pnei Hever	24		76		
	Tene Omarim	135				
	Hagai	135		76		
	Negohot	102				
	Metsada	61				
	Neve Daniel	180				
	Old City	30				
	Carmel	156				
	Karmeit Tzur	120				
	Sosia	81				
	Kiryat Arba'	156				

Fifth: The Separation Wall and Barriers in WB

1. The Separation Wall

In 2018–2019, there was no major development in the construction of the 708-kilometer-long Separation Wall, with progress not exceeding 0.3%.¹⁵¹ This does not reflect Israel giving up on the Wall, but rather the fact that its main sections separating Palestinian towns from the 1948 occupied territories had already been completed, and the isolation of WB settlements had largely been achieved. The slow progress of the Wall's construction can also be attributed to the change in Israel's vision of its final borders. During recent years, approvals for establishing settlements and outposts east of the Wall increased, which meant that the original borders of the Wall no longer guaranteed the complete isolation of settlement blocs. The Israeli government continued to promote bypass road network and closing roads that connect Palestinian towns and villages, in order to ensure that Palestinians are unable to reach settlement blocs.

Most progress on the Wall, in 2018–2019, was the section surrounding Beit El settlement built on the lands of Jalazone town in the Ramallah Governorate, and the section surrounding Shaked settlement established on the lands of the village of Dahr al-Maleh in Jenin. The number of checkpoints and barriers along the Wall reached 123 during the period covered by this report.¹⁵²

2. The Barriers¹⁵³

In 2019, the number of barriers in WB disrupting communication among Palestinian governorates, city centers, villages and towns reached 777, including iron gates, concrete roadblocks, earth mounds besides temporary and permanent checkpoints. Checkpoints are mainly found in the Hebron governorate, where 320 barriers exist, then Ramallah and Nablus governorates with 114 and 76 barriers respectively.

During the period covered by this report, the Israeli Army installed 15 new checkpoints in the Hebron governorate, most of which were in its southern villages, and 14 checkpoints in the Ramallah governorate mostly concentrated in its north to separate it from the northern towns.

Sixth: House and Structure Demolitions and Land Confiscations

1. House and Structure Demolitions

In 2018–2019, the number of houses and structures in WB declined in comparison to 2016–2017. In 2018, 244 houses and structures were demolished in WB excluding Jerusalem,¹⁵⁴ for the latter was addressed previously in this chapter. These demolitions led to the expulsion of 246 people, where most of the demolitions were in Hebron with 72, Ramallah 35, and Salfit 35. In 2019, there were 384 houses and structures demolished, leading to the expulsion of 811 people, with most of the demolitions in Bethlehem with 123, Hebron 123 and Tubas 58.¹⁵⁵

Field documentation by the Land Research Center (LRC) and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs-occupied Palestinian territory (OCHA-oPt) has shown differences in the numbers of demolition cases due to different methodologies. Yet at the same time, this difference shows the need to support the accurate documentation of demolition of houses and structures, so that it becomes more comprehensive, and hence more effective in bringing support to the owners of the homes and structures destroyed. The following table lists the cases documented by each side, noting that the period covered in this report saw deterioration in the funding of human rights organizations working in the occupied territories, whether these bodies were civil institutions or offices affiliated with the UN or its various bodies.¹⁵⁶ Ultimately, this raises questions about the success of the Israeli foreign policy in undermining efforts to monitor its aggression against the Palestinians.

Table 13/3: House and Structure Demolitions in WB 2018–2019¹⁵⁷

Source of documentation	2018	2019
OCHA-oPt	244	384
LRC	317	171

2. Land Confiscation

In 2018–2019, more than 23,197 donums of land were confiscated for security reasons, or for settlement construction or expansion, or construction of bypass roads connecting settlements.¹⁵⁸ Ramallah governorate witnessed the highest cases of land confiscations of 5,965 donums,¹⁵⁹ Tubas governorate 2,444 donums, Salfit governorate 2,081 donums, and Hebron governorate 1,518 donums. These numbers were largely consistent with the settlement activity in the Ramallah Governorate, the northern Jordan Valley (Tubas Governorate), and the Salfit Governorate, which is characterized by low population density, fertility of land, and availability of water resources.

Seventh: The Water

Israel controls about 80% of water resources in the WB,¹⁶⁰ considering them to be its own, while demanding the Palestinians there to obtain prior approval from Israel to use the water, even when collecting rain water or building water tanks. Consequently, it controls not only the use of water resources but also the trends of population growth and exploitation of arable land. Trump's Deal of the Century ignored the reference to the distribution of water resources in the WB, after it had been a basic clause in the Oslo Accords, thus reinforcing a situation whereby Israel deprives Palestinians of using their water resources. This contradicts the plan's own vision regarding the "prosperous Palestinian economy" in the WB.

In 2018–2019, Israeli forces destroyed 82 wells and agricultural ponds in WB, most of which were in Tubas and Hebron, along with over 50 irrigation networks in Ramallah, Nablus, Tubas, Salfit, and Jericho.¹⁶¹

Conclusion

As US President Donald Trump announced on 6/12/2017 his administration's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, the conflict over the city entered a potentially decisive stage. Apparently, Israeli pursuit of obliterating Jerusalem's identity and Judaizing the city will continue to receive unprecedented US support. This stage has been marked by a state of contention: Israeli attempts to impose

major changes, countered essentially with popular Jerusalemite movements and, to a lesser extent, Palestinian, Arab and Islamic action.

In general, Israel was able, in 2018–2019, to make several advances concerning Palestinian institutions and prominent figures of Jerusalem, for they closed the headquarters of the Education Directorate in Jerusalem and the Arab Health Center, as well as suspending and obstructing the work of the Governor and Minister of Jerusalem by repeatedly arresting them and preventing them from performing their duties. Israeli forces also carried out major demolitions in the Shu‘fat RC, Wadi Hummus and al-‘Ayzariyah. They approved several projects which, if completed, will change the face of the city, such as the Jerusalem cable car in the vicinity of the Old City and a new major settlement project at the Qalandiya airport site in the north.

At the same time, Israel suffered two major setbacks: the first was in the Bedouin village of Khan al-Ahmar in East Jerusalem, where the Israeli Prime Minister had to announce the postponement of its demolition under international and popular pressure. The other was the opening of the Gate of Mercy following 16 years of Israeli closure, thanks to the Gate of Mercy uprising, which dispelled gradual Israeli efforts to evacuate the region and control it.

As for the aggression against *al-Aqsa* Mosque, it came in three parallel tracks. The first was the spatial and temporal division alongside break-ins, with the focus on gradually imposing public biblical prayers in the Mosque, which reached a peak in October 2019. The second track was depleting the role of the Jordanian Ministry of Awqaf, Islamic Affairs and Holy Places through two important developments: in early 2019, when Israel usurped the authority of Awqaf in the restoration of *al-Aqsa*’s southwestern wall, where the Jerusalem municipality carried out these restorations for the first time since the Israeli occupation of the Mosque; and in October 2019, by preventing *al-Aqsa* guards from accompanying or taking photos of settlers during their raids. The third track was the temporal division of both sides of the Gate of Mercy at the historical adjacent cemetery. Noticeably, 2019 witnessed the exclusive coincidence between Jewish holidays, which are a usual Israeli excuse to storm *al-Aqsa* Mosque, and major Islamic holidays (expected to recur in 2020 and 2021). This coincidence resulted in Israel raiding *al-Aqsa* Mosque on the 28th of Ramadan, and on the first day of *al-Adha* Eid, which marked the first time the Mosque had been raided during an Islamic Eid.

As for Christian holy sites, the Israeli Supreme Court issued a final decision regarding the Omar Square property, transferred in 2005 by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, noting that the current Patriarch Theophilos III was appointed to his position after vowing to annul this deal. Yet the opposite happened in 2019, and a blow was dealt to Arab and national Orthodox endeavor to protect the properties, as a result of the bias by the PA and Jordan to Theophilos III, whose legal efforts have ended up in complete failure so far.

The confrontations throughout 2018–2019 were mainly in Jerusalem’s central neighborhoods, in the Old City, Silwan and ‘Isawiyyah in particular. These neighborhoods waged continuous local uprisings for the sixth consecutive year since the summer of 2013. In return, Israeli “strikes” against Jerusalemites were more psychological, as was evident in the deliberate announcements in January 2018 regarding the transfer of Jerusalem property in the Old City and Silwan, although each of the deals has taken years to be completed. There were also major demolitions, unprecedented since *al-Aqsa Intifadah*, which were carried out with massive military reinforcements in the Shu‘fat RC in March 2018 and in Wadi Hummus east of Sur Baher in July 2019.

In 2018–2019, settlement building in Jerusalem, and the WB in general, focused on four central directions. The first was to strengthen the Jewish presence in central Jerusalem through infrastructure projects, such as the cable car in the vicinity of the Old City. The second direction was to connect the settlements of East Jerusalem to the slopes of the Jordan Valley, and isolate Jerusalem from Ramallah, leading eventually to a complete separation of the WB into two northern and southern islands encircled by the Jordan River. This was the original Israeli strategic vision for the WB as expressed by the Allon Plan in 1967. The third direction was to transform Jerusalem into an urban center for settlers living in WB settlements, on which they would depend for services, and to which they would be connected by roads and public transportation. Thus, it would solve the chronic problem of Jerusalem having limited geographic depth, for Jerusalem is relatively far from areas of Jewish concentration on the coastal plain. The fourth direction sought to bolster the east Hebron settlements bloc, which encircles its Old City from the east and put pressure on its neighborhoods, in an attempt to confirm the biblical identity of Israel.

Throughout 2020–2021, the conflict over the fate of Jerusalem will continue. Israel will continue its attempts for advancement under US cover, countered by the Jerusalemite and Palestinian response, along with limited Arab and Islamic support. The re-election of Donald Trump would be the most decisive element in determining the severity of the confrontation. For, in light of an Israeli political crisis, which is likely to entrench, unlimited US support to Israel remains the main driver for deciding the fate of the city. As for *al-Aqsa* Mosque, its role as a symbolic motive for popular uprisings will continue. This role has been renewed for three decades, starting with the Tunnel uprising in 1996 to the Gate of Mercy uprising in 2019. Israeli attempts to reclose the Gate of Mercy are likely to escalate, for the opening of the *Musalla* under popular pressure is still unacceptable to the Israelis. The other pretext for escalation would be storming *al-Aqsa* Mosque and the associated aggression, especially since in the coming two years, major Islamic and Jewish holidays will coincide. Therefore, the popular uprisings in Jerusalem will probably reoccur.

On the ground, the confrontation is expected to be bolstered in three directions: the first is the war on the symbols of the official Palestinian presence in Jerusalem leading to their disruption and marginalization. This would make Israeli approval of holding symbolic elections in post offices in Jerusalem as in previous experiences impossible. The second direction is the escalation of collective demolition, while focusing on the outskirts of major Palestinian neighborhoods in the Shu‘fat RC, Beit Hanina and Silwan. The third is the renewed confrontation related to Khan al-Ahmar.

The emerging popular movement in Hebron would largely determine the fate of the settlement expansion endeavor in the city, and it might even be able to end the experience of the division of the Ibrahimi Mosque, which Israel has considered a model for the division of *al-Aqsa* Mosque. The attempt to encircle Jerusalem and Ramallah from the east might develop into abolishing all potentials for geographic contiguity between the northern and southern parts of the WB; however, the course of popular confrontation will be a key factor in determining the success of this attempt.

Endnotes

- ¹ On 8/5/2001, Sharon formed this committee, see The Most Prominent Israeli Attacks on al-Aqsa Mosque 2001–2010, Wafa, http://info.wafa.ps/ar_page.aspx?id=9552 (in Arabic)
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Ziad Muhammad, *‘Ain ‘ala al-Aqsa: Taqrir Sanawy Yasdur ‘an Mu’assasat al-Quds fi Thikra Ihraq al-Masjid al-Aqsa wa Yughatti al-I’tida’at al-Isra’iliyyah ‘ala al-Masjid al-Aqsa ma bayna 1/1/2005–21/8/2006* (Eye on al-Aqsa: An Annual Documentary Report Issued by Al Quds Institution on the Anniversary of al-Aqsa Mosque Arson Monitoring Israeli Aggressions on al-Aqsa Mosque During the Period 1/1/2005–21/8/2006) (Beirut: Al Quds International Institution, 2006), p. 16.
- ⁴ Aljazeera.net, 21/7/2010. (in Arabic)
- ⁵ Mohsen Mohammad Saleh (ed.), *The Palestinian Strategic Report 2011/12* (Beirut: Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations, 2013), p. 286.
- ⁶ Research and Information Department, Al Quds International Institution, “The Gate of Mercy Uprising, Where Does it Stop? The choices of the Masses and the Jordanian State,” Situation Assessment, 2019, <http://alquds-online.org/> (in Arabic)
- ⁷ The Most Prominent Israeli Attacks on the al-Aqsa Mosque, 2001–2010, Wafa, http://info.wafa.ps/ar_page.aspx?id=9552 (in Arabic)
- ⁸ Interviews conducted by the researcher with the guards of *al-Aqsa* Mosque, and with the Sheikh Najeh Bakirat when he was managing *al-Aqsa* Mosque in May 2013 in Amman. See also: Mercy Gate: Renewed Confrontations in al-Aqsa, site of Metras, 20/2/2019, <https://metras.co> (in Arabic)
- ⁹ *Alrai* newspaper, Amman, 15/2/2019.
- ¹⁰ Aljazeera.net, 18/2/2019. (in Arabic)
- ¹¹ Mohsen Mohammad Saleh (ed.), *The Palestinian Strategic Report 2012/2013* (Beirut: Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations, 2015), p. 270.
- ¹² Mohsen Mohammad Saleh (ed.), *The Palestinian Strategic Report 2014–2015* (Beirut: Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations, 2016), p. 306.
- ¹³ See The Israeli Police Arrests 3 Women Who Are Relatives of Sheikh Raed Salah, Anadolu Agency, 25/7/2018 (in Arabic); and see also What’s Going on at the Gate of Mercy in al-Aqsa Mosque?, Aljazeera.net, 19/6/2018. (in Arabic)
- ¹⁴ Arabs 48, 18/6/2018.
- ¹⁵ Site of Sanad News, 26/5/2019, <https://snd.ps/>
- ¹⁶ *The Jerusalem Post* newspaper, 17/3/2019, <https://www.jpost.com/Breaking-News/The-court-issued-a-closure-order-for-the-Golden-Gate-on-the-Temple-Mount-583694>
- ¹⁷ Aljazeera.net, 17/3/2019. (in Arabic)
- ¹⁸ Arabs 48, 3/3/2019.
- ¹⁹ Site of Al-Quds City, 6/4/2019, <http://www.alquds-online.org/news/30985>
- ²⁰ This has repeatedly happened during the year, see Arabs 48, 21/7/2019; Filastin Al’an, 19/8/2019; and *Alghad*, 10/10/2019.
- ²¹ A field interview with one of the evacuees, who were evacuated from the vicinity of the Gate of Mercy on 14/10/2019. See also *Alghad*, 14/10/2019.

- ²² For example, on 3/12/2019, the Israeli forces arrested the Murabit (singular of Murabitun) Majd Kabha during his prayer in the upper courtyard facing the Gate of Mercy, and the Murabitah (feminine of Murabit) Muntaha Amarah, see site of El3en, 3/12/2019, <https://www.el3en.com/?app=article.show.36083>
- ²³ *Alquds*, 2/1/2020.
- ²⁴ *Al- 'Arabi al-Jadid*, 10/1/2020.
- ²⁵ For more on the Moroccan Hill, see Mohsen Mohammad Saleh, *The Palestinian Strategic Report 2011/12*, pp. 290–293.
- ²⁶ Concerning these claims, the State Comptroller presented an official report in 2011, *Haaretz*, 17/5/2011, <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5013410>
- ²⁷ On 1/6/2016, the Jerusalem Municipality ordered a halt to the construction of additional restrooms at the Ghawanim Gate, because they have begun without the proper permits. These restrooms are still closed as of early 2020, see site of The Times of Israel, 1/6/2016, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/jerusalem-city-hall-orders-halt-to-illegal-waqf-construction-on-temple-mount/>
- ²⁸ Research and Information Department, Al Quds International Institution, “An Information Paper and a Situation Assessment of the Stone Fall Incident on the Western Wall of al-Aqsa Mosque,” 2019. (in Arabic)
- ²⁹ Al-Quds City, 25/1/2019, <http://www.alquds-online.org/index.php?s=news&id=30071>
- ³⁰ Site of AlMamlaka TV, 6/2/2019, <https://www.almamlakatv.com/>
- ³¹ *Assabeel* newspaper, Amman, 25/7/2014.
- ³² QPress News Agency has covered this story, however, it was banned five months later. See citing the agency: *Assabeel*, 19/5/2015.
- ³³ *Al- 'Arabi al-Jadid*, 13/3/2019.
- ³⁴ Arabi21, 29/5/2019.
- ³⁵ Wattan News Agency, 5/1/2020, <https://www.wattan.tv/ar/news/298778.html>
- ³⁶ Aljazeera.net, 16/1/2018. (in Arabic)
- ³⁷ Anadolu Agency, 7/11/2018. (in Arabic)
- ³⁸ *Alquds*, 8/11/2018, <http://www.alquds.com/articles/1541667337286498200>
- ³⁹ WAFA, 25/9/2018. (in Arabic)
- ⁴⁰ *Al- 'Arabi al-Jadid*, 13/6/2019.
- ⁴¹ Quds News Network, 16/9/2018.
- ⁴² Aljazeera.net, 20/1/2019. (in Arabic)
- ⁴³ Arabi21, 23/2/2019.
- ⁴⁴ *Alghad*, 24/2/2019.
- ⁴⁵ Arabs 48, 27/2/2019.
- ⁴⁶ WAFA, 3/3/2019, http://wafa.ps/ar_page.aspx?id=0eUqmMa850605449925a0eUqmM (in Arabic)
- ⁴⁷ Arabs 48, 4/3/2019.
- ⁴⁸ Arabi21, 9/10/2019.
- ⁴⁹ For the full video coverage of this storming, see site of Mubasher Aljazeera.net, 2/6/2019, <http://mubasher.aljazeera.net>
- ⁵⁰ Estimates of the Administration of Jerusalem’s Awqaf published in the morning of Eid, announced by the Waqf spokesman Firas al-Dibbs, and were distributed to the media, see, for example, Euronews, 11/8/2019, <https://arabic.euronews.com/2019/08/11/watch-clashes-between-israeli-forces-and-palestinian-worshippers-in-al-aqsa-mosque> (in Arabic)

- ⁵¹ Wafa, 9/8/2019. (in Arabic)
- ⁵² Interview conducted by the author with eyewitnesses, 13/8/2019.
- ⁵³ Arabs 48, 11/8/2019.
- ⁵⁴ For more info on the judicial aspect of *al-Aqsa*'s division, see Hisham Yaqoub et al., '*Ain 'ala al-Aqsa: Taqrir Tawthiqi Yarsud al-I'tida'at 'ala al-Masjid al-Aqsa fi al-Fatrah ma bayna 22/8/2010 wa hatta 21/8/2011*' (Eye on al-Aqsa: An Annual Documentary Report Monitoring Israeli Aggressions on *al-Aqsa* Mosque During the Period 22/8/2010 and until 21/8/2011) (Beirut: Al Quds International Institution, 2011), pp. 42–45.
- ⁵⁵ Arabs 48, 26/3/2018.
- ⁵⁶ The most prominent Israeli violations against *al-Aqsa* Mosque during December 2018, see Wafa, http://info.wafa.ps/ar_page.aspx?id=UyNv0Ka27487578393aUyNv0K (in Arabic)
- ⁵⁷ Jordan News Agency (Petra), 17/4/2018, http://www.petra.gov.jo/Include/InnerPage.jsp?ID=16302&lang=en&name=external_news
- ⁵⁸ An interview made by the author with eyewitnesses, stated that the police officer Ibrahim Sa'id, of Arabic origin, would escort those storming the Mosque between 7–8 am. When *al-Aqsa* guards objected to having settlers conducting rituals and prayers inside *al-Aqsa*, Sa'id aggressively told them that what the settlers have done is acceptable, and that they themselves have to accept it, and that their objections are useless.
- ⁵⁹ Hisham Yaqoub et al., '*Ain 'ala al-Aqsa: Taqrir Tawthiqi Yarsud al-I'tida'at 'ala al-Masjid al-Aqsa wa al-Tafa'ul Ma'ahu ma bayna 1/8/2018 wa hatta 1/8/2019*' (Eye on al-Aqsa: An Annual Documentary Report Monitoring Israeli Aggressions on *al-Aqsa* Mosque and the Interaction with It During the Period 1/8/2018 and until 1/8/2019), 13th Report, Chapter 2 (Beirut: Al Quds International Institution, 2019), p. 98, http://www.alquds-online.org/userfiles/all/2_compressed.pdf
- ⁶⁰ Mohsen Mohammad Saleh, *The Palestinian Strategic Report 2014–2015*, pp. 300–301.
- ⁶¹ Hisham Yaqoub et al., '*Ain 'ala al-Aqsa: Taqrir Tawthiqi Yarsud al-I'tida'at 'ala al-Masjid al-Aqsa wa al-Tafa'ul Ma'ahu ma bayna 1/8/2018 wa hatta 1/8/2019*', 13th Report, Chapter 2, p. 101.
- ⁶² Site of Arutz 7 (Israel National News), 31/12/2018, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/256965>
- ⁶³ Ziad Bhies, Sabotaging the Jerusalem Skyline: The Project of the Occupation Government to Put a Cable Car in the Vicinity of the Old City of Jerusalem, Al Quds International Institution, Beirut, 3/12/2019. (in Arabic)
- ⁶⁴ *Haaretz*, 1/8/2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-israel-opens-jewish-heritage-center-in-east-jerusalem-1.6337942>
- ⁶⁵ Hisham Yaqoub et al., '*Ain 'ala al-Aqsa: Taqrir Tawthiqi Yarsud al-I'tida'at 'ala al-Masjid al-Aqsa wa al-Tafa'ul Ma'ahu ma bayna 1/8/2017 wa hatta 1/8/2018*' (Eye on al-Aqsa: An Annual Documentary Report Monitoring Israeli Aggressions on *al-Aqsa* Mosque and the Interaction with It During the Period 1/8/2017 and until 1/8/2018), 12th Report (Beirut: Al Quds International Institution, 2018), p. 95, <https://www.alquds-online.org/index.php?s=9&cat=51&id=1114>
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- ⁶⁷ Hisham Yaqoub et al., '*Ain 'ala al-Aqsa: Taqrir Tawthiqi Yarsud al-I'tida'at 'ala al-Masjid al-Aqsa wa al-Tafa'ul Ma'ahu ma bayna 1/8/2016 wa hatta 1/8/2017*' (Eye on al-Aqsa: An Annual Documentary Report Monitoring Israeli Aggressions on *al-Aqsa* Mosque and the Interaction with It During the Period 1/8/2016 and until 1/8/2017), 11th Report, Chapter 2 (Beirut: Al Quds International Institution, 2017).
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Chapter Four

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

The Courses of Aggression, Resistance and the Peace Process

Introduction

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

First: Israeli Aggression and Palestinian Resistance

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* Including the Sinai Peninsula.

**Including two resistance operations inside the prison.

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

1. Marches of Return and Breaking the Siege

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. The GS: Between Aggression and Calm

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

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

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

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

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

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

a. Khan Yunis Operation/ Operation Sword’s Edge

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

b. Gaza Tunnels

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. The Killed and Wounded

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

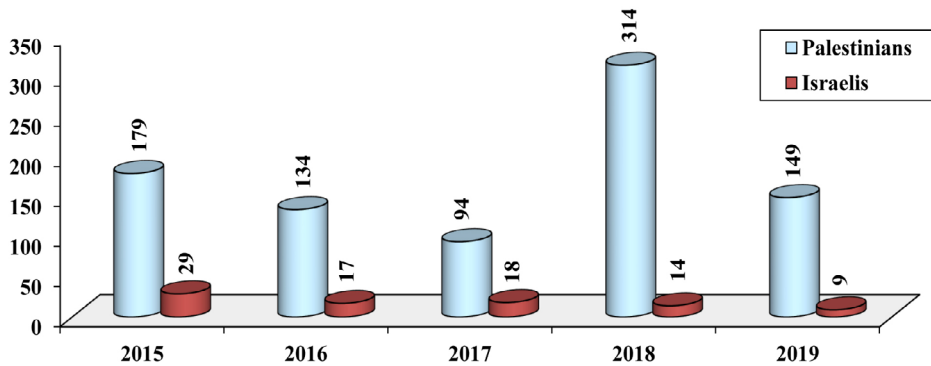
The Shabak recorded the killing of 14 Israelis in 2018, and nine in 2019, because of Palestinian attacks. 77 Israelis were wounded in 2018, compared to 65 in 2019 (see table 2/4).⁶⁰

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

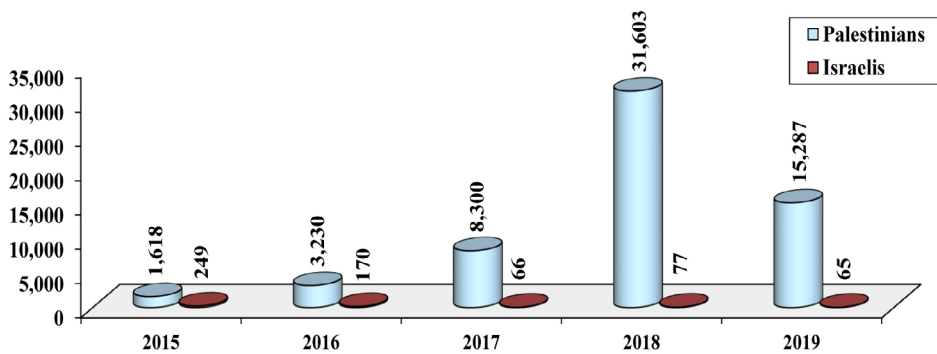
Table 2/4: The Killed and Wounded Among Palestinians and Israelis in WB and GS 2015–2019⁶³

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

Palestinians and Israelis Killed in WB and GS 2015–2019



Palestinians and Israelis Wounded in WB and GS 2015–2019



4. Prisoners and Detainees

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Administrative Detention

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

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

Table 4/4: Administrative Detainees 2015–2019⁷¹

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

5. Israeli GS Siege

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

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

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

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

Second: The Peace Process

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

First: The Proposed Palestinian State

The US-proposed state is characterized by the following:

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

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

Second: The Refugees

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

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

Third: Regional Economic Integration

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

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

Fourth: The Prisoners

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

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

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

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

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

3. The Palestinian President and the Lost “Peace”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Chapter Five

The Israeli Scene

The Israeli Scene

Introduction

Perhaps the most prominent Israeli news in 2018–2019 concerned the internal political crisis that emerged out of the re-election of the Knesset with the failure to form a government, which pushed Israel towards a third election. The other major political development was the escalation of religious and nationalist extremism in the Zionist Jewish community, and the push for its legitimacy and legalization in the state system, which was clearly manifested in the “Jewish Nation-State Law.”

In 2018–2019, the Israeli leadership reaped the benefits of economic and technological progress and military superiority, the decline of military risks, and increased opportunities for normalization with new Arab countries. However, a number of risks remained for Israel, namely the escalation of specific combat resistance capabilities including their ability to penetrate Israel’s Iron Dome, with no stability in the strategic environment surrounding Israel.

First: The Internal Israeli Political Scene

The years 2018–2019 witnessed a series of internal developments in Israel, the most prominent of which was the legislative elections (of the Israeli Knesset) in 2019.

1. Corruption Cases and Netanyahu’s Political Future

There have been many corruption cases in recent years in Israel, especially among parties and politicians, but the most notable ones were the four main corruption cases involving investigations of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Some of these cases go back many years, as the police and the Public Prosecution needed a long time to complete the elements of each case individually and submit a recommendation to the Attorney General to submit the case to the judiciary and competent courts.

Mostly, the Netanyahu cases involve receiving bribes; offering regulatory favors to businesspersons in exchange for gaining secret editorial control over some media outlets, with flattering coverage of Netanyahu and his family; and providing tax exemptions to Israeli businesspersons considered to be Netanyahu's friends. In Case 1,000, the police advised the Attorney General to bring Netanyahu to trial, after the Anti-Fraud Unit Lahav 433 completed its investigations.¹

As for Case 4,000,² it sparked outrage in political and media circles due to the quid pro quo between Netanyahu and businessperson Shaul Elovitch, owner of the Walla! website, ensuring positive coverage of Netanyahu's activities, statements and policies, and even of his wife Sara, who appears frequently at his side. In the past, she was accused of abusive and threatening behavior towards staff at the prime minister's official residence, even though she holds no official capacity. Indeed, the law in Israel does not grant the wife of the prime minister or the head of state any official status, unlike in other countries where she might be considered the "First Lady." Therefore, Sara's Netanyahu's involvement and its repercussions have an indirect effect on the general political landscape in Israel.³

The media coverage of the corruption cases was continuous, influencing politicians who are part of the coalition forming the Netanyahu-led government. Head of the Kulanu Party and Finance Minister, Moshe Kahlon, described the situation as in terms of black clouds hanging over politicians' heads that they could not ignore. This indicated that there was turmoil within the government coalition to the extent that there were threats made by some parties to withdraw from the coalition, and calls for early Knesset elections. However, it is interesting to note that despite the recommendations to take Netanyahu's cases to court, the parties that formed the government coalition maintained the coalition. In other words, as long as the cases did not reach court, it was considered that there was no need to dissolve the coalition, dissolve the Knesset, and head towards early elections.⁴

Netanyahu tried to use his power and influence to strengthen and extend the life of his government, reinforce the right-wing camp and enforce his control within his Likud party in order to avoid going to court.⁵

Moreover, there were numerous calls by the Likud demanding the enactment of a law that would provide immunity to the prime minister, so that no charges could be made against him, even after his mandate as prime minister ended, or

even if he did not hold another official position⁶—a law inspired by the French constitutional system. Nonetheless, this attempt to provide lifelong immunity to a prime minister in Israel is not framed by the constitutional law in force in the country (there is no constitution in Israel, but rather basic laws that make up a semblance of a constitution). However, many Knesset members, including the parties forming the government coalition and politicians outside the parliament, rallied together, possibly considering such a move could be the first step towards a dictatorial regime in a country that claims to be proud of its democratic system.

Despite the uproar caused by the attempt to legislate such a law, the reluctance of the attorney general, Avichai Mandelblit, to file indictments against Netanyahu raised many suspicions regarding the ties that link Netanyahu to the Attorney General. It is worth noting that Mandelblit served as Netanyahu's Cabinet Secretary (2013–2016), implying that there is some kind of understanding between the two, albeit not publicly declared.

Mandelblit came under political, media and public pressure and several protests were held in front of his private residence calling for Netanyahu to be brought to court following the recommendations of the police and the public prosecution.⁷

While the opposition in the Israeli Knesset, the press, and civil society institutions in Israel were seeking to overthrow Netanyahu by taking advantage of these corruption cases, his government ministers maintained full compliance with the coalition agreement and did not seek to break up the coalition. This position in the political arena helped Netanyahu maintain both his government and his position as its head.

According to many politicians, it is obvious that Netanyahu's political future is largely linked to these cases, of which one or more will lead to his ousting, because the evidence appears to clearly indicate that he was involved in financial corruption cases and receiving bribes, which are strictly prohibited by law.⁸

In a press conference held on 21/11/2019, Attorney General Mandelblit announced that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and several businesspersons would be charged with bribery, fraud and breach of trust. Mandelblit based his decision on the evidence gathered by the investigation unit, pointing out that Netanyahu was accused of a breach of trust, receiving bribes while assuming the posts of prime minister and Minister of Communications.⁹

Barely an hour after Mandelblit's statement, Netanyahu held a press conference in the prime minister's office where he attacked investigators and the police, calling for an investigation to be launched because they were not performing their duties according to the law, but rather according to their specific interests. He announced that he remained in office and that he would continue to manage the affairs of his government until a new government was formed. There was a political and judicial debate over whether Netanyahu could continue in this position, even though it was a "caretaker" government, since no government had been formed following the election. Could he run in the upcoming elections, with the indictment looming over his head? However, the government's legal advisor stated that doing so would not violate the law, unless a court ruling to the contrary was issued.

2. The Israeli Right is on the Rise

Right-wing parties and movements in Israel intensified their attacks against Arab parties, movements, and political figures, in the 1948 territories and in the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967. Every once in a while, right-wing Israeli politicians would accuse Arab representatives in the Knesset Joint List of being disloyal to Israel, of having sworn an oath of allegiance to the Israeli parliament outwardly, and of working against the state of Israel¹⁰ and seeking to destabilize it. This reached the point of accusing them of high treason, and some even accused these deputies of being a fifth column.¹¹

Forty members of the Israeli Knesset signed a petition to expel MP Haneen Zoabi from the National Democratic Assembly (Balad). This was due to her statements in support of the Palestinians' right to Jerusalem after President Trump announced that his administration recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and that his ordering of the transfer of his country's embassy there.¹² Additionally, it was because of Zoabi's statements that Israeli soldiers are murderers. However, their attempts were unsuccessful due to Zoabi's parliamentary immunity, and because she rejected all the allegations and statements made by right-wing Israelis both inside and outside the Knesset.¹³

Right wing parties worked to legislate hundreds of racist laws in the Israeli Knesset that were biased towards the Jewish community in the country. The Minister of Public Security, Gilad Erdan, announced his intention to instruct ministry employees to enforce laws that prevented Palestinians from entering Israel without an official permit.¹⁴

Added to this was the tendency of right wing parties, especially those that formed the coalition in the Netanyahu government, to press for a gradual takeover of WB.

The right in Israel also used its power and influence to direct accusations and suspicions against members of the National Democratic Assembly and its activists, by fabricating charges of financial irregularities and transgressions during the elections of the 21st Knesset. However, following arrests and investigations conducted by police special investigation units, it appeared that they were all political, not administrative nor financial cases.¹⁵

It seems that there is a growing tendency towards apartheid in Israel, manifested in several ways, including the increase in the number of bypass roads in WB, as a result of the pressure exerted by settlers and their representatives in the Knesset, in addition to some members in the coalition government, such as Minister of Construction and Housing Yoav Galant. Among the most recent bypass roads was the one in Qalqilya Governorate, officially declared that it is to be used only by Jews, never by Palestinians. This road is one of a series of roads that horizontally connect the east and west of WB, and do the same longitudinally between its north and south.¹⁶ Bypass road projects have received unrivaled support from Netanyahu himself, who has stated that such roads aim to provide protection to Israelis.¹⁷

It is necessary to refer here to the influence and power of the right in two areas: The first is Israeli society, where ideas and statements tend, year after year, to move towards the right. Indeed, according to opinion polls, more than half of Israeli society supports right wing parties and currents. The second is in the Knesset, where the number of right-wing members increased, enabling them to form a government headed by the Likud Party, without the need for a coalition with left or center left parties.¹⁸

Thus, the power of the right prevailed and this was strongly reflected every day through the positions taken by politicians, who stressed the importance of fortifying Israel against those who they saw as wanting to destroy it.¹⁹ Some attribute this phenomenon to the fear caused by developments in the Arab political landscape. This means that the weaker the Arab role in the region becomes, the stronger the Israel is, as a defensive and offensive force that is in control of the region. Vice versa, the stronger the Arab role and political position becomes, the weaker the power and influence of Israel is, both inside and outside its society. All

this is reflected in the course of public political life. The right in Israel controls the government and affects its decisions. Its core is preserved and expanded, and also invested in Knesset elections.

This influence prompted right-wing parties, whether they participated or not in the government coalitions, to put forward bills that increased restrictions on Palestinians in WB and GS, as well as those under direct rule of Israel carrying Israeli IDs.²⁰ Right-wingers, inside or outside the government coalition, left no room for flexibility for Netanyahu's government. Therefore, recent years, including 2018–2019, have been marked by the emergence of a strong right-wing, who have strongly influenced decision-making and the application of decisions, whether in Israel or the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967.

3. The Palestinians of 1948

The Palestinians of 1948 constitute 17% of the total population in Israel (excluding East Jerusalem). They are found in three central regions, namely Galilee in the north, the Triangle in the center, and the Negev in the south, in addition to mixed cities such as Haifa, Acre, Jaffa, Lod and Ramla. Palestinians are subjected to discriminatory policies that affect almost all aspects of daily life. There are also wide gaps between them and the Jewish community in the areas of education, social welfare, standard of living, income and other indicators of well-being. Successive Israeli governments, and especially the Netanyahu government, have adopted deliberate policies of neglect toward the Palestinians, as well as excessively monitoring them, considering them violators of laws who must be tried.²¹ In other words, Israeli governments in general have presented a negative image of their Palestinian "citizens" as a fifth column, and as opponents of the state who refuse to be loyal to it.²²

Palestinians have been made victims widespread violence in Arab villages and cities for more than two years. The reasons for this phenomenon has been attributed to the proliferation and spread of unlicensed weapons among gangs, as well as individuals and families who engage in violence. Palestinian villages and cities witnessed shootings, and a number of people were killed in plain sight of the police, who did not act to protect them. The failure of the police in Israel to assume their responsibility, whether in collecting unlicensed weapons or in arresting the perpetrators, is sufficient evidence of complacency and a policy of negligence. This approach on the part of Israel seeks to sow terror, panic and tension in Arab

Palestinian society, to dismantle and fragment it, thus putting it further under the state's control.

Creating a state of terror and fear is a strategy that indirectly contributes to pushing large segments of the Palestinian community at home, especially young people, to think about emigration and leaving the country. This phenomenon has spreading in a number of villages and towns that have been subjected to a series of shootings, killings and sabotage over the past two years.²³

Things have not stopped there, as Israeli politicians consider the policy of distributing and trafficking in arms a sensitive issue. Although Israel used to arrest and prosecute anyone who was seized with a weapon without a permit, it condoned the availability of arms in the hands of gangs, individuals and families who practiced violence for self-interest.

Arab leaders in the 1948 territories have tried to pressure the police to collect weapons, who in turn have claimed that they are carrying out their duties and are not able to cover all areas, an interpretation rejected by the Arab community leaders.

During the past two years, the Netanyahu government did not seek to allocate a single government session, or a part thereof, to tackle this phenomenon, until the matter became worse in the fourth quarter of 2019, after a terrible series of killings of Arab citizens in a number of villages. Thus, after demonstrations, protests and marches were organized condemning government policy, the government formed a committee to examine the situation. However, this was not enough to stop the violence in Palestinian society in the 1948 territories, as it appears that the government did not want this society to carry out other activities such as confronting its discriminatory policies in education, health and social services.²⁴

Another issue distressing the Palestinians of 1948 was the demolition of unlicensed homes in Arab towns. Construction and planning committees failed to grant new building permits, except on rare occasions, in addition to the failure of the Ministries of the Interior and Construction and Housing to expand building areas in Arab towns. At the same time, there has been a continuous increase in the number of young couples needing to build houses but faced with a limited number of permits being made available. As a result, Arab families have resorted to unlicensed construction to meet the urgent need of their young people.

Unlicensed construction was not a spontaneous decision by building owners, but was rather a result of the discriminatory Israeli policies taken against Palestinian society aimed at avoiding the expansion of construction spaces and indirectly pressuring young people to emigrate outside their villages.²⁵ As for the remaining lands owned by the 1948 Palestinian citizens, they have shrunk considerably over the decades, against the backdrop of the expropriation policies pursued by the successive Israeli governments.

Several years ago, the government of Israel enacted the Kaminitz Law, which stipulated the issuance of judicial decisions to demolish more than 70 thousand homes or housing facilities that were built without official authorization from the competent authorities, in addition to hefty fines. This prompted Arab local authorities and parties to strive to repeal this law, or limit its far-reaching implementation of demolition policies in Arab towns.

In fact, these policies created daily tension in Arab towns and have failed to provide a safe future to the families. Indeed, the licensing authorities did not evolve to cover the needs at the required speed. They also indirectly increased tensions between the state and its Palestinian citizens, thus perpetuating the feelings of victimization,²⁶ since such a situation did not exist in Jewish society. This confirmed that these were intentional policies of repression and pressure on the Palestinian community in the 1948 territories.

Moreover, the matter expanded to the Arab Druze segment, whose youth serve in the ranks of the Israeli army due to the obligatory military service law established in 1956. The problem of housing and licenses prevailed in the Druze villages and towns in Galilee and Carmel. The crisis remained unresolved, despite Druze military service in the Israeli army and the “blood ties” praised by Israeli politicians between the Druze and Israeli societies. As a result, the number of unlicensed apartments and residential units increased significantly, and many clashes between the Israeli security forces and Palestinian and Druze protestors occurred.²⁷

The members of Knesset (MKs) of the right wing parties sought to incite Arab MKs due to the latter’s opposition to Israeli policies of repression and aggressions carried out the military against the Palestinian people, particularly in WB and GS.²⁸

4. The Supreme Court and Racist Laws

In parallel with the increase in official and media incitement against Palestinian Arabs in Israel, the momentum of legislating racist laws has increased during the past two years.²⁹ The Israeli Knesset website indicated that 37 racial laws were passed, out of 220 bills, from late 2017 to the time of writing (late 2019). Right wing parties sought to legalize governmental political decisions that would impose greater Israeli hegemony over WB, and tighten repressive measures against the 1948 Palestinians, legally prosecuting them. In other words, the intensification of racist laws did not aim to regulate the relationship between the state and the Palestinian Arab minority, but rather to subject them to the laws. Indeed, the laws were a cover to impose more restrictions on the Arabs and push them to provide blind and complete loyalty to the “state,” rather than to Palestine, the people of Palestine, and the wider Arab nation.³⁰

The peak of such punitive laws was in the “Jewish Nation-State Law,”³¹ approved by the Knesset in July 2018, despite widespread protests against it by Arab citizens, including the Druze, and by some Israeli groups and individuals. They viewed the law as racist and biased, leaving no room for a future settlement between Israel and the Palestinians and Arabs generally, and failing to build any equality and justice in Israel’s relationship with its Palestinian citizens. Some considered it a colonial law in its orientations, akin to an apartheid law.³²

On the eve of the ratification of this racist law, and the events and protests that followed, there were intense efforts by political parties and movements, whether in the Arab communities, or among the Israeli left who strongly advocated against the law. The Druze also opposed it, as the law granted full citizenship rights and the right to self-determination to Jews in what the law called “the land of Israel.” The protests and demonstrations in Tel Aviv did not result in any abolition or even amendment of the law.³³

Nonetheless, despite the severe criticisms levelled against the law and Netanyahu’s government, no one in the Israeli establishment moved a finger to block it, which is indicative of the prevailing racist mentality in a country where, a few days later, life returned to “normal.” This applied to other simultaneous events as well, where Israeli society remained outside the circles of influence. Psychological and political analysts attribute this phenomenon to the nature of the Israeli society, and to the doses of tension, panic and intimidation that politicians

spread via the media. This is particularly true of Netanyahu, who—just before the leaks about the possible formation of a government by Benny Gantz—described his alarm at the security situation of Israel and pointed at the existential danger posed by Arabs there, i.e., the Palestinians.³⁴ These racist statements served the political agenda of Netanyahu, and reflected the condition of Israeli society, which lives in constant fear and anxiety about its present and future.³⁵ Add to this that the law in question and other similar racist laws do not aim to build a system of relationships based on equality and equal rights between the two peoples in Israel; on the contrary, they strengthen the apartheid system by failing to recognize the Palestinians as a people. Consequently, the law recognizes that they are sects, and this is in line with the Zionist vision expressed by the Balfour Declaration in 1917.³⁶ Hence, some analysts believe that the legislation of this law and the American recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel on the centennial of this declaration was not a coincidence.

The racist Jewish Nation-State Law will allow Israeli governments to implement more expropriations of land in the Galilee (northern occupied Palestine) in favor of projects to Judaize this area, which still has a Palestinian majority.

Furthermore, this law is classified within the Basic Laws, which are constitutionally superior. Changing it requires a majority of two-thirds of the Knesset members. Consequently, it is not easy to file a legal petition with the Supreme Court to repeal it. Therefore, the Palestinians of 1948 sought the amendment of several provisions of the law through The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel—Adalah, located in Haifa.

Among the powers of the Supreme Court in Israel is its ability to repeal laws enacted by the Knesset, and reject any laws that are believed to be incompatible with having balance in Israel or are far from the spirit of the Declaration of Independence, which Israelis praise as being the basis of their democracy. However, Minister of Justice Ayelet Shaked worked during her mandate to limit such powers, attacking it on public platforms. Such conduct is unfamiliar in Israel. The minister called for a law restricting the powers of the Supreme Court and preventing its judges from influencing the legislation process, claiming that the Knesset is the legislator, and that the power of the Supreme Court is to pronounce judgments according to these laws.³⁷ Shaked was attacked by former Supreme Court President Judge Aharon Barak as well as a group of former and current judges, while other politicians

defended her reformist approaches. Shaked's approach could be considered an attempt by the extreme right to rule alone and to determine the extent and ceiling of democracy, and the freedom of judicial work.³⁸ This is also consistent with Netanyahu's trend to rule alone and to restrict the freedom of political and judicial work, so that he and his government can seize state institutions using the legal pretext of judicial reform.

5. Israeli Legislative Elections

The second half of 2018 was marked by accusations against Netanyahu by his opponents, within and outside his government coalition. The accusations featured three central issues: First, Netanyahu's tendency towards appeasement with Hamas and other factions in GS. He has been accused of surrendering to Hamas in order to escape a peace settlement with the PA. This was in the context of undeclared Israeli recommendations to maintain the Palestinian internal schism, since it provides Israel with the opportunity "to make more achievements on the ground by weakening the Palestinian resistance in general."³⁹

Second, Netanyahu was accused of obstructing the enactment of a law to recruit ultra-Orthodox Jews to the army. This was what Avigdor Lieberman and his party, who are part of the coalition government, had called for, while it was opposed by their government partners, the religious parties. Naturally, this atmosphere led to tension between the Yisrael Beiteinu party led by Lieberman, a purely secular party, and the religious ultra-Orthodox parties (Haredi).⁴⁰

The third accusation was that Netanyahu's internal policy and involvement in corruption files and alleged receiving of bribes would lead to the collapse of Israel. Some people even believed that he was the most dangerous prime minister in the history of Israel.⁴¹

These public exchanges, in particular the issue of the recruitment of the ultra-Orthodox to the army, led to the resignation of Lieberman and his transfer to the opposition ranks.⁴² Consequently the Netanyahu government lost its Knesset majority, the Knesset was dissolved in December 2018, and on 9/4/2019, early elections were called.

The three months preceding the elections saw the formation and dismantling of the electoral lists, as is customary in the Knesset election contests. The Joint List, which mainly represents the Arab masses, was broken down into two lists due to

internal conflicts over the arrangement of the electoral list: Hadash (Democratic Front for Peace and Equality) led by Ayman Odeh, and Ta'al (Arab Movement for Change) led by Mansour 'Abbas. The calls for the re-unification of the Joint List by the 1948 Palestinian masses and independent political and cultural figures were not heard. Thus, the 1948 Palestinians headed to the elections with two lists, ultimately obtaining 10 seats combined, while they had won 13 seats in their previous formation in 2015. It is noteworthy that tens of thousands of 1948 Palestinians did not vote, and some of them announced their boycott of the Knesset, in principle, because it had been working against the Palestinian people and their issues.⁴³

But the dissolution of the 21st Knesset, less than two months after its formation, was an opportunity to restore unity and cohesion among the four components of the Joint List. This renewed the public's confidence in the List, which won 13 seats in the 22nd Knesset elections.

Out of 47 electoral lists that ran in the legislative elections of the 21st Knesset, only 11 lists won seats in the 120-seat Knesset. Each of Netanyahu's Likud party, and Gantz's Blue and White party (*Kachol Laven*) won 35 seats. Moreover, Shas (the Eastern Religious) won 8 seats; United Torah Judaism—*Yahadut HaTorah* 8 seats; the Arab Movement for Change (Ta'al) and the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (Hadash) 6 seats; The United Arab List (Ra'am) and the National Democratic Alliance (Balad) 4 seats; the Labor Party 6 seats; Yisrael Beiteinu 5 seats; the United Right 5 seats; Meretz 4 seats, and Kulanu 4 seats.⁴⁴

The elections for the 21st Knesset were characterized by the following:⁴⁵

- The emergence of campaigns against Netanyahu, and the calls by several parties and lists to drop him permanently due to the corruption cases attributed to him. They believed that a prime minister accused of corruption cannot be allowed to continue to run the "state" and participate in a legislative election.
- The intensified competition between the far right and secular camp led by Netanyahu on the one hand, and the secular right led by Gantz and his party on the other.
- An intense emergence of right-wing parties and lists that participated in the legislative elections, where the extreme right led by Netanyahu dominated, thus giving the social and political life in Israel a right wing character.

- The Labor party's deterioration continued and the Israeli left has retreated and lost its status.
- Conflicts within the ranks of the Joint List have deepened the differences, and two competing lists were formed.

The elections did not produce conclusive results for the two major parties, Likud and the Blue and White party, as each of them emerged with the same number of seats. Consequently, it became exceedingly difficult to form a government based on a Knesset majority. This meant that Netanyahu's government would not continue under the principle of equal seats, and that Lieberman has put spokes in Netanyahu's wheels, especially after Netanyahu's failed attempt (through his aides) to pass the prime minister's immunity law for life. It became clear at this point in that Lieberman was the stumbling block to a new government formed by Netanyahu because the latter knew that he would not succeed in forming a new government and that the mandate would pass to his opponent Gantz, the leader of the Blue and White party. Lieberman refrained from agreeing with Netanyahu on a coalition and chose to push for early elections. Thus, the 21st Knesset did not witness a new government. It is the first time in the history of Israel that no new government was born after legislative elections. That is why the elected parties in the Knesset adopted a bill to dissolve itself and called for second elections in the same year on 17/9/2019.

The traditional parties competed in the elections in the second round, but it was an opportunity to reform the Joint List of Arab parties and lists. A list was also formed upon former Prime Minister Ehud Barak's initiative, uniting some left and center parties. The lists opposing Netanyahu raised the slogan of toppling him and forming a center-right government, instead of the extreme right. However, the results of these elections produced the same situation that existed in the aftermath of the previous elections. Netanyahu was unable to form a new government due to his failure to obtain the trust of 61 MKs, even though the right-wing bloc that pledged allegiance to him consisted of 55 members. Likewise, Gantz was unable to form a government either, even if it was a narrow government backed from outside the coalition by the Joint List. This is because the Yisrael Beiteinu party led by Lieberman rejected the alliance with Netanyahu because of his partnership with the religious parties and refused to partner with Gantz because of his intention to rely on the Joint List. Hence, the crisis was led by Lieberman who wanted to undertake

political blackmail for himself and his party, while Netanyahu wanted to show that his being the prime minister was the only solution to the crisis, otherwise, a third election would be held in the spring of 2020. Actually, Lieberman left no choice but the one reviled by the two major parties.⁴⁶

After Gantz failed to form a government, matters returned to the president, who summoned the Speaker of the Knesset under the rules of the constitutional system, asking him to announce if there were any Knesset member who could collect 61 MKs to form the next government within 21 days starting from 20/11/2019.

There was a legal, political and media controversy surrounding Netanyahu's possible prevention from running in the third elections, if a decision was taken to hold them. He was also pressured to step down because of the indictment against him. However, the government's attorney general issued his view permitting Netanyahu to continue his duties as head of a transitional government and authorizing him to run for the upcoming elections, as long as his case was still in court with no definitive judicial decision issued.

The leaders of the major parties in Israel made attempts to form a national unity government based on sharing the prime ministerial position between Netanyahu and Gantz and distributing ministerial portfolios between their two parties, and other parties allied with them. However, these attempts were unsuccessful due to the lack of trust between the two sides, the low credibility of Netanyahu, while the Blue and White party expected its popularity to increase if it rejected joining such a government. This happened as Netanyahu attempted to appear to be the strongest player, able to hold the reins of power in Israel, while insisting on become prime minister in order to strengthen his position when facing his trial and potential conviction.

Thus, the intractability and failure of the two parties to form a joint government, led Israel to hold a third round of elections in less than a year, on 2/3/2020.

As expected, the third round of elections did not lead to any decisive results. It basically maintained a state of division and an impossible political situation. Although it somehow strengthened the Likud party, which increased its number of seats from 32 to 36 seats. It did not provide the right-wing camp with the majority of the 61 seats, after it gathered just 58 seats. Moreover, the Yisrael Beiteinu party led by Lieberman, which won 7 seats, still refused to join this camp, despite its right wing tendency.

Table 1/5: Results of the 21st, 22nd and 23rd Knesset Elections⁴⁷

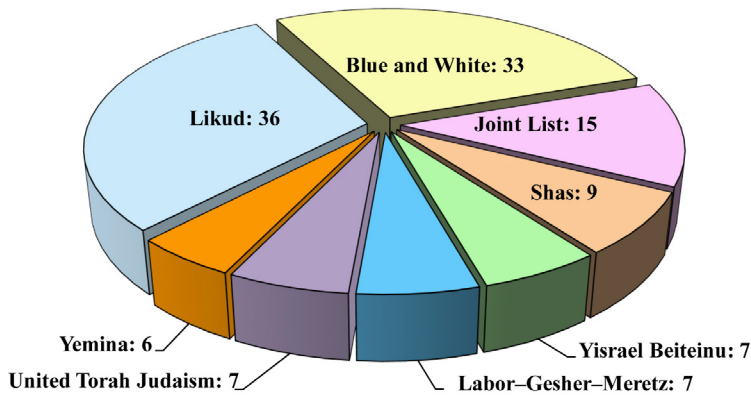
Name of List*	23rd Knesset (2/3/2020)		22nd Knesset (17/9/2019)		21st Knesset (9/4/2019)	
	No. of valid votes	No. of seats	No. of valid votes	No. of seats	No. of valid votes	No. of seats
Likud	1,352,449	36	1,113,617	32	1,140,370	35
Blue and White**	1,220,381	33	1,151,214	33	1,125,881	35
Joint List (United List, Hadash, Balad, Ta'al)	581,507	15	470,211	13	—	—
The Arab Movement for Change and the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (Hadash)	—	—	—	—	193,442	6
The United List and the National Democratic Assembly (Balad)	—	—	—	—	143,666	4
Shas	352,853	9	330,199	9	258,275	8
Yisrael Beiteinu	263,365	7	310,154	8	173,004	5
United Torah Judaism	274,437	7	268,775	7	249,049	8
Labor–Gesher–Meretz	267,480	7	—	—	—	—
Labor–Gesher (Sept. 2019) (Labor: April 2019)	—	—	212,782	6	190,870	6
Democratic Union (Sept. 2019) (Meretz: April 2019)	—	—	192,495	5	156,473	4
Yemina (United Right: April 2019)	240,689	6	260,655	7	159,468	5
Kulanu***	—	—	—	—	152,756	4
Number of eligible voters	6,453,255		6,394,030		6,339,729	
Total valid votes	4,553,161		4,436,806		4,309,270	

* Some names of lists, parties and alliances have been shortened in an attempt to simplify the table.

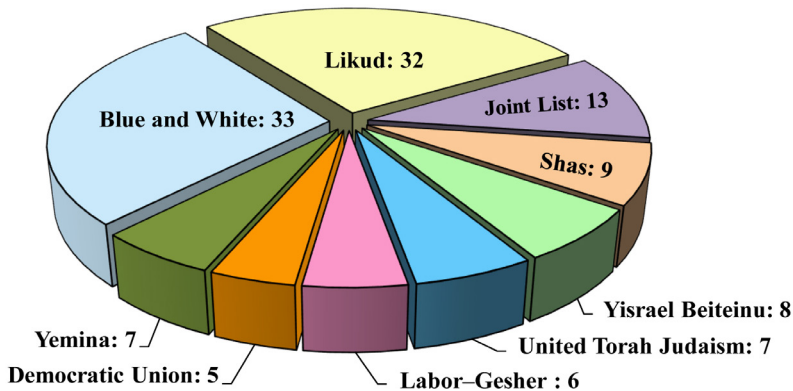
** Yesh Atid officially dissolved itself before the April 2019 elections and joined the Blue and White Party.

*** Kulanu officially dissolved itself before the September 2019 elections and joined the Likud Party.

Results of the 23rd Knesset Elections on 2/3/2020



Results of the 22nd Knesset Elections on 17/9/2019



Although the Blue and White party retained the same number of seats (33), its chances of forming the government did not improve, as it needed Lieberman's support, which was not easy to obtain. It also needed the support of the Joint List (15 seats) in the Knesset (without its participation in the government), nevertheless, the List did not unanimously agree on that. Moreover, several officials from the Blue and White party and most Israelis reject the formation of a government whose survival depends on the "negative support" of the Arab list. However, what actually happened was that a government was formed based mainly on the partnership between the two major parties.

The Palestinian Arab minority participating in the elections, won 15 seats for the first time in their history, and collected around 582 thousand votes, which was considered a great achievement. However, it can be hardly considered a political accomplishment, since it is amidst an environment that wants to oppress both the land and the people. Nonetheless, it revealed the wish of the Palestinian community to unite and cooperate in order to face the escalating dangers that threaten it.

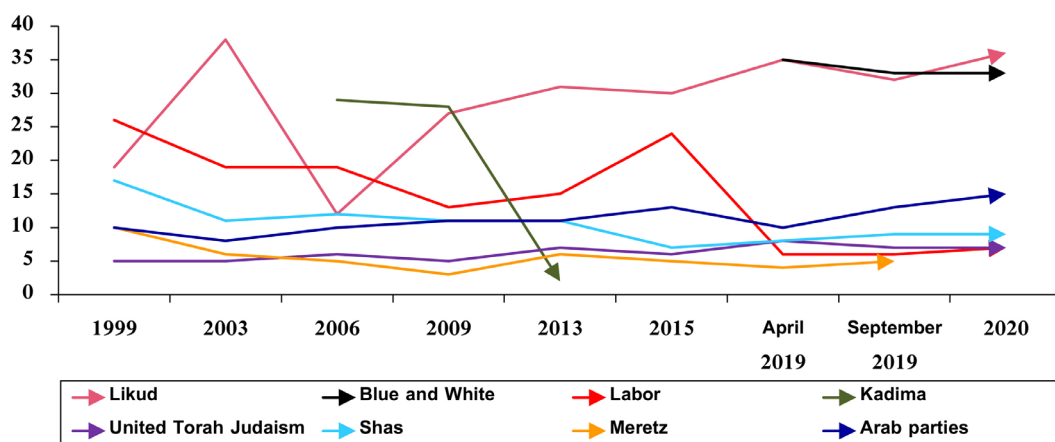
The governance crisis in Israel reflected negatively on the administrations of state institutions, for with the caretaker government there were no decision makers, thus leading to economic recession, which began to appear in a number of sectors.⁴⁸ Moreover, the ability to change national governance in Israel became linked to the outcome of the corruption cases against Netanyahu.

Despite the political impasse, some election campaigns called for the imposition of Israeli sovereignty on some WB areas, especially the Jordan Valley and near Jerusalem. The religious extreme right also called for the establishment of a state according to Jewish law, while others called for a new occupation of GS, and a massive displacement of its residents in agreement with other countries to absorb them.⁴⁹

The results of the Israeli elections indicated that the existing status quo would be maintained: an inability of any party to obtain a Knesset majority; the large number of party lists; fragmentation, division, and reshaping of parties; building alliances. Moreover, the last 20 years witnessed the emergence of new major parties (Kadima, Blue and White), and the tendency of Israeli voters towards the extreme right, as well as the continued decline and dissolution of the left parties as indicated in the following table:

Table 2/5: Israeli Election Knesset Results by Number of Seats 1999–2020⁵⁰

Knesset	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
Year	1999	2003	2006	2009	2013	2015	April 2019	September 2019	2020
Likud	19	38	12	27	31	30	35	32	36
Blue and White							35	33	33
Labor	26	19	19	13	15	24	6	6	7
Kadima			29	28	2				
Yisrael Beiteinu	4			15		6	5	8	7
United Torah Judaism	5	5	6	5	7	6	8	7	7
Shas	17	11	12	11	11	7	8	9	9
Meretz	10	6	5	3	6	5	4	5	
Arab parties	10	8	10	11	11	13	10	13	15

Israeli Election Knesset Results by Number of Seats 1999–2020


Second: Demographic Indicators

The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) estimated the population of Israel at the end of 2019 at 9.138 million, including 6.773 million Jews, i.e., 74.1% of the population. This was compared to 8.968 million people, including 6.664 million Jews, 74.3% of the population, at the end of 2018. As for the Arab population in Israel, including the residents of East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, it was estimated at 1.918 million in 2019, i.e., 21% of the population, compared to 1.878 million in 2018, 20.9% of the population (see table 3/5). If we exclude the population of East Jerusalem (approximately 358 thousand⁵¹) and the Golan Heights (approximately 25 thousand), then the number of the 1948 Palestinians (i.e., the Palestinian territories occupied in 1948) was 1.535 million in 2019, about 16.8% of the population.

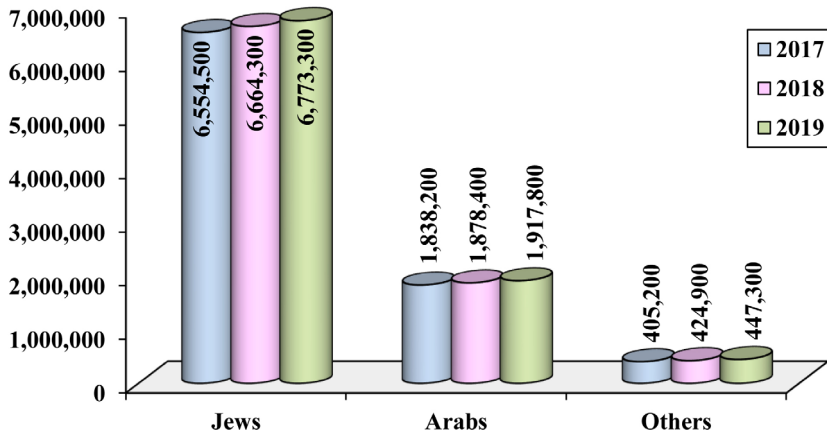
In 2019, CBS classified 447 thousand people as “others,” or 4.9%, compared to 425 thousand in 2018. These “others” are mostly immigrants from Russia, the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, who are not recognized as Jews, or who tend to deal with Judaism as a nationality rather than a religious affiliation, or who are non-Jews or non-Arab Christians.

It is difficult to determine accurate numbers of Jewish settlers in WB, as Israeli statistics deliberately omit the numbers of settlers in East Jerusalem. Some discretion is also used regarding the rest of WB, perhaps to assuage Palestinian and international reactions to the settlement programs. According to a report issued by Ya‘akov Katz, the former head of the National Union party, the number of settlers in WB increased over the past five years by 20.6%. The total number of settlers in WB (excluding East Jerusalem) was 450 thousand in 2018, an increase of 3.3%, while their number in East Jerusalem was estimated at 320 thousand.⁵² However, according to the available data, a more accurate estimate of the number of settlers in the WB, including East Jerusalem, is at least 800 thousand.

In contrast, a CBS statement issued on the commemoration of the occupation of the eastern part of Jerusalem in 1967, affirmed that Jerusalem is the largest city in Palestine and that its population represents 10% of the total population. Indeed, the population of Jerusalem reached 883 thousand, including 550 thousand settlers and 333 thousand Palestinians, approximately 38%. It added that during 2017, the number of settlers in Jerusalem increased by 8,100, while the Palestinian population increased by 8,800.⁵³

Table 3/5: Population of Israel 2011–2019⁵⁴

Year	Total	Jews	Arabs (including the population of East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights)	Others
2011	7,836,600	5,898,400	1,609,800	328,400
2012	7,984,500	5,999,600	1,647,200	337,700
2013	8,134,500	6,104,500	1,683,200	346,800
2014	8,296,900	6,219,200	1,720,300	357,400
2015	8,463,400	6,334,500	1,757,800	371,100
2016	8,628,600	6,446,100	1,797,300	386,200
2017	8,797,900	6,554,500	1,838,200	405,200
2018	8,967,600	6,664,300	1,878,400	424,900
2019	9,138,400	6,773,300	1,917,800	447,300

Population of Israel 2017–2019


In 2017 and 2018, there was a 2% population growth rate in Israel, which is almost the same annual growth rate as has occurred since 2003, with 183,648 persons and 184,370 persons being born in Israel in 2017 and 2018, respectively,⁵⁵ according to the latest statistics at the time of writing.

According to CBS, 33,085 immigrants came to Israel in 2019, compared to 28,099 and 26,357 in 2018 and 2017, respectively (see table 4/5). According to statistics, there have been 3.3 million immigrants arrive in Israel since its establishment in 1948, of whom 43.7% arrived in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990.⁵⁶ These figures show a limited increase in the rate of immigration in 2018 and 2019 compared to the preceding decade. However, they remain minimal compared to the 1990s. This comes after the diminution of the numbers of Jews willing to migrate, and after most Jews abroad went to developed countries in North America and Europe, so Jews do not have an incentive to migrate on a large scale.

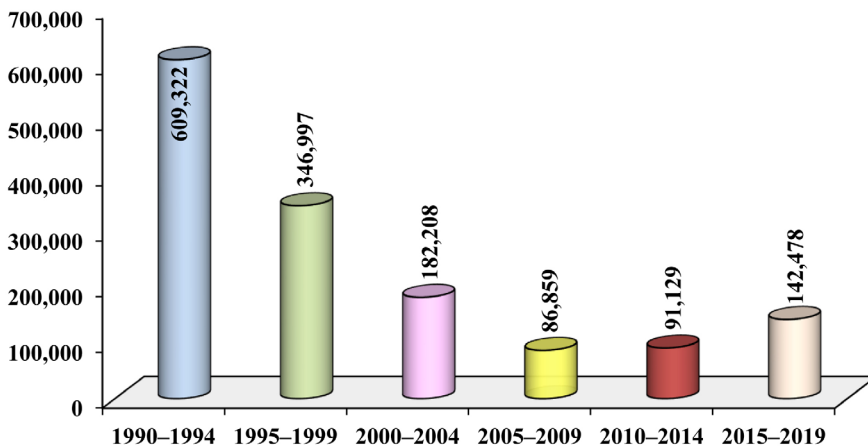
Table 4/5: Numbers of Jewish Immigrants to Israel 1990–2019⁵⁷

Year	1990–1994	1995–1999	2000–2004	2005–2009	2010–2014	
No. of immigrants	609,322	346,997	182,208	86,859	91,129	

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
No. of immigrants	27,908	27,029	26,357	28,099	33,085	1,458,993

The following chart shows the evolution of the number of Jewish immigrants to Israel every five years during 1990–2019.

Numbers of Jewish Immigrants to Israel 1990–2019



Although Israel treated these immigrants as Jews, there was a problem with their acceptance as Jews according to the religious definition, or according to the criteria of the Ministry of the Interior, controlled by the Orthodox movement, which insists that a Jew must have a Jewish mother. Therefore, based on data obtained by Hiddush about immigrants to Israel under the Israeli Law of Return in the 2012–2019 period, only 14% of these immigrants are “real” Jews. Moreover, 86% of them are registered as persons without religion, have converted to other religions, or they consider themselves Jews because they are descendants of a Jewish parent. However, the Ministry of the Interior rejected the figures published by Hiddush and said that there were a fallacy, and that the reason for the high proportion of non-Jews is due to the use of false definitions by the staff who prepared the statistics.⁵⁸

It should be noted that migration to Israel was accompanied by a continued counter-migration. According to CBS, about 14,300 persons holding Israeli passports exited Israel in 2017, while 8,400 came back in the same year. In other words, the rate of counter-migration reached 5,900 persons.⁵⁹ According to CBS estimates, between 560–596 thousand Israelis lived abroad at the end of 2016, not including the number of children born to them while they were outside the country.⁶⁰ An annual report issued by the National Union of Israeli Students stated that 59% of university students in Israel are thinking of immigration for various reasons, mostly personal and economic. According to the report, 35.5% of those polled attributed their intention to emigrate to the absence of any future professional development, while 31.5% attributed it to the high cost of living, 12.4% attributed it to the Israeli mentality, and 7.3% to security reasons.⁶¹

As for the religious and social tendencies of the Israeli society, a poll conducted by the *Haaretz* newspaper indicated that 54% of Israeli Jews said they believe in the existence of God and 21% believe that there is a supreme force, while 23% said they do not believe at all. Moreover, 60% confirmed that they do not keep the Sabbath holy, compared to only 25% who do. Likewise, 37% said they do not eat kosher food under Jewish law, compared to 45% who do.

The poll also showed that 78% of right-wing voters believe in the existence of God, and this percentage drops to 34% among center voters, and to 15% among left-wing voters. Moreover, 64% of these believers are between the ages of 18 and 24, while 22% of them are over the age of 65.

According to the poll, 56% consider that the Jews are the “chosen people” and that they have the right to this country as a result of a “divine promise.” Moreover, 79% of right-wing voters and 13% of left-wing voters believe that the Jews are “God’s chosen people,” while 74% of the right and 8% of the left believe that the Jews have the right to Palestine because of a “divine promise.” Regarding marriage, 45% said that they reject mixed marriage and 38% support it, while 61% support same-sex marriage and 28% oppose it. It also appeared that 44% believe in the theory of evolution and that humans evolved from apes, while 37% reject it. Moreover, 44% believe that there is life after death compared to 35% who do not.⁶²

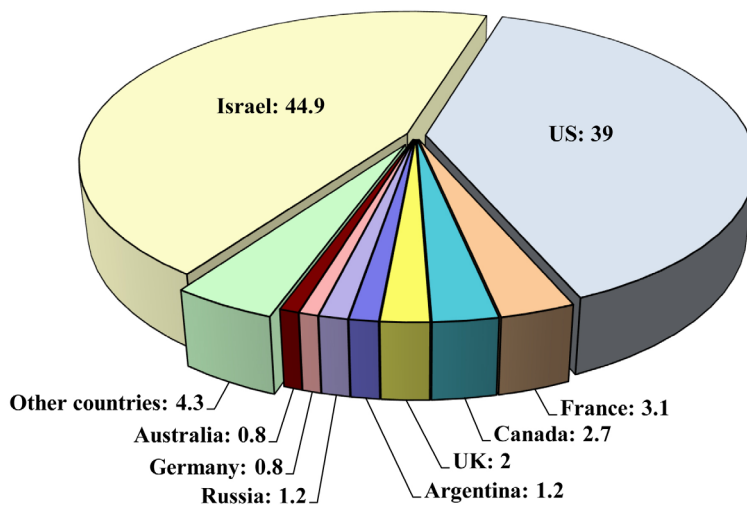
Regarding the 1948 Palestinians, according to the official poverty report issued by the Israel National Insurance Institute, the poverty rate among Arabs was still the highest in Israel at 60.7% in 2017, compared to 61.7% in 2016. The report also pointed to the sharp decline in birth rates among Arabs, from about 4.8 births per mother in 1990 to about 3.4 births in 2017. The report added that the poverty rate reached 43.1% among Haredi families and 47.1% among Arab families. However, while allowances helped 24.5% of Haredi families to move above the poverty line, it helped only 9.7% of Arab families.⁶³

As noted above, Israeli statistics incorporate the Palestinians of East Jerusalem and the Syrians of the Golan Heights with the Palestinians of 1948; therefore, this observation should be taken into account when discussing the religious distribution and social conditions of these citizens. Accordingly, based on data at the end of 2018, there are 1.598 million Muslims (Sunnis), 85%, 143 thousand Druze, 7.6%, and 135 thousand Christians, 7.2%. In terms of the population growth rate in 2018, it was 2.2% among Arabs compared to 1.7% among Jews.⁶⁴

As for the world Jewish population, Sergio DellaPergola, the renowned demographer and statistician, estimated it at 14.606 million at the end of 2018, an increase of 98 thousand from 2017 (a 0.7% increase), according to the latest statistics at the time of writing this report.⁶⁵ In the same context, there remain warnings against the “dissolving” of the followers of Judaism outside of Israel because of the high proportion of mixed marriages, which has an impact on the world Jewish population, especially in Western countries.

Table 5/5: World Jewish Population by Country 2018⁶⁶

Country	Estimates (thousands)	Percentage (%)
Israel	6,558.1	44.9
US	5,700	39
France	453	3.1
Canada	390.5	2.7
UK	290	2
Argentina	180.3	1.2
Russia	172	1.2
Germany	116	0.8
Australia	113.4	0.8
Other countries	632.7	4.3
Total	14,606	100

World Jewish Population by Country 2018 (%)


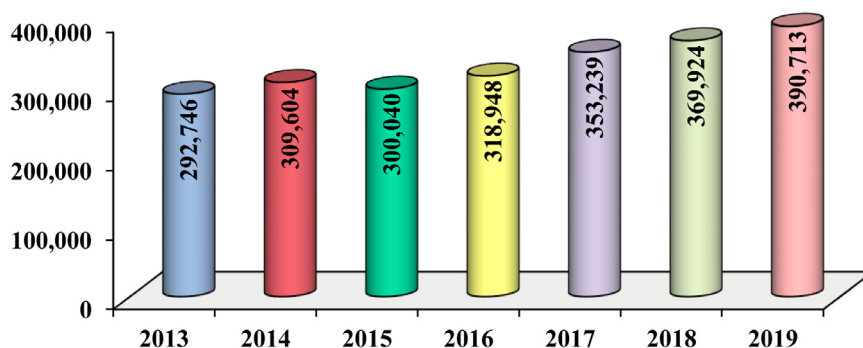
Third: Economic Indicators

Israeli GDP in 2018 was 1,330.6 billion shekels (\$370 billion), compared to 1,271.6 billion shekels (\$353 billion) in 2017, a growth of 4.6%. As for 2019, and according to the figures available for the first three quarters of the year, GDP was estimated at 1,392.6 billion shekels (\$391 billion), with a growth rate of 4.7%. If we calculate the growth rate in dollars, and because of the volatility of the value of the shekel against the dollar, we find the growth rate increased by 5.6% in 2019, and by 4.7% in 2018 compared to the previous year (see table 6/5). It is worth noting that these results are contrary to the growth expectations of the Bank of Israel, which were 3.7% in 2018⁶⁷ and 3.1% in 2019.⁶⁸ Moreover, the statistics that we offer are drawn from official sources, which periodically update and adjust data.

Table 6/5: Israeli GDP 2013–2019 at Current Prices⁶⁹

Year	GDP (million shekels)	GDP (\$ million)	Shekel exchange rate (according to Bank of Israel)
2013	1,056,638	292,746	3.6094
2014	1,107,577	309,604	3.5774
2015	1,165,324	300,040	3.8839
2016	1,224,951	318,948	3.8406
2017	1,271,555	353,239	3.5997
2018	1,330,618	369,924	3.597
2019*	1,392,619	390,713	3.5643

* Estimated numbers are based on the figures of Q1, Q2 and Q3 of 2019.

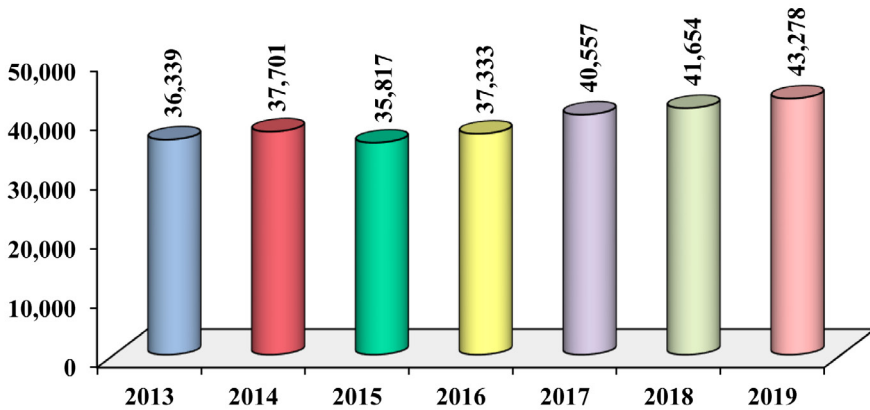
Israeli GDP 2013–2019 at Current Prices (\$ million)

Israeli GDP per capita was 149,828 shekels (\$41,654) in 2018, compared to 145,993 shekels (\$40,557) in 2017, a 2.6% increase. As for 2019, Israeli GDP per capita, according to available statistics for the first three quarters of the year, was estimated at 154,257 shekels (\$43,278), a 3% increase. When calculating the growth rate in dollars, and because of the volatility of the value of the shekel against the dollar, we find that the growth rate increased 3.9% in 2019 and by 2.7% in 2018 compared to the previous year. Therefore, one should not rush to make inaccurate conclusions if the difference in local currency against the dollar is not taken into account (see table 7/5).

Table 7/5: Israeli GDP per Capita 2013–2019 at Current Prices⁷⁰

Year	GDP per capita (shekels)	GDP per capita (\$)
2013	131,162	36,339
2014	134,871	37,701
2015	139,108	35,817
2016	143,380	37,333
2017	145,993	40,557
2018	149,828	41,654
2019*	154,257	43,278

* Estimated numbers are based on the figures of Q1, Q2 and Q3 of 2019.

Israeli GDP per Capita 2013–2019 at Current Prices (\$)

As for the budget of the Israeli government, CBS stated that the grand total in the approved 2019 budget of government payments amounted to 503.129 billion shekels (\$141 billion) compared to 553.565 billion shekels (\$153.9 billion) of the adjusted budget in 2018. However, the budget performance of government payments was 506.87 billion shekels (\$140.9 billion) in 2018, compared to 511.818 billion shekels (\$142.2 billion) in 2017.⁷¹

The budget is divided into three axes, the first of which is the ordinary budget, which includes the expenses of the presidency, the prime minister and the ministries. The second includes the development budget and debt repayment, and the third includes the budget of business enterprises. We note that the ordinary budget performance of 2018 was 368.549 billion shekels (\$102.5 billion), including that of the Ministry of Defense 72.547 billion shekels (\$20 billion), and Ministry of Public Security 17.898 billion shekels (\$5 billion). This was in addition to 71.422 billion shekels (\$20 billion) spent by the Ministry of Education, and 53.922 billion shekels (\$15 billion) spent by the Ministry of Social Affairs. We also note that debt repayment has carved out a significant portion of the total expenditure, reaching 78.993 billion shekels (\$22 billion) in 2018 compared to 100.19 billion shekels (\$27.8 billion) in 2017.⁷²

The grand total of budget performance of government receipts in 2018 was 468.519 billion shekels (\$130.3 billion) compared to 469.085 billion shekels (\$130.3 billion) in 2017. A large proportion of the current receipts came from income tax (134.987 billion shekels equivalent to \$37.5 billion) and value added tax (VAT) (99.9 billion shekels equivalent to \$27.8 billion), as was apparent in the 2018 budget.⁷³

According to CBS, the grand total of budget performance of government receipts in 2019 was 503.129 billion shekels (\$141 billion), compared to 483.668 billion shekels (\$134.5 billion) in the 2018 adjusted budget.⁷⁴

It appears that the statistics obtained from the Israeli Ministry of Finance website focused on the ordinary budget primarily related to the government and its ministries, and the updated budget for 2019 showed total expenditure of 414.35 billion shekels (\$116.3 billion) without referring to debt repayment or business enterprises. Similarly, the updated budget for 2018 showed total expenditure of 401.412 billion shekels (\$111.6 billion).⁷⁵

Therefore, some inconsistency and confusion could happen to some researchers, for the statistics and figures issued by different official Israeli bodies did not specify if the intended budget was the grand total budget or the ordinary budget. It did not specify if it was the budget approved by the government or by the Knesset, and whether it was the updated budget for receipts and payments after the completion of the fiscal year.

The following table shows the receipts and payments of the Israeli government in 2017–2019:

Table 8/5: Budget Performance of Israeli Government Receipts and Payments 2017–2019⁷⁶

		2017		2018		2019	
		Million shekels	Million \$	Million shekels	Million \$	Million shekels	Million \$
Receipts	Current receipts	313,624	87,125	314,753	87,504	332,740	93,354
	Capital receipts	127,893	35,529	128,694	35,778	146,865	41,204
	Business enterprises	27,568	7,658	25,072	6,970	23,525	6,600
Receipts grand total		469,085	130,312	468,519	130,253	503,129	141,158
Payments	Ordinary budget	351,572	97,667	368,549	102,460	353,939	99,301
	Development budget and debt repayment	132,727	36,872	113,338	31,509	125,666	35,257
	Business enterprises	27,519	7,645	24,983	6,946	23,525	6,600
Payments grand total		511,818	142,184	506,870	140,915	503,129	141,158
Deficit (%)		-9.1		-8.2		0	

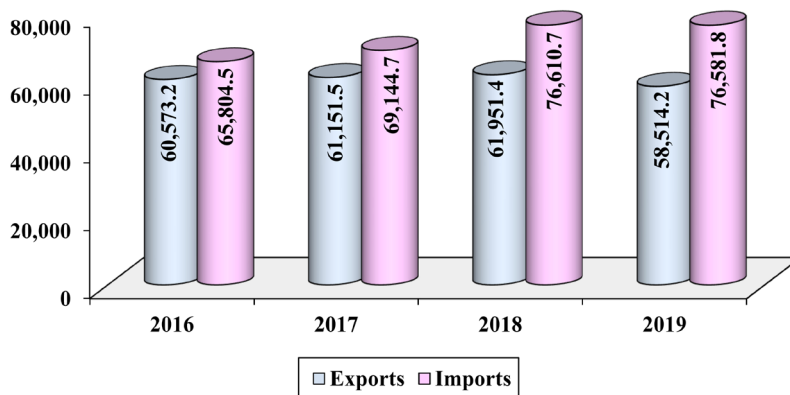
Note: The numbers of 2017 and 2018 are the actual receipts and payments, while for 2019, they are of the approved budget.

The Israeli exports for 2019 amounted to \$58.514 billion, compared with \$61.951 billion in 2018 and \$61.152 billion in 2017. Thus, exports fell by 5.5% in 2019 after increasing 1.3% in 2018. As for imports in 2019, they reached a total of \$76.582 billion, compared to \$76.611 billion in 2018 and \$69.145 billion in 2017. Thus, imports maintained their level in 2018–2019 (see table 9/5). It must be noted that these statistics do not include foreign trade services (import and export activities).

Table 9/5: Total Israeli Exports and Imports 2016–2019 at Current Prices⁷⁷

		Exports	Imports	Surplus/ deficit (%)
2016	Million shekels	232,757.6	252,668.3	-8.6
	\$ million	60,573.2	65,804.5	
2017	Million shekels	220,221.8	248,638.6	-12.9
	\$ million	61,151.5	69,144.7	
2018	Million shekels	222,432.6	275,436.5	-23.8
	\$ million	61,951.4	76,610.7	
2019	Million shekels	208,765.6	273,019.3	-30.8
	\$ million	58,514.2	76,581.8	

Total Israeli Exports and Imports 2016–2019 at Current Prices (\$ million)



The US still maintains its status as a primary trading partner of Israel. In 2019, Israeli exports to the US amounted to \$15.856 billion, representing 27.1% of total Israeli exports, compared to \$16.696 billion in 2018 (27% of the total Israeli exports). Israeli imports from the US reached \$12.273 billion in 2019 (16% of total Israeli imports), compared to \$9.755 billion in 2018 (12.7% of total Israeli imports). Israel offsets its trade deficit to a large extent with most of its trading partners through the trade surplus with the US, which was \$3.6 billion in 2019 and \$7 billion in 2018, representing a great support to the Israeli economy. It is noteworthy that the Israeli trade surplus with the US almost halved in 2019 compared to 2018 (see table 10/5).

China was ranked the second largest trading partner of Israel, with exports to China reaching \$4.714 billion in 2019 and \$4.779 billion in 2018. Israeli imports from China amounted to \$6.721 billion in 2019 and \$6.836 billion in 2018. Britain ranked third, with a trade volume reaching \$8.015 billion in 2019 after it reached \$10.493 billion in 2018.

Germany advanced from fifth to fourth position in 2019, with the trade volume reaching \$7.194 billion after reaching \$7.197 billion in 2018. Switzerland dropped from the fourth to fifth position with a trade volume of \$6.623 billion in 2019 after reaching \$9.109 billion in 2018, and \$6.984 billion in 2017 (see table 10/5).

Hong Kong went from seventh position in 2017 to the sixth position in 2018 with a trade volume of \$6.43 billion, then to ninth position in 2019 with a trade volume of \$4.86 billion (see table 10/5).

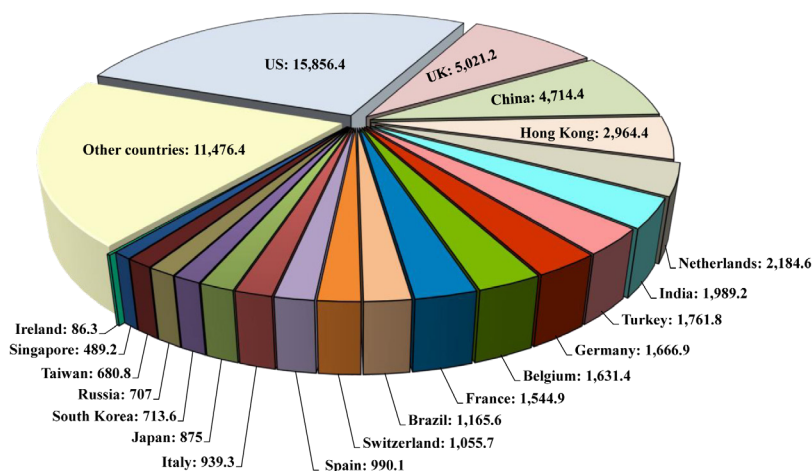
In addition to the countries above, the main countries to which Israel exported in 2019 were the Netherlands (\$2.185 billion), India (\$1.989 billion), Turkey (\$1.762 billion), Belgium (\$1.631 billion), France, Brazil, Spain, and Italy. The main countries that Israel imported from in 2019 were Belgium (\$3.57 billion), Turkey (\$3.174 billion), the Netherlands (\$2.857 billion), Italy (\$2.772 billion), France (\$2.043 billion), and India (\$1.847 billion) (see table 10/5).

In 2018, the main countries to which Israel exported were the Netherlands (\$2.28 billion), Belgium (\$2.19 billion), India (\$2.15 billion), Turkey (\$1.9 billion), France, Brazil and Japan. The main countries that Israel imported from in 2018 were Belgium (\$3.8 billion), the Netherlands (\$3.3 billion), Turkey (\$2.89 billion), Italy (\$2.84 billion), and France (\$2.198 billion) (see table 10/5).

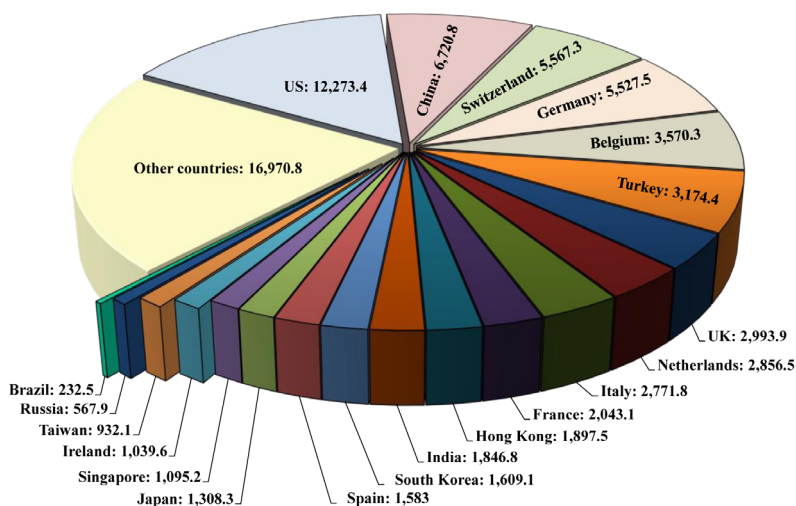
Table 10/5: Volume of Israeli Trade, Exports and Imports to/ from Selected Countries 2018–2019 at Current Prices (\$ million)⁷⁸

	Country	Trade volume		Israeli exports to:		Israeli imports from:	
		2019	2018	2019	2018	2019	2018
1	US	28,129.8	26,451.1	15,856.4	16,696	12,273.4	9,755.1
2	China	11,435.2	11,614.9	4,714.4	4,778.6	6,720.8	6,836.3
3	UK	8,015.1	10,492.6	5,021.2	4,341.2	2,993.9	6,151.4
4	Germany	7,194.4	7,197.2	1,666.9	1,777.2	5,527.5	5,420
5	Switzerland	6,623	9,109.1	1,055.7	1,351.9	5,567.3	7,757.2
6	Belgium	5,201.7	6,016.7	1,631.4	2,193.5	3,570.3	3,823.2
7	Netherlands	5,041.1	5,558.1	2,184.6	2,275.6	2,856.5	3,282.5
8	Turkey	4,936.2	4,797.9	1,761.8	1,912.4	3,174.4	2,885.5
9	Hong Kong	4,861.9	6,429.8	2,964.4	4,227.1	1,897.5	2,202.7
10	India	3,836	3,933	1,989.2	2,149.5	1,846.8	1,783.5
11	Italy	3,711.1	3,823.4	939.3	981.7	2,771.8	2,841.7
12	France	3,588	3,803.5	1,544.9	1,605.9	2,043.1	2,197.6
13	Spain	2,573.1	2,467	990.1	882.6	1,583	1,584.4
14	South Korea	2,322.7	2,485.6	713.6	970.1	1,609.1	1,515.5
15	Japan	2,183	3,087.4	875	1,031.6	1,308.3	2,055.8
16	Taiwan	1,612.9	1,490	680.8	546.4	932.1	943.6
17	Singapore	1,584.4	2,160.2	489.2	504.1	1,095.2	1,656.1
18	Brazil	1,398.1	1,356.5	1,165.6	1,169.1	232.5	187.4
19	Russia	1,274.9	1,440.6	707	664.2	567.9	776.4
20	Ireland	1,125.9	1,283.5	86.3	104.4	1,039.6	1,179.1
21	Other countries	28,447.5	23,564	11,476.4	11,788.3	16,970.8	11,775.7
	Total	135,096	138,562.1	58,514.2	61,951.4	76,581.8	76,610.7

Israeli Exports to Selected Countries 2019 at Current Prices (\$ million)



Israeli Imports from Selected Countries 2019 at Current Prices (\$ million)



Manufacturing, mining, and quarrying topped the list of Israeli exports for 2018 and 2019, totaling 85.6% and 89.1% respectively. Net Israeli diamond exports reached 12.6% in 2018 and 9.3% in 2019. Agricultural exports and those relating to forestry and fishing totaled to 2.1% in 2018 and 2019 (see table 11/5). The breakdown of industrial exports by technological intensity showed that high technology industries accounted for 43.1% of total industrial exports (excluding diamonds) in 2018, while medium-tech industries accounted for 49.9% and low-tech industries for 6.9%.⁷⁹

Table 11/5: Israeli Exports by Commodity Group 2017–2019 (\$ million)⁸⁰

Year	Agriculture, forestry and fishing	Manufacturing, mining & quarrying excl. working diamonds	Diamonds		Others	Returned exports	Total
			Working of diamonds	Wholesale of diamonds			
2017	1,217	45,231.1	4,493	2,232.6	9.1	–118.5	53,064.3
2018	1,145	46,347.3	4,559.4	2,263.3	3.1	–180	54,138.2
2019	1,127	46,076.8	3,358	1,440.1	8.4	–142	51,686.4

As for Israeli imports, raw materials topped the list in 2018 and 2019, reaching 40.8% and 42.2% respectively, while fuel imports reached 13% and 12.3%, import of consumer goods 19.5% and 20.3%, investment goods 16.7% and 15.7%, and diamond imports reached 7.5% and 5.1% in 2018 and 2019 respectively (see table 12/5).

Table 12/5: Israeli Imports by Commodity Group 2017–2019 (\$ million)⁸¹

Year	Consumer goods	Raw materials	Investment goods	Fuel	Diamonds rough and polished	Others	Total
2017	13,667.2	28,335.8	12,084.2	7,602.4	5,754.7	563.8	68,008.1
2018	14,716.1	30,872.4	12,621.6	9,838.4	5,684.4	1,912.1	75,645
2019	15,365.7	31,930.1	11,846.5	9,285.6	3,877.2	3,303.5	75,608.6

Although Israel is a rich and developed country, it still receives annual US aid, which has recently increased by 22.4%. Indeed, Israel received a total of \$3.8 billion in late 2019, including \$3.3 billion in military grants, and a total of \$3.8058 billion in 2018. The US military grant has remained stable since 2012, at \$3.1 billion. Thus, the amount of US support Israel received during the period 1949–2019 totaled about \$138.29 billion, according to the report submitted by the Congressional Research Services (CRS).⁸²

Table 13/5: US Bilateral Aid to Israel 1949–2019 (\$ million)⁸³

Period	1949–1958	1959–1968	1969–1978	1979–1988	1989–1998	1999–2008
Total	599.6	727.8	11,426.5	29,933.9	31,551.9	29,374.7

Period	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Total	2,583.9	2,803.8	3,029.2	3,098	3,115	3,115

Period	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Total	3,110	3,110	3,107.5	3,805.8	3,800	138,292.6

Fourth: Military Indicators

In 2018 and 2019, regional developments presented Israel with many challenges, some of which were of a novel nature. What increased Israeli anxiety was the volatile internal Israeli landscape, with the inability of the right and middle-left blocs to form a government, even though two Knesset elections were held. The Marches of Return that started on the GS borders on 30/3/2018, as well as intermittent military tensions, added a new explosive factor that almost tipped into a more serious confrontation more than once. Additionally, the US assassination of Iranian military commander Qasem Soleimani instigated Iranian reaction towards Israel.

1. Appointments and Structural Changes

In 2018 and 2019, several new appointments and promotions in the Israeli military took place, including many corps and command posts. Among the more notable appointments was Lieutenant-General Aviv Kochavi on 25/11/2018 as the chief of general staff of the army, succeeding Gadi Eisenkot, whose term ended on 31/12/2018. He started his new position on 1/1/2019.⁸⁴

Moreover, the Southern Command officially appointed Brigadier General Eliezer Toledano as the head of the Gaza Division on 24/10/2018, replacing Brigadier General Yehuda Fuchs.⁸⁵ The Northern Front chief Major-General Yoel Strick was appointed commander of the embattled Ground Forces, and Major-General Amir Baram replaced Strick as the commander of the Northern Front.⁸⁶ The former of the Golani Brigade commander, Brigadier General Ghassan Alian, was appointed head of the Civil Administration in the Palestinian Territories.⁸⁷ On 16/12/2019, Colonel Barak Hiram was appointed commander of the Golani Infantry Brigade.⁸⁸

2. Manpower

There are around 170 thousand active soldiers in the Israeli army while the reserve forces number approximately 445 thousand.⁸⁹ These forces are highly prepared, as they can be fully mobilized and can effectively enter service within four days.

On 10/1/2019, the Manpower Directorate in the Israeli army released its annual figures on the number of soldiers killed. In 2018, 43 Israeli soldiers were killed, including eight in combat, and eight suspected of committing suicide, while in 2017, 55 soldiers died.⁹⁰ This was the first time in years that the number of suicides has decreased, from 16 soldiers in 2017 and 15 soldiers in 2016.⁹¹

3. Military Plans and Directions

The strategic environment of Israel is in a state of uncertainty, especially with the increase of hostile military capabilities, in addition there is an active strategic concentration of some hostile forces, especially on the northern front. Adding to the pressure on this strategic environment is the instability and indecisiveness in the Arab Gulf region.

The new challenge facing Israel and its army lies is the attrition across several military combat fronts. A hostile military system surrounds Israel that includes the Iran and Hizbullah forces in Syria and Lebanon, and the Palestinian factions in GS and WB. Combined these force constitute a military and combat attrition to Israel that it wants to contain. The Israeli army is now ready to launch wars and confrontations on several fronts simultaneously.

The 18th and 19th Herzliya Conferences were held in May 2018 and June 2019 respectively, analyzing the security and military challenges facing Israel in light of the political and military changes in the regional strategic environment, especially at its northern borders. Although Israeli security and military leaders who spoke at the two conferences emphasized continued Israeli military superiority in the Middle East, they pointed out that the “enemy” is now enjoying a better military strategic position. Indeed, Iran was establishing its military presence in Syria as Israel’s neighbor, and Hizbullah was building its missile arsenal and owned missiles and precision guided missiles as part of a long-term Iranian project, in addition to the combat experience it gained in Syria.⁹² Moreover, Hamas continues

to dig tunnels and develop its missile and combat capabilities in GS. Speakers at both conferences recognized that the next war will take a heavy toll on the Israeli home front. In this context, Giora Eiland, former President of the National Security Council (NSC), pointed, during his speech at the 19th Herzliya Conference, to the transformations in building Iranian power and Hizbullah forces, especially the development of precision guided missiles, which meant targeting strategically valuable Israeli facilities.⁹³

According to the Herzliya conferences, the Israeli strategy focuses on maintaining a state of deterrence on all fronts, and is based on the principle of “burning into the consciousness” of the “enemy” the prospect of Israel inflicting massive destruction of infrastructure, whether in Lebanon or GS, in the event of a new war, while still remaining keen on maintaining calm at all fronts. The former Deputy Chief of Staff of the Army, Major General Yair Golan, opined that the next war could not be won by Israel without land maneuvers and a ground invasion of Lebanon in order to hit Hizbullah’s forces, bases and infrastructure.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, in the 19th Herzliya Conference, former Air Force commander General Amir Eshel, declared that any talk of land maneuvers as a magic solution was too idealistic, because it cannot be relied on, especially in light of the lack of preparedness of ground forces.⁹⁵

In an article published in the Hebrew newspaper *Maariv*, Yossi Melman identified the most important characteristic of the Jewish year [On 29/9/2019, the Jewish year 5779 ended] for Israel was the state of uncertainty surrounding the country because every incident, no matter how small, has the potential to lead to a state of full confrontation.⁹⁶

According to the two Herzliya conferences, Israel faces difficulties in having influence on its strategic environment, and this was confirmed by the strategic assessment by the head of The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) and the former head of the Intelligence Division, Major General Amos Yedlin, published in January 2020 looking at events that were anticipated in 2020. According to the assessment, Israel is a strong country but finds it difficult to translate its strength into strategic influence and its war achievements into political goals, thereby achieving central national security goals. Yedlin pointed out that the publishing of the summary of the strategic assessment coincided with the assassination of

Qasem Soleimani, which put the region in a new context that could mark a strategic turning point, with an extent that is hard to measure. The Israeli researcher predicted several events during 2020, including some related to the Iranian nuclear program, the “First Northern War,” the factions in GS, the regional system, enhancing the readiness of the army, increasing the defense budget, and preserving superiority.⁹⁷

On October 4/10/2019, INSS at Tel Aviv University and the Washington Institute for Near East Policy published a booklet entitled “Guidelines for Israel’s National Security Strategy.” It is a study drafted by former Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot, who developed the destructive “Dahiya doctrine” during the July 2006 war on Lebanon, and the INSS senior researcher Gabi Siboni, who is a colonel in the Israeli army reserve service.⁹⁸ However, this document does not offer anything new regarding the Israeli concept of security that has been in effect since the 1950s.

Although more than five years have passed since the Israeli aggression on GS in mid-2014, Israeli army leaders are still drawing lessons from it. An Israeli military document disclosed the failures of the Israeli army during that war. The document points to sharp criticism leveled at the army leadership, as Yair Golan, the deputy chief of staff at the time, revealed that the air force fired 1,200 rockets and precision guided missiles at empty targets without results due to the frustration of the army leadership about the war coming to an end. According to the document, the army was fearful of losses in the ranks of its ground forces, and at the same time was unable to find any way to stop the rocket fire coming from GS and to confront the tunnels other than a limited ground operation, despite its gravity.⁹⁹

As the Gideon multi-year plan (2016–2020), drawn up by former chief of staff Gadi Eisenkot, entered its final year, new chief of staff Aviv Kochavi began to formulate a new multi-year military action plan, dubbed “Tnufa” (momentum). It is a strategic plan intended to galvanize the army’s forces and replace Gideon’s plan. Based on the details of the “Tnufa” plan, which was published by military analyst Alex Fishman in the *Yedioth Ahronoth* newspaper, the plan talks about a “swift and massive use of force against enemy systems.”¹⁰⁰

But the weak point of Kochavi’s plan will emerge, according to Fishman, when presented to the government, “which will not only have to increase budgets, but also to absorb a military-political concept that is different from what it is also used to.” The Kochavi plan asks the government not to interfere in the course of the war after deciding to launch it.¹⁰¹

With increasing Israeli interest in international public opinion international legitimacy, the Israeli leadership was keen on adapting military operations to the rules of international law. To achieve this, at the beginning of 2018 the Israeli army created a circle to influence public opinion, called the “circle of awareness.” The idea is to concentrate the planning for all “flexible” activities with foreign armies, diplomats, foreign media and public opinion, under one military roof.¹⁰²

4. Military Maneuvers

With the continued security and military threats on its border and the fluid situation in its surrounding strategic environment, the Israeli army continued to implement its annual training plan of 2018 and 2019, conducting several large-scale military exercises. This was part of the military and security vision to be ready and alert in case security and military changes should happen along the borders, especially on the northern and southern fronts.

Over the past two years, the Israeli army launched several military exercises on the borders with Egypt and GS in the south, to examine the readiness of its southern military command units, the ground forces, and the southern logistics network in states of emergency.¹⁰³ These exercises also expanded throughout occupied Palestine, in preparation for a military confrontation on the GS and Syria fronts, and they included a simulation of the full occupation of GS.¹⁰⁴ They aimed to scrutinize the readiness of the ground forces, the armored corps, the air force, the artillery, the communications and military intelligence unit.¹⁰⁵

The Israeli army also launched a series of military exercises in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights, the Upper Galilee and Nahariya region, where thousands of reservists were involved. Most of these exercises simulate war in the northern and southern regions, with the participation of hundreds of squadrons and air combat units.¹⁰⁶ The training covered bumpy mountainous areas and street fighting in difficult weather conditions.¹⁰⁷

An Israeli navy drill aimed to raise the navy’s efficiency in providing protection to the natural gas platforms of the oil fields, discovered by Israel in the Mediterranean Sea. The drill, which was dubbed “Raging Sea,” took place in the last week of January 2019 in the Mediterranean, simulating a missile attack against enemy ships and boats.¹⁰⁸

As for the Israeli Air Force, its efficiency has increased by acquiring US Stealth F-35 aircraft, which were used in Israel's air strikes inside Syrian territory in the second half of 2019. This weapon was first introduced in Israeli army exercises on 16–19/6/2019, simulating war on several fronts and covering scenarios that included an enemy armed with advanced Russian S-300 and S-400 missile systems.¹⁰⁹

Concerning the joint Israeli maneuvers with its allies, a joint US-Israel ballistic missile defense exercise called Juniper Cobra 2018, which lasted until 15/3/2018, simulated a comprehensive attack on Israel from more than one front, including the northern border with Lebanon and the southern GS border. These exercises took place in Israel for the ninth time since 2001.¹¹⁰

As Israeli normalization with some Arab countries is developing, a number of Israeli planes participated on 20/3/2018 in INIOHOS 2018, which are exercises that are held annually, along with dozens of other air force planes. Egypt and the UAE took part in the exercises, as well as the US, Italy, United Kingdom (UK), Cyprus and Greece.¹¹¹ Emirati pilots also participated alongside Israeli pilots in the INIOHOS 2019, which ended on 12/4/2019.¹¹²

5. Arms and Arms Trade

On 27/8/2018, the Israeli Ministry of Defense announced the completion of a major arms deal with the Israel Military Industries—Ta'as, providing the army with advanced missile systems possessing a 30–150 km range, and the aim of developing others by 2020 that could cover the Middle East region. Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman said, “We are purchasing and developing high-precision systems that bolster the IDF's offense capabilities,” adding that some of the systems were already in production and others nearing the end of the research and development stage. “The deal for the missile system, which within a few years will allow for coverage for every point in short and far ranges.”¹¹³

In early 2018, the Israeli army began to introduce new rifles, which would significantly increase their ability to hit the target precisely.¹¹⁴

On 22/4/2018, the Israeli navy announced the purchase of four new gas field-defending Sa'ar 6 warships from Germany. The Sa'ar 6 corvettes will be outfitted with both a modified version of the Iron Dome system, known as the Naval

Iron Dome, as well as the Barak 8 missile interceptor. The first corvette was scheduled to arrive in late 2019. The other three would be delivered by the beginning of 2021.¹¹⁵

The Israeli Ministry of Defense have been working hard to speed up the development of a laser system “Iron Beam”—nearly 20 years after it abandoned this idea. Such a system would fill a current capability gap within in the Iron Dome system, as it has difficulty intercepting projectiles at short range because of the shorter flight time.¹¹⁶ Yossi Melman, a security affairs analyst in the Hebrew newspaper *Maariv*, stated on 16/5/2019 that reconsidering such development began several months ago, in the wake of the escalation in GS, in early May 2019, where there were failures in the performance of the Iron Dome and the GS factions, notably Hamas and PIJ, had developed their capabilities.¹¹⁷

The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) of US military aid to Israel, which was formally signed on 14/9/2016, came into effect on 1/10/2018. Under this 10-year MoU, Washington pledged to provide Israel \$38 billion as follows: \$33 billion in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) grants, plus \$5 billion in defense appropriations for missile defense programs.¹¹⁸

Contrary to the prevailing optimism on the Israeli side in regard to the previous MoU, the Israeli Ministry of Defense warned at a meeting of the Knesset Finance Committee that the country’s arms industry was expected to lose more than \$1 billion and approximately 22 thousand jobs when the MoU was applied. It may also lead to the closure of 130 factories, as the MoU changed the previous conditions for military aid. After it was possible to spend up to 26.3% of aid (\$815 million) in Israel annually, it became obligatory to spend all US military aid in the US, thus leading to losses to the local industry.¹¹⁹

Israel continued to receive the F-35 stealth fighters in compliance with the agreement concluded with the US administration in August 2017. Tel Aviv received 16 aircraft as of 14/7/2019, and it is expected that it will receive another 34 by 2024.¹²⁰ Some of these aircraft were used in Israeli air strikes against Syrian territories during 2019.

As for exports of Israeli weapons, on 17/4/2019, the Military Exports Department of the Israeli Ministry of Defense stated that Israeli arms sales exceeded \$7.5 billion in 2018, most of which were to the Asia Pacific region. The Ministry of Defense stated that this figure was lower than the \$9.2 billion that was

achieved in 2017, which was an exceptionally strong year. The Israeli government does not usually disclose details of arms sales deals, but the ministers' statement explained that sales of offensive missile and missile defense systems accounted for 24% of 2018 sales (down from 31% in 2017), unmanned aerial vehicles and their radar systems 15%, radar and electronic defense systems 14% (down from 17% in 2017), marine systems 2% compared to 1% in 2017, communications and space intelligence systems 6% (down from 9% in 2017), maintenance and upgrades of equipment previously sold 14%, and satellite and space systems 1%. The data indicated that the contracts were more widely distributed in the Asian market, especially India, which was showing special and growing interest in Israeli military technology. In 2018, exports to Asian Pacific countries reached 46% compared to 58% in 2017, followed by the European market with 15% compared to 21% in 2017, North America with 6% compared to 14% in 2017, Africa with 2% compared to 5% in 2017, and Latin America with 6% compared to 2% in 2017.¹²¹

According to a Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) report, Israel has strengthened its global position, becoming the seventh largest arms exporter. Moreover, the pace of this industry's growth has increased by 55% over the past five years, which is the largest increase among the top 10 countries in this category. It appears that India received 49% of Israeli weapons sold between 2013 and 2017, while Azerbaijan received 13% and Vietnam received 6.3%. Israel ranks 17th among the countries that import weapons and its arms imports have increased by 125% in the past five years, compared to the previous five years.¹²²

The Israeli newspaper *Maariv* reported that the budgets of the various Israeli intelligence forces, led by the Mossad and the Shabak, had risen significantly over the past two decades, particularly since 2012. The report added that the budgets of the Shabak and the Mossad were estimated at around 4 billion shekels each (\$1.1 billion),¹²³ with a clear increase in the influence and role of the Cyber and High-Tech Units, which had recently turned into a spearhead.¹²⁴

6. Military Budget

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his military commanders talked often about the importance of providing huge budgets to the army under the pretext of the size of the danger that surrounds Israel. Excessive spending on the Israeli army continued despite internal warnings that this would reflect negatively on the economy and on the ability to maintain defense spending. In August 2018,

Netanyahu demanded an increase in the military budget of around 30 billion shekels (\$8.2 billion),¹²⁵ an increase of 0.2% to 0.3% of Israeli GDP. Indeed, the military budget of the Israeli army and security arms is equal to 8% of GDP.¹²⁶

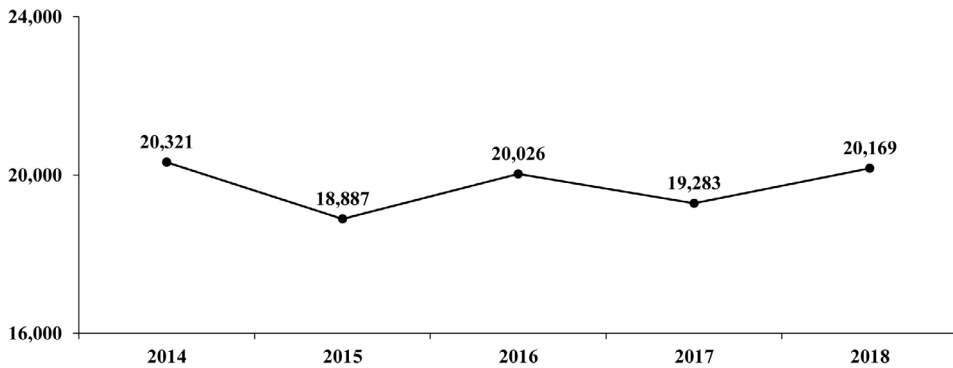
On 21/12/2016, the Knesset approved its 2017–2018 budget in marathon session, as the Ministry of Defense obtained 70 billion shekels (\$18.2 billion) for each year.¹²⁷ On 13/3/2018, it also approved the 2019 budget, with an increase of 4.3% from the 2017–2018 budget, as the Ministry of Defense obtained 72.8 billion shekels (\$21.2 billion).¹²⁸ It should be noted here that a large part of the annual Israeli military sales revenue has entered the defense budget for years without being declared.

According to former NSC Head Yaakov Amidror, the current budget of the Ministry of Defense, the army, and the Israeli security services is not sufficient to meet the challenges and threats facing Israel. In an interview with *Maariv*, on the 46th anniversary of the October 1973 war, Amidror said that Israel had witnessed a sharp debate within its military and political leadership about Egyptian intentions towards a war, and that, in light of Iranian threats and Israeli fears of being ambushed, Israel should have learned important lessons.¹²⁹

In the following table, CBS provided details of the actual Israeli military expenditures in 2014–2018:

**Table 14/5: Actual Israeli Military Expenditures 2014–2018
at Current Prices¹³⁰**

Year	Expenditures (million shekels)	Expenditures (\$ million)
2014	72,705	20,321
2015	73,356	18,887
2016	76,912	20,026
2017	69,414	19,283
2018	72,547	20,169

Actual Israeli Military Expenditures 2014–2018 at Current Prices (\$ million)***Fifth: The Israeli Position on the Internal Palestinian Situation***

In 2018 and 2019, Israel maintained its policies, or rather its strategy, in dealing with the internal Palestinian situation. It is the same strategy of previous years, in light of the continuing Palestinian political and geographical divide, reconciliation efforts that have stalled since 2007, and the absence of any active and influential Arab and Islamic role in Palestinian affairs, linked to Arab and regional developments.

Israel expressed its desire to maintain the Palestinian division and refused to take part in a bloody war in GS on behalf of Mahmud ‘Abbas and the PA, aimed at giving the PA governance across all of the 1967 occupied territories. In an interview with *Israel Hayom* on 5/4/2019, Netanyahu indicated that Israel was benefiting from the Palestinian division and that it would not give GS to ‘Abbas:

The connection between Gaza and Judea and Samaria has been broken. They are two separate entities, and I think that in the long term, that’s not something that’s bad for Israel. Abu Mazen brought that upon himself. He cut back the influx of PA funds. He thought that by doing so, he could send Gaza up in flames. We would pay for the occupation of Gaza with a heavy loss of life, and on Israel’s back he [Abbas] would get Gaza on a silver platter. That won’t happen.¹³¹

‘Abbas hinted at stopping payments that were linked to essential services in GS, after an explosion targeting the convoy of Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah, who passed the Beit Hanoun crossing in the northern GS on 13/3/2018. Israeli Minister of Defense Avigdor Lieberman accused ‘Abbas of generating tension between Israel and the Palestinians, and seeking to provoke a conflict between Hamas in Gaza and Israel.¹³² Moreover, in an analytical article published in *Haaretz*, Israeli journalist Amira Hass also reflected that Hamas had no interest in what happened, while military analyst Amos Harel outlined in another article that the bombing affected only the chances of Palestinian reconciliation and nothing else.¹³³

In parallel, Israel continued to enforce its blockade on GS, trying to impose its conditions on the resistance factions there, periodically threatening an all-out war and at other times promising concessions and the partial dismantling of the blockade, while allowing the entry of foreign aid. On 4/4/2019, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that he had offered several Arab countries control of GS, in a plan that would see Israeli forces reoccupy the territory, and topple the Hamas movement, but “no one wanted to do this.”¹³⁴

According to the *Yedioth Ahronoth* website on 28/12/2019, Israel disregarded the PA request to hold legislative and presidential elections in occupied Jerusalem. The decision was taken not to respond positively or negatively to the PA, after a high-ranking Israeli team discussed the request.¹³⁵ According to the PA, this Israeli stance had prevented the holding of Palestinian elections up to the time of writing.

Despite Israeli interest in assessing the post-‘Abbas era, as seen in reports, articles, and security leaks in the Israeli media from time to time, Israel does not have a clear path in regard to this particular issue. However, Israel strives, with a high degree of caution, to provide a suitable environment for ‘Abbas’s successor to be able to comply with Israeli and US conditions, cooperate “reasonably” in managing the “functional” PA in WB, and even play a role in implementing the Trump deal, even if indirectly.

Former Minister Yossi Beilin quoted Brigadier General Dror Shalom, head of the Research Division in Aman saying that ‘Abbas “is key to the quiet that has been in effect since 2006. ... I find it hard to imagine anyone who would present more moderate or pragmatic positions than ‘Abbas. We need to take that into consideration.”¹³⁶

The Israeli side has considered several scenarios in the wake of ‘Abbas’s death, including that of a Palestinian war in which everyone fights against everyone else, the scenario of Hamas’s control of WB and a scenario of turmoil.¹³⁷

Israel’s Channel Two indicated in a report that Abu Mazen is unpopular, but that he manages to continue his rule of WB with his security forces and with Israeli security cover. Hence, the channel insinuated that the successor of ‘Abbas would only succeed if he adopts these two main factors.¹³⁸

Israeli press and media leaks stated that the Israeli security forces put three scenarios on the table: the old guard takes over power, such as Saeb Erekat, Majid Faraj, Jibril Rajoub, and Mahmud al-‘Aloul, who could be expected to continue security coordination with Israel. Muhammad Dahlan represents the second scenario, the third scenario includes turmoil, civil war and power inheritance struggles within the Fatah movement, including Hamas and other parties, which may be accompanied, perhaps weakly, by a third *Intifadah* (uprising). Israeli Brigadier General Eli Ben-Meir, former head of the Aman, spoke of a fourth scenario where there would be a transitional phase in which the PA is presided over by a unanimously approved weak figure until the next general elections.¹³⁹

Away from these scenarios, it seems that Israel has already begun to follow another path, by preempting the end of the ‘Abbas era and initiating relations with PA officials, especially in the security forces. The first such Israeli steps were through the Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, Major General Yoav Mordechai, whose office deals with Palestinian humanitarian issues related to travel, treatment and visits, through the PA Ministry of Civil Affairs. The two sides had been doing this for many years, until the situation changed after 2014, when Mordechai’s office started to make direct contact with the Palestinians, without going through the Palestinian Ministry, which sparked its anger and protest.¹⁴⁰

In addition, some Israelis came up with an old-new option in WB that would be more appropriate for Israel in the absence of ‘Abbas, including the restoration of the “village ties” scenario that Israel applied in some parts of WB in the 1970s, when some Palestinian officials responded to it, while a number of them were assassinated by Palestinian factions. The task of “village ties” is to manage society by communicating with the Israeli Civil Administration, or facilitating some of their living affairs, away from the PA and its president, both administratively and

politically.¹⁴¹ As for the major Palestinian cities, the Israelis would have the choice in the elected local councils, which manage Palestinian life, regardless of any political and sovereign significance, provided that Hamas did not win, as Israel fears it might.

There is also a third formula, which would allow each Palestinian security officer to manage the governorate that he controls, and to communicate with them through the Israeli liaison officer.¹⁴²

Conclusion

In 2018–2019, the Israeli landscape was marked by an escalation of religious and national extremism. The right-wing dominated the political scene with the fragmentation and collapse of the left forces. Even the core ideas of the rising powers facing the right-wing, such as the Blue and White party, adopt the positions of the right regarding the peace process, the annexation of Jerusalem, the settlements, the Jordan Valley, and the Trump deal. Zionist extremism was evident in the Israeli Knesset's approval of 37 racist laws from late 2017 until the end of 2019. The culmination of these racist laws was the ratification by the Knesset in July 2018 of the "Jewish Nation-State Law," that enshrines the Jewish-Zionist nature of Israel.

Notwithstanding the corruption charges that have been brought against Prime Minister Netanyahu and that were reinforced by the government's formal charges on 21/11/2019, Netanyahu continued to lead the Israeli landscape and the Right Camp, and to retain pole position for retaining the position of prime minister, thus making him escape, even temporarily, from trial and possible imprisonment.

Holding three elections in less than one year resulted in a political intractability and a stuttering government performance. This situation may eventually lead to the formation of a "national unity" government between the two major parties, i.e., the Likud and Blue and White party, or the formation of a right-wing government if the Yisrael Beiteinu party agrees to join it, or to a fourth election. This may raise questions about the future of the Israeli electoral system and the possibilities of making amendments to it.

In the face of Israeli extremism, the Palestinian Arab minority has endeavored to organize and arrange its ranks, managing to accomplish a historic achievement by winning 15 seats in the Knesset. This showed that it was able to mobilize large numbers of the 1948 Palestinians in its ranks, with a growing sense of being targeted. This relative success is difficult to translate into political achievements on the ground, but it is an important tool in confronting Israeli racism.

Israeli population statistics show a modest growth of 2% annually, with the number of Palestinian Arabs continuing to increase at a higher rate than Jews. Immigration data also showed a limited increase in the rate of Jewish immigration to Israel compared to the previous 10 years, but it still remained minimal compared to the 1990s. The general graph is also moving towards achieving a demographic majority of Palestinians on the land of historic Palestine in the near future.

Israel was able to achieve advanced economic results in the 2018–2019 period in the increase of the GDP and GDP per capita. It also maintained broad trade relations, and a large volume of exports, despite an ongoing state of trade deficit. Moreover, Israel continued to benefit from the enthusiastic US support, with \$3.8 billion annually, despite the high Israeli income levels, even compared to Western European countries.

Israel continued to take care of its military system and its development and to provide a huge military budget, in an effort to ensure its military superiority over the countries of the region, and to benefit from US and Western support. Its military industries, arms exports and security systems remained a priority, to maintain its advanced position among arms exporting countries.

As for Israeli society, it continued to suffer from its internal crises, an inability to impose its will on the Palestinian people, and from the development of resistance forces that constitute an increasing threat. This is in addition to the fact that its efforts to achieve normalization in the Arab environment have remained limited to the “fragile” class of the official Arab political environment, while the hostility remains deep and rooted in the Arab popular environment against the Zionist project.

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Chapter Six

The Palestine Issue and the Arab World

The Palestine Issue and the Arab World

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 Muhamed 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 Ahronoth*.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 Ahronoth* 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 strangle 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 Snaine, 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 Factions 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 Hizbullah. 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 1988 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 Ahronoth* 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).

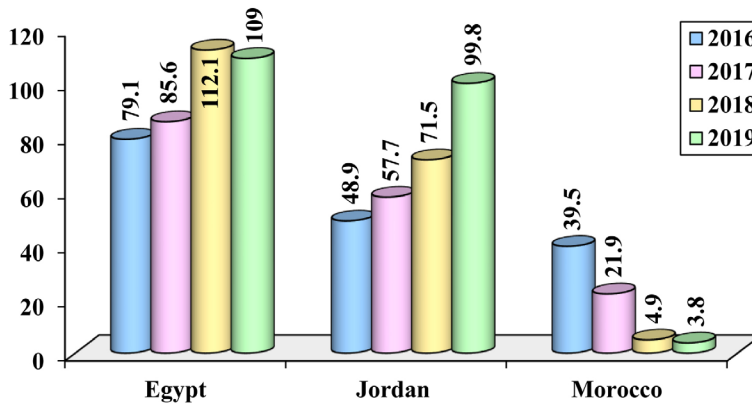
Egypt's trade with Israel increased from \$150.9 million in 2017 to \$184.1 million in 2019 (22% growth). Israeli exports to Egypt increased during that period from \$85.6 million to \$109 million (27.3% growth), and the Israeli imports from Egypt also increased from \$65.3 million to \$75.1 million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

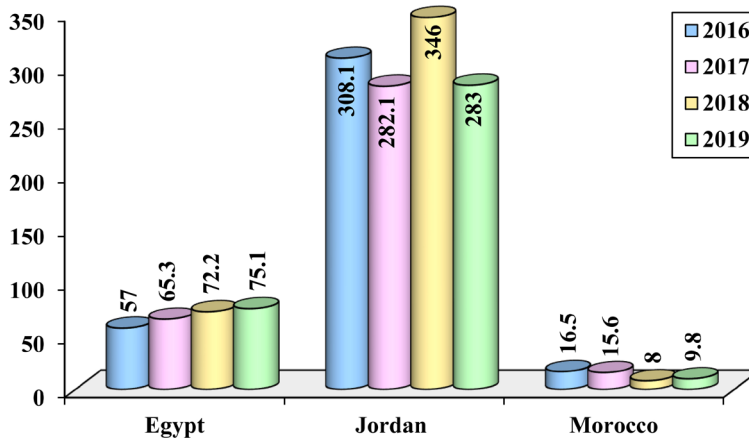
**Table 2/6: Israeli Exports and Imports with Some Arab Countries
2016–2019 (\$ million)³⁴⁷**

	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 Yeminiis 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.

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Chapter Seven

The Palestine Issue and the Muslim World

The Palestine Issue and the Muslim World

Introduction

The official pan-Islamic political level still lags behind the aspirations of Muslim peoples with regard to the liberation of Palestine and the restoration of Palestinian rights, land, and holy sites. The approach of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and Muslim countries remains slow and outdated, often not exceeding verbal or moral support, at a time when the Trump deal presents dangerous dimensions, led by the Judaization of Jerusalem. The Muslim peoples still yearn for Jerusalem, reject the normalization of Israel, and continue to carry out solidarity activities with Palestine and its issue, within their limited capabilities.

This chapter summarizes the general Muslim world situation concerning this issue, with particular focus on two regional players: Turkey and Iran; countries that are active on Palestine, but with clear differences in their methods of interaction.

First: OIC

Throughout 2018–2019, the OIC continued to pursue its policy regarding the Palestine issue, with the Jerusalem issue attracting more of its attention due to the increased US targeting of the holy city, when Washington recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and moved its embassy there; in addition to Israeli continued attacks on the city in general, and *al-Aqsa* Mosque in particular.

In addition to advocating the cause of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons, the OIC supported the efforts to end the internal Palestinian division and conclude the reconciliation between the Fatah and Hamas movements.

Despite fifty years passing since the founding of the OIC, the organization has not lived up to its task for which it was established, namely the protection of the holy sites and city of Jerusalem. Throughout 2018–2019, its activities continued along the same commemorative lines. For example, in February 2018 a conference was held in the city of Ramallah declaring “Al-Quds, Islamic Youth Capital,” as part of the work to defend the city, amid continued attempts to remold the city into the capital of Israel.

In the same context, the OIC reiterated its rejection of the transfer of foreign embassies to Jerusalem. In March 2018, the OIC condemned Guatemala's decision to relocate its embassy to Jerusalem in mid-May, viewing it as an illegal step and a violation of UN Security Council resolutions, particularly resolution 487, and UN General Assembly resolutions on Jerusalem, which reject any actions that might prejudice the historical and legal status of the occupied city of Jerusalem. In early January 2018, the OIC secretary general sent a letter to the Foreign Minister of Guatemala affirming the OIC's rejection of this decision, which contributed to entrenching the Israeli occupation of the city.¹

In May 2018, the OIC convened an extraordinary summit upon the invitation of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to respond to the actions of the US administration that had moved its embassy to Jerusalem on 1/5/2018. The summit rejected of the US decision and affirmed that it would “take the necessary measures to apply the economic restriction to countries, officials, parliaments, companies or individuals who recognize the annexation of Al-Quds by Israel, the occupying Power,... or deal with any measures related to the consecration of Israeli colonization of the occupied Palestinian territories.”²

OIC involvement in the Palestine issue in 2018 and 2019 followed with its previous pace, with denunciations of Israeli measures under the political ceiling the OIC had committed itself to, namely, the Arab Peace Initiative proposed by the late Saudi King ‘Abdullah during the Beirut Arab League summit in 2002. In its statements during 2018 and 2019, the OIC reaffirmed the centrality of the Palestine issue and Jerusalem to the Muslim nation and affirmed the organization's determination to continue to work in accordance with international law. The OIC emphasized its unwavering commitment to a two-state solution, as it is (according to the organization's view) the only acceptable international solution in the context of self-determination, international law and current UN resolutions, and in accordance with international references and the Arab Peace Initiative.³

Concerning the Israeli attacks on Islamic and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem, the OIC continued to issue strongly worded statements condemning these attacks, settlement building, and repeated massacres against the Palestinian people in GS, as well as condemning racist laws against the Palestinian people in the Palestinian territories occupied in 1948.

Consequently, we are unlikely to see OIC positions that reach the aspirations of Muslim peoples in 2020 and 2021, and to unite energies and positions to defend the rights of Muslim peoples, especially the protection of Islamic and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem and *al-Aqsa* Mosque.

Second: Turkey

The Syrian issue continued to dominate Turkish foreign policy in 2018–2019, including the priority of the fight against the separatist project of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*—PYD) and its military arms. The past two years saw two Turkish military operations in northern Syria in collaboration with Syrian opposition groups, namely, Operation Olive Branch in early 2018 and Operation Peace Spring in October 2019. Turkey's domestic agenda was also busy, particularly over the two years, with the country holding two major elections—presidential and legislative elections in June 2018, and municipal elections in March 2019. In addition, Turkey continued its domestic crackdown on the group affiliated to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*—PKK).

Despite all this, it can be said that the Palestine issue remained present in Turkish foreign policy, in word and deed, that is, in the official statements of Turkish officials and in Turkish diplomatic work. This was further enabled by Turkey's periodic presidency of the OIC, with the escalating developments in Palestine, especially concerning the Marches of Return and the transfer US embassy to Jerusalem, encouraging Turkey to advance joint Islamic action countering this decision within the OIC.

The Turkish Scene

2018 and 2019 were similar to previous years in terms of Turkey's busy domestic and foreign policy agendas, with the country witnessing radical changes led by the transition from the parliamentary to the presidential system, following the legislative-presidential elections of 2018. This has affected domestic politics, albeit less so on foreign policy.

As had been expected, President Erdoğan won presidential elections in the first round, but his Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*—AKP)

lost the majority of seats in parliament with a small margin, although it managed to maintain a majority by forming an alliance, the “People’s Alliance,” with the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*—MHP).⁴ However, the relative decline of the AKP continued in the March 2019 municipal elections, in which it lost a number of local councils led by Istanbul and Ankara, despite retaining a comfortable lead against other parties.⁵

The municipal elections, notably in Istanbul, gave a strong warning to the AKP through the landslide victory achieved by the opposition candidate. Those elections, as well as other factors, brought strong criticism of the AKP’s policies by former leaders, mainly former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, and former Economy Minister Ali Babacan. Eventually both men resigned from the AKP, and the former established the Future Party (*Gelecek Partisi*—GP), while the second is expected to announce a new party in 2020.

Over the past two years, relations with the US continued their turbulent streak caused by tensions and distrust. US-Turkish relations were severely jolted by Ankara’s buying of Russian S-400 missile defense systems, despite Washington’s reservations and threats of sanctions.

All of the above formed Turkey’s priorities, internally and externally, which somewhat reduced its interest in other issues. Nevertheless, the Palestine issue received noticeable Turkish attention during the two years in question, due to developments in Palestine on the one hand and Turkey’s periodic presidency of the OIC on the other.

Tension and Management of Interests with Israel

Despite their strong trade relations, Turkish-Israeli relations in the past two years were cold and tense. This was fuelled by the hostility shown by Israel towards Turkey, and their recent regional conflict of interests, despite the restoration of their bilateral relations after the 2016 agreement.⁶ Indeed, Ankara saw that Tel Aviv had played a role in US support of the separatist militias opposed to Turkey in Syria,⁷ and in the efforts to eliminate Turkey from the natural gas equation in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁸ In addition, Turkey viewed Israel’s regional alliances as being against Ankara, sometimes militarily.⁹ It considered Israel to have had a role in the failed coup attempt in the summer of 2016,¹⁰ not to mention that Israel has supported the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan, opposed by Ankara in 2017.¹¹

Adding insult to injury, the past two years saw important events regarding the Palestine issue that contributed to raising the ceiling of the Turkish position against Israel, foremost of which was the brutal Israeli response to the Marches of Return, along with the transfer of the US embassy to Jerusalem.

Turkish Interest in the Palestine Issue

During the period in question, Turkish interest in the Palestine issue increased, thanks to the aforementioned reasons, foremost among which were the developments of the Jerusalem issue and the Marches of Return, as well as Turkey's periodic presidency of the OIC.

The last two years were characterized by a broad Turkish openness to the PA owing to several considerations. It increased its support to the PA, invited the Palestinian president who was well received, and provided facilities to the Palestinian Foreign Ministry, including logistical support, training of cadres, and received the meetings of Palestinian ambassadors.¹²

Concerning the Hamas movement, over the past two years, there have been no official Turkish meetings with its leaders, except for during the final few months, when the Turkish president met a Hamas delegation, led by Hamas ex-politburo chief Khalid Mish'al in November 2019.¹³ A meeting was also held between the president and the current chief of Hamas's politburo Isma'il Haniyyah, during the latter's first foreign visit after his election. According to the Turkish presidency, the two sides discussed a number of issues, the most important of which were Jerusalem, the threats to *al-Aqsa* Mosque, the planned Palestinian elections, the difficult humanitarian conditions in GS, and the Turkish role in supporting the Palestine issue.¹⁴ Interestingly, the Turkish president spoke thereafter of Hamas as a resistance movement fighting "the occupiers," and not only as a political movement elected by the Palestinian people, as had been customary.¹⁵

Ankara hardened its tone against Palestinian ex-Fatah leader Muhammad Dahlan, deeming him a threat to Turkish national security, having previously arrested two individuals suspected of carrying out espionage upon his orders.¹⁶ The Turkish authorities issued a "red notice" for Dahlan's arrest over his alleged role in supporting and funding the failed coup attempt in 2016, offering rewards for tipoffs about him.¹⁷ Interestingly, this escalation took place after the Palestinian president, addressing the UN, said he intended to call for elections in the Palestinian

Territories, and after the remarks of the Turkish foreign minister saying there was a plan by regional regimes to install Dahlan as head of the PA.¹⁸ This means that this step could lead to further rapprochement between Ramallah and Ankara, if the PA accepts the move and cooperates.

On the humanitarian and relief level, Ankara provided \$10 million aid to the PA to implement various projects,¹⁹ in addition to \$10 million to UNRWA after Erdoğan met Commissioner-General Pierre Krähenbüh in Ankara.²⁰ The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı*—TİKA) continued to be the most prominent Turkish development instrument in implementing humanitarian and development projects in the territories of the PA,²¹ a role that angered Israel, which developed a detailed plan to limit Turkey's activities in the Palestinian territories, especially Jerusalem.²²

The Marches of Return

Turkey has taken a strong position against Israeli attacks on Palestinian Marches of Return launched in GS on 30/3/2018, especially those held on the anniversary of the *Nakbah* on 15/5/2018, when Israel killed 60 Palestinians in one day and wounded 1,300. The Turkish response unfolded on multiple political levels, led by the Turkish presidency, whose spokesman Ibrahim Kalin strongly condemned the massacre, calling on the UN to assume its responsibilities to protect the Palestinians.²³

In turn, the Turkish Foreign Ministry condemned Israel's "disproportionate" use of force against the Palestinians.²⁴ A spokesman of the ruling AKP party, Mahir Ünal, said that what had happened on that day amounted to a crime against humanity, deeming the international silence vis-à-vis Israel's actions another crime against humanity.²⁵ The Turkish government announced three days of mourning in solidarity with the Palestinian people after the "Israeli massacre,"²⁶ and sought to transfer Palestinian wounded to Turkish hospitals for treatment. However, its attempt failed, and Turkey accused Israel and Egypt of obstructing its efforts.²⁷

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in turn, condemned the Israeli massacre, stressing that Israel would be punished for what it did, calling it a "terrorist state."²⁸ Erdoğan also held the US responsible for the Palestinian blood shed because of its support for Israel's actions.²⁹

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu called on the Arab League and the OIC to issue a collective stance against the massacre in GS, saying condemnations alone would not be enough as there was need for “joint practical steps as soon as possible.”³⁰

These successive events triggered a media and political war of words between Ankara and Tel Aviv. On Twitter, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accused the Turkish president of occupying Cyprus. Erdoğan responded by saying Netanyahu had no right to criticize Turkey, as he was the leader of a “terrorist state,” and the voice of “oppressors,” unlike Erdoğan, who “represents the voice of the oppressed.”³¹ Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu responded to Netanyahu in turn, calling him a “cold-blooded killer” responsible for killing thousands of Palestinians.³²

It was remarkable that the Turkish president defended not only the Palestinian people in general, but the resistance movement Hamas specifically, rejecting Netanyahu’s accusation of “terrorism.” Erdoğan said Hamas was not a terrorist organization, but a resistance movement fighting occupation, an advanced position given traditional Turkish official discourse that has dealt with Hamas as an elected Palestinian faction rather than a resistance movement.³³

Jerusalem

At the end of 2017, the US president recognized Jerusalem as the undivided and eternal capital of Israel, saying that he intends to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. This coincided with Turkey’s periodic presidency of the OIC, in 2016–2019, allowing it to lead the Islamic and Arab official response to the decision, under the slogan of “Jerusalem is our red line.”³⁴ In May 2018, on the anniversary of the *Nakbah*, Washington announced it would move its embassy to Jerusalem during an official ceremony.³⁵ This coincided with the massacre committed by the Israeli forces against the Marches of Return.

The Turkish responses again came from various official levels, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Parliament, AKP and the presidency spokesperson, but the important positions came from the Turkish president himself. Erdoğan stressed that his country would not allow the usurpation of Jerusalem by Israel,³⁶ and that it would maintain its support for the Palestinians, especially with regard to Jerusalem, even if the whole world abandoned them.³⁷

Ankara took a series of diplomatic measures in response, summoning its ambassador to Tel Aviv for further consultations. Then, it summoned the Israeli ambassador to Ankara to the Foreign Ministry and handed him a letter protesting events in GS,³⁸ asking him and the Israeli consul to leave the country. At the airport, the police deliberately searched the Israeli ambassador, forcing him to take off his shoes in front of journalists, as part of the mutual tit-for-tat diplomatic steps between the two sides.³⁹

Officially, the Turkish president accused Israel of engaging in systematic terrorism as part of its state policy,⁴⁰ holding the US partially responsible since it has continuously supported Tel Aviv and based on its decision to transfer its embassy to Jerusalem. Turkey then summoned its ambassador to Washington for consultation. The Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, while praising his country's consistent defense of Jerusalem, warned that several Muslim and Arab countries had clearly retreated from their positions regarding the holy city.⁴¹

Turkey, as the head of the 13th Islamic Summit of the OIC, hosted an extraordinary summit of the organization in Istanbul focusing on Jerusalem and developments there. At the opening ceremony, Erdoğan said that his country had warned the US that its decision to transfer its embassy to Jerusalem would ignite the region and lead to sharp escalations.⁴² The Turkish president criticized Israel's "banditry" and "brutality," and compared its actions to the atrocity faced by the Jewish people in Europe, pledging his country would seek, through the UN, to punish Israel for what it had done.⁴³

In July 2018, the Turkish president responded to Israel's passing of the Jewish Nation-State Law, by calling Israel the most "Zionist, fascist and racist state in the world."⁴⁴ In a speech to his party's parliamentary bloc, he said, "The Israeli administration's view to identify those ancient lands as belonging to Jews alone is no different from Hitler's obsession with the Aryan race." "I call on the Islamic world, Christian world, all democratic and liberal states, non-governmental organizations, and members of the media to move against Israel," he added.⁴⁵

In December 2018, Istanbul hosted the second conference of "Parliamentarians for Al Quds," two years after its first session, held under the aegis and with the participation of President Erdoğan, and attended by around 600 lawmakers from 74 countries. The final communique stressed the rejection of the Deal of the Century and the transfer of the US embassy to Jerusalem, renewing the call on

the OIC, al-Quds committee and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to defend the heritage of Jerusalem, *al-Aqsa*, and the Palestinian Territories.⁴⁶

In his opening speech, the Turkish president stressed the importance of Jerusalem being a red line for the Muslim world and said that targeting children in GS was no different from the crime of the Holocaust against the Jews in Europe. He thanked the heroes fighting for Jerusalem and human dignity, and defending the dignity of the Muslim nation against the occupiers.⁴⁷ The Turkish MP and head of “Parliamentarians for Al Quds,” in Turkey, Nurettin Nebati, called for restarting resistance and steadfastness for the sake of Jerusalem.⁴⁸

In June 2019, the Turkish president spoke clearly for the first time about the US peace plan in the Middle East, aka the Deal of the Century, considering it a new project to destabilize the Middle East, and a new project for the division, fragmentation, and the swallowing up of the region, stressing that his country would not allow it.⁴⁹

Erdoğan’s speech at the UN General Assembly in 2019 included a lengthy segment on the Palestine issue, during which he urged the UN to implement its resolutions against Israel, and questioned the motives of the international organization in failing to do so.⁵⁰ Erdoğan presented several maps, showing the Israeli incursion into the Palestinian territories since before the declaration of the state of Israel through the present day. He said that in 1947 there was no such thing as Israel, and the whole region was called Palestine, and then compared it to the current situation in which Palestine is barely present, for “the entire region has become Israel.” Erdoğan wondered about the boundaries of Israel, and its objectives and future, questioning the motives behind the Deal of the Century, which he said aims to eliminate the Palestinian people and their issue.⁵¹

Operation “Peace Spring”

On 9/10/2019, the Turkish Armed Forces, in cooperation with the Syrian National Army, launched a third military operation in northern Syria—dubbed Operation Peace Spring—against the Kurdish People’s Defense Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*—YPG). Turkey identified two main goals for the offensive: repelling the protection units’ militants to a depth of more than 30 km away from the Turkish-Syrian border, and establishing a safe zone in northern Syria to return one million Syrians in the first stage, and then raise their number later to three million.⁵²

Because the Turkish process did not enjoy wide international support, with the reactions varying between denunciation, condemnation, reservations and warning, with the exception of a few countries that supported it, Ankara issued admonitions to many countries for not supporting its “war on terror,”⁵³ which led to a popular reaction reflected on social media.

Some nationalists, especially some leaders of the İYİ Party (opposition), took advantage of this popular sentiment to rail against a condemnation statement by the Arab League, attacking the Palestinians in particular, saying Turkey was wrong to support them despite their failure to support Ankara in its most important battle against “terrorism.” This was exacerbated by statements issued by Palestinian factions opposing Turkey’s operation, with the exception of Hamas, which said it understood Turkey’s right to defend itself.⁵⁴ A campaign was therefore triggered by some Turkish writers and activists on social media against the Palestinian position rejecting the operation, whereas in response some Turkish writers believed that the Turkish position on the Palestine issue was principled and not based on expecting something in return.

However, the most prominent reaction came from Turkish officials, where President Erdoğan and his foreign minister defended the official Palestinian position, believing that the LAS position did not represent that of the Palestinians, whose representative—and not their foreign minister—had participated for the first time in the League meeting.⁵⁵ The Anadolu News Agency was also keen to carry a denial from Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki’s of having issued a condemnation of the operation,⁵⁶ while various Turkish media reported the position supportive of Hamas.

Economic Relations

Trade between Turkey and Israel continued to rise in the period covered by the report (2016–2019). Trade volume rose from \$4.34 billions in 2016 to \$4.91 billion in 2017, and kept rising to \$5.61 billions in 2018, and \$6.1 billions in 2019 (see table 1/7).

According to the data of the Turkish Ministry of Finance, cars, iron and steel products, and jewelry topped Turkish exports to Israel, while Turkey’s imports were led by oils, propylene, and hydrocarbons.

Table 1/7: Volume of Trade Between Turkey and Israel According to Turkish and Israeli Statistics 2016–2019 (\$ million)⁵⁷

Year	Turkish exports to Israel		Turkish imports from Israel		Trade volume	
	Turkish statistics	Israeli statistics	Turkish statistics	Israeli statistics	Turkish statistics	Israeli statistics
2019	4,359.4	3,174.4	1,743.1	1,761.8	6,102.5	4,936.2
2018	3,894.5	2,885.5	1,714.4	1,912.4	5,608.9	4,797.9
2017	3,407.4	2,895.9	1,505.1	1,428.1	4,912.5	4,324
2016	2,955.5	2,601.7	1,385.6	1,297.7	4,341.1	3,899.4

In contrast, Turkish exports to the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967 decreased significantly in the 2016–2019 period, as follows: Exports decreased 7.3% in 2017, 11.4% in 2018, and 14.3% in 2019, reaching about \$66.5 million in 2019 compared to \$94.4 million in 2016. Turkish imports from the Palestinian Territories over the same period increased by 47.9% in 2017, 33.9% in 2018, and 26.5% in 2019, reaching about \$8.4 million in 2019 compared to \$3.4 million in 2016 (see table 2/7).

Table 2/7: Volume of Trade Between Turkey and the PA According to Turkish Statistics 2016–2019 (\$ thousand)⁵⁸

Year	Turkish exports to PA territories	Turkish imports from PA territories	Trade volume
2019	66,472.9	8,426.1	74,899
2018	77,525.7	6,660	84,185.7
2017	87,459.8	4,974.7	92,434.5
2016	94,372.1	3,363.9	97,736

Evaluation and Outlook

The years 2018 and 2019 were similar to previous years in terms of the Turkish occupation with its domestic agenda, full of electoral cycles, economic crises, and “anti-terror” campaigns, while Turkish foreign policy remained preoccupied with the priorities of the Syrian issue and tensions with other powers, led by the US.

Nevertheless, the Palestine issue held an advanced position on the Turkish foreign policy agenda in the two years in question, statements and diplomatic measures wise. In fact, it may not be an exaggeration to say that Turkey led the official pan-Islamic action at this level, especially regarding the issue of Jerusalem and the transfer of the US embassy.

In addition to this major evaluation of the Turkish position during the past two years, the following points can be observed:

1. There has been no fundamental change in the Turkish position on the Palestine issue, its view of how to achieve a resolution, and its management of its other international relations regarding Palestine, despite the high ceiling and sharp tone of its statements regarding Israel.
2. Turkish foreign policy has once again demonstrated the importance of Jerusalem to Ankara, for known religious, historical and political reasons, and for what it considers “its historical responsibility,” given that the Ottoman state was the last sovereign state ruling the city before its occupation. In addition, Turkey’s periodic presidency of the OIC provided an opportunity to support Jerusalem, since it was originally established to defend it and *al-Aqsa* Mosque.
3. Turkish support of the Palestinians continued to focus on the political, media and humanitarian-relief aspects, while officially dealing with the PA.
4. There was no prominent Turkish effort concerning the internal Palestinian scene and the reconciliation process, except for urging both parties to end the division and unify efforts.

Therefore, it is not expected that the Turkish position on the Palestine issue will radically or rapidly change in the coming period. This position can be summarized as: supporting a political settlement on the basis of the two-state solution, amid persistent tensions with Tel Aviv, despite the continuation of trade relations; strengthening the relationship with the Palestinians through the PA; maintaining good relations with other Palestinian components, foremost among them Hamas; and focusing Turkish support on the political, media and relief fields, giving special importance to the issues of Jerusalem and the GS siege.

Among the most important factors behind the continuation of the Turkish position is that the crisis with Israel is not a fleeting one, but one that has turned into a semi-permanent policy. This is due to the roles Israel has played against strategic Turkish interests, from supporting Kurdish militias to regional alliances

related to the Eastern Mediterranean Gas resources and the consistent incitement against Erdoğan and Turkey.

Against the backdrop of this general strategic line, the Turkish interest in the Palestine issue is likely to rise tactically in some issues, affected by several factors, the most important of which are:

1. The relative calm of the internal Turkish agenda, especially at the level of elections, for the country is not expected to witness any electoral cycle until the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2023.
2. Slower developments on the Syrian scene in relation to Turkey after Operation Peace Spring, with Turkey achieving most of its objectives, pushing back YPG fighters from its borders, which relieved the external pressure on Turkey from the Syrian side.
3. The consolidation of Turkish understandings with Russia regarding the Syrian issue, and more generally, regarding broader Turkish-Russian relations. The continuation of a crisis of confidence with the US, thus reducing Ankara's need to fulfill some commitments vis-à-vis Washington, which could even encourage it to do more for the Palestine issue, while stepping up its criticisms of Israeli practices.
4. Ankara's interest in the outcomes of the Palestinian elections, which it estimates are approaching either out of choice or necessity. It wants to minimize the chances of former Fatah leader Muhammad Dahlan, whom it sees as a part of the hostile regional alliance that has worked against Turkey. Therefore, Turkish interest in Palestinian internal affairs in the next stage will most likely increase.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, there has been a solid, consistent Turkish policy concerning the Palestine issue, with its role witnessing a notable but gradual evolution. Studying the internal and regional factors influencing Turkish decision-making indicates a possibility that the Turkish position on Palestine may escalate in the near future. Perhaps one of the most important factor is the growing balance in Turkish foreign policy vis-à-vis the West and the East, which means the US influence over Ankara has declined in favor of more independence in Turkish foreign policy. This would reflect positively on its role in the Palestine issue and on its position concerning various Palestinian parties.

This places important responsibilities on the Palestinians, of all backgrounds, to avoid losing the support of a powerful friendly regional power. The Palestinians must work to strengthen cooperation with Turkey, help it shape its position on the Palestine issue, and prevent this position from regressing, especially after Turkey hands over the presidency of the OIC, a plausible scenario in all cases.

With the continuation of Ankara's position vis-à-vis the Palestinians and their issues in the next two years, it is still possible for the Palestinians to support and develop Ankara's role through several tracks, the most important of which are:

1. Strengthening Turkish-Palestinian relations by focusing on their common interests, especially strategic ones, and not only on the basis of Turkish support to the Palestinians, as this would be more effective and more sustainable.
2. Arranging Palestinian priorities in dealing with Turkey, and the areas and issues that should be a priority for the Turkish decision-makers regarding supporting the Palestinian people's resilience and political rights.
3. Despite the gradual escalation of the Turkish position, it is important to consider Ankara's sensitive position, in light of the complex US-NATO-European relations. Palestinians must avoid causing any recriminations against Palestinians living in Turkey or a decline in the role Turkey plays in general.
4. Institutionalizing relations with Turkey, cooperating with various Turkish political parties, and not limiting relations with the government and the ruling party or their leader, in order to achieve wider support and a deeper Turkish understanding of the issue, and avoid any harmful shifts.
5. Engaging Turkish civil society institutions by presenting a Palestinian vision of various relief, humanitarian, and development issues based on Palestinian necessities and priorities, to avoid redundancy, overlap and chaos.
6. Engaging the Turkish community, with a view to nudging Turkish people from support based on abstract emotion, to support based on the facts of history and data, and shifting the Palestine issue from the purely humanitarian dimension to its wider political and rights dimensions. Indeed, popular awareness is the real and strategic foundation of any issue, in addition, it would support the official position, and in the future, may serve to correct it, too.

Third: Iran:

In 2018 and 2019, the Palestine issue saw rapid strategic developments, most notably the decision by US President Trump to transfer his country's embassy to Jerusalem, and the subsequent Palestinian people's response through the Marches of Return. This was followed by the Deal of the Century project, which seeks through financial and development promises to liquidate the question of Palestine. Those developments coincided with a public drive for normalizing ties with Israel in some Arab Gulf states, which called for signing a "non-aggression" treaty, and eliminating mutual hostilities with Israel based on having Iran as a "shared foe."

The normalization drive and political deals seeking to liquidate the Palestine issue were accompanied by heavy pressures on Iran, which in the past two years came in the form of unprecedented US economic, financial, and oil sanctions, following the US withdrawal from the treaty signed with Iran regarding its nuclear program. Iran also faced Israeli threats and attacks on Iranian positions in Syria. The linkage between the escalation against Iran and normalization projects, as well as the Deal of the Century, sought to deflect Arab hostility away from Israel and towards Iran, while normalizing economic, political, and media ties with Israel.

These economic and political pressures did not prevent Iranian officials from condemning the Deal of the Century or the normalization with Israel. Iran also continued to assert its fixed positions regarding the illegitimacy of Israel, declaring its support to resistance movements in Palestine, strengthening and developing its relationship with them.

Iran's Position on the US Embassy Move to Jerusalem

An extraordinary Islamic summit of the OIC was held in Istanbul to discuss Trump's announcement of moving the US embassy to Jerusalem. At this summit, the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, called on Islamic states to focus their efforts on de-nuclearizing the Middle East region, and to pressure Israel to dismantle its nuclear arsenal, saying, "The nuclear arsenal of the Zionist entity is a serious threat to peace and security, especially in West Asia. Eliminating nuclear weapons from this region, which has been repeatedly proposed by Iran, must be a top priority in the agenda of Islamic countries."

Rouhani added:

In order to assist the Palestinian nation and counter the destructive decision by Trump, we call on Muslim governments and freedom-seeking nations in the world to revise their political, economic and commercial ties with the US administration, and also cut all their relations with the occupying Zionist regime and boycott the products and companies of the Zionists.⁵⁹

In a speech during the 73rd session of the UN General Assembly in New York, President Rouhani said, “The most pressing crisis in the Middle East, however, is the question of Palestine. The passage of time cannot—and must not—justify occupation... Israel, equipped with a nuclear arsenal and blatantly threatening others with nuclear annihilation, presents the most daunting threat to regional and global peace and stability.” Rouhani also said, “The abhorrent US decision to transfer its embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, and the recent enactment of the racist Jewish State law are violations of international law and norms, and unmistakable manifestations of apartheid.”⁶⁰ Rouhani described the unilateral measures of the Trump administration against the Palestinians as an affront to all peace loving peoples. Rouhani’s words highlighted again that Jerusalem, recognized by the US as the capital of Israel, is not important just to Palestinians, but also the adherents of the three monotheistic religions, including more than 1.5 billion Muslims.⁶¹

For his part, the Speaker of Iran’s Parliament Ali Larijani said that the US decision to transfer their embassy to Jerusalem was part of its policy to undermine international institutions, similar to its decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal with Iran, and the Paris climate agreement. Speaking before the parliament, Larijani said that these indicated that the US intends to undercut international institutions wherever possible, pushing the international landscape towards a kind of security chaos.⁶²

Iran’s Position on the “Deal of the Century”

The US President’s decision to move the embassy paved the way for the promotion of the Deal of the Century, considered a new attempt to liquidate the Palestine issue and impose the Israeli will, conditions and perceptions. The US promotion of this deal was linked with drive for normalization of relations between Gulf countries (KSA, UAE and Bahrain) and Israel, in exchange for an alliance between these countries against Iran and supposed “extremism.”⁶³

Iran viewed the US plan as a “crime against humanity,” as Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had put it, calling on everyone to work to foil it. In a message addressed to the pilgrims on the day of ‘*Arafah*, Khamenei said, “The stratagem of the ‘Deal of the Century’ prepared by the oppressive US, and its treasonous cohorts, is a crime against the society of humankind, and not just the Palestinian nation. We are inviting everyone to active participation in overcoming this stratagem by the enemy,” adding that the deal was “doomed to failure.”⁶⁴

Khamenei’s website also quoted him as saying, “This dangerous conspiracy aims to destroy the Palestinian identity among the Palestinian public and youth, and it must be confronted precisely on this point, so that they are not allowed to destroy the Palestinian identity by use of money.”⁶⁵

President Rouhani also said the Deal of the Century was doomed to fail, stressing that his country would prevent the execution of Washington’s schemes in the region. In a speech Rouhani delivered during a government meeting, he said “If the US thinks that they can eradicate the people of Palestine and the history will forget the Palestinian refugees, if they think that by strengthening the Zionist Regime they can bring the people of Gaza to their knees, they are making another grave mistake.”⁶⁶

Iranian Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani also stressed that Iran would resist Trump’s plan for “peace” between Israel and the Palestinians. Larijani said the Deal of the Century was a conspiracy led by Israel, Iran’s arch enemy, and the US, to secure Israeli domination of the Middle East. During an annual conference on Islamic unity, he said that Iran would stand up to the Israeli regime and not allow the plan to be realized in the region, and if the Americans were imposing sanctions on Iran today and pressuring it, the reason was that Iran was standing up to Israel. Larijani explained that to achieve their goal, Iran was trying to establish new political arrangements in the region. Then he warned the countries of the region, namely KSA and the UAE, against normalizing ties with Israel, saying that they must learn that they will not benefit at all from allowing Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu to enter their territories, adding that people in all countries in the region consider Israel a cancerous tumor.⁶⁷

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif also asserted that the Palestinian people would foil the Deal of the Century, and called on the countries of the region who were supportive of the deal to return to their senses. Zarif,

in an interview special with Al-Alam TV, said that the deal would become the “bankruptcy of the century” through the resistance of the Palestinians. He added that it was unfortunate that a number of countries of the Gulf region were collaborating to impose the deal, hoping that the US would protect them in exchange for their betrayal of the Muslim world, but that this perception was false. He said that it was not necessary to sell Jerusalem to the Zionists, or the Golan to the Zionists. “Return to the regional fold, and our hands are ready to hold your hands, on condition that the demands of Palestine and the demands of the peoples of the region are your demands, and not what Netanyahu demands,” he added.⁶⁸

Alliances Against Iran

The US-Israeli strategy seeking to liquidate the Palestine issue and the resistance movements came in conjunction with a strategy targeting Iran through economic strangulation, and a bid to build an Arab-Israeli alliance to confront Iran as a “shared foe,” such as the US-proposed “Arab NATO” and the “non-aggression pact” between the Gulf countries and Israel. US and Israeli officials spoke directly about this linkage between normalizing Arab-Israeli ties and encircling Iran and containing its influence and ties with resistance movements.

1. Arab NATO (Warsaw Conference)

On 14/2/2019, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called for a new era of cooperation in the Middle East. Pompeo, addressing foreign ministers and officials from more than 60 countries attending the Ministerial to Promote a Future of Peace and Security in the Middle East (aka Warsaw conference), said that no country could be isolated from regional challenges, including Iran, Syria, Yemen, and the “peace” between the Israelis and the Palestinians. According to some reports, the goal of the Warsaw conference was to channel US pressure on its Arab allies to establish the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), dubbed by some as an Arab NATO. The Trump administration sought to create an alliance of eight Arab countries in addition to the United States, which included the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Egypt, and Jordan in order to confront Iran and promote a future of peace and security in the Middle East, according to a statement by the White House.⁶⁹

Although the proposed alliance did little beyond convening the conference in Warsaw, and did not turn into an actual MESA, it managed to secure a public

meeting between Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu and several Arab leaders. As such, the conference achieved a major milestone in public Arab normalization with Israel's leaders and political symbols.

2. The “Non-Aggression” Pact

After the stalling of the Deal of the Century and the failure of the Arab NATO, Israel offered the Gulf countries a “historic” pact to normalize relations. Israel's Channel 12 revealed efforts underway by Tel Aviv to sign a “non-aggression” pact with Gulf countries, with the goal of jointly countering the Iranian threat, and contain Iran's influence in the Middle East, according to the Israeli i24 news website. The Israeli channel said that Israel was also seeking to normalize relations with the Gulf countries in counter-terrorism and economic cooperation, as it was impossible to conclude a comprehensive peace agreement because of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

The idea behind the pact was the assumption that there was an opportunity that should be seized with common interests existing between Arab states and Israel against Iran, along with Trump's desire to secure a political achievement during his first term, with a view to signing the pact in the White House's garden.⁷⁰

Yisrael Katz, then-Israeli foreign minister, confirmed this on Twitter, saying, “Recently I have been promoting, with the backing of the prime minister, a diplomatic initiative to sign ‘non-aggression agreements’ with the Arab Gulf states.” He added, “It's a historic move that will end the conflict and enable civilian cooperation until the signing of peace agreements.” The putative agreement, according to the Israeli channel, included four themes, namely; developing friendly ties and cooperation between the two sides in accordance with the UN Charter and international law; taking necessary and effective steps to prevent hostile activities or threats, plots, conspiracies, violence, or incitement against the other party, from being developed or funded on the soil of the other party; refraining from joining, supporting, or assisting an alliance, organization, or coalition of a military or security nature with a third party; and solving any differences arising from the agreement through consultations.⁷¹

The Arab NATO project and the non-aggression pact, however, continued to be vague attempts, that by the end of 2019 had not led to any changes to the existing alliances. However, these projects managed to push forward public Arab-Israeli

normalization and incitement against Iran, as a shared foe of both Israel and the Arabs, allegedly “threatening peace and stability in the Middle East.”

In speech delivered at the UN, Yisrael Katz said, “The main problem threatening stability and security in the Middle East is Iran, which threatens to destroy Israel, and works against the regimes of many countries in the region.” He added, “I call on the international community to unite in order to stop Iran. The world cannot allow Iran to develop nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, and the world must stop Iran from supporting terror organizations in the region.”⁷²

Israel’s Minister of Regional Cooperation Tzachi Hanegbi, in an interview with Israel Hayom, said that a large-scale military confrontation between Iran and Israel was very likely, and that the possibility of war against Iran or its proxies in the coming two years was greater than the possibility of no-war, saying war was a question of when not if. He also said that for Iran, “occupying Syria” had paved the way for it to encircle Israel on three fronts, with the help of the PIJ in GS and Hizbullah in Lebanon, adding that Israel could not afford the cost of doing nothing as it would mean giving the Iranians a green light to entrench themselves in Syria. “Otherwise, we would get a kingdom of terrorism along the border, much more powerful than Hizbullah and Hamas.”⁷³

Despite the linkage between normalizing Arab relations with Israel and incitement against Iran, Tehran did not stop affirming its fixed positions on Palestine, resistance, the illegitimacy of Israel, and also worked to further expand its ties with resistance movements in Palestine.

Iran’s Fundamentals Regarding the Palestine Issue

While receiving the guests at the Islamic Unity Conference in Tehran, Ali Khamenei said, “The people of Palestine, including the Muslims, Christians and Jews who are the original owners of that land, should be able to choose their government themselves. They should oust the foreigners and ruffians, like Netanyahu.” Khamenei pointed out “the enemies’ efforts at distorting the meaning of Imam Khomeini’s and the Islamic government officials’ repeated insistence on the abolishment of Israel.” He said, “We support Palestine and its independence and liberation. The abolishment of Israel does not mean the abolishment of the Jewish people. We have nothing to do with them. Furthermore, there is a Jewish population living in our country in safety.” He added, “Today, the greatest

tragedy in the Muslim world is the Palestinian issue,” and “we have maintained our position without making any other considerations, and have helped Palestine and the Palestinians. And, we will continue to do so. We believe this to be the responsibility of the whole Muslim world.”⁷⁴

Supreme Leader Khamenei, according to his official website, said that Jerusalem remains the capital of Palestine and would be liberated from its enemies, and he urged Muslim countries to take a position against “these crimes.” Khamenei also stressed that the US and Israel would submit to the will of Muslims.⁷⁵

Then in a press conference held in New York, Rouhani said, “The Zionist occupation, which is more than 70 years old, is one of the leading causes of violence and frustration in the Middle East... imagine if there had been no Zionist entity in our region, how would things be now?” He added that Iran would continue to support the disadvantaged and the oppressed, including the Palestinians, and asserted that Iran had consistently defended the rights of the Palestinian people and would continue to do so, and that it would stand against the aggressors and oppressors. The Iranian president then expressed his confidence that Israeli crimes will further strengthen the determination of the Palestinian people to resist to restore their legitimate rights.⁷⁶

General Hossein Salami, deputy commander of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), addressed the Israelis, saying, “We know you well, you are a great risk, you have no depth and no center. You are besieged everywhere in the occupied territories.” He said that Israel was living in the snake’s mouth, and that the resistance was stronger than ever before, warning the Israelis not to miscalculate. He said that in the event of war, “be certain that it will lead to your erasure. You are a very small target.”⁷⁷

For his part, the commander of Iran’s Air Forces said his country was waiting impatiently to fight and erase Israel. The website of the Young Journalists Club News Agency, under the supervision of official television, quoted Brigadier-General Aziz Nasirzadeh as saying that the air force were fully prepared and waiting impatiently to fight Israel and “wipe it off the face of the earth.”⁷⁸

Hossein Salami also threatened to wipe Israel from the political geography of the world. He added, “It seems that this will come soon because of the actions of this reckless entity that will be the end of its existence.” He threatened, “If the

Zionist entity makes any move that could lead to a new war this war will lead to its demise and the liberation of the occupied territories, and the Israelis will not find graves in Palestine to bury their bodies in them.”⁷⁹

Ali Akbar Velayati, senior advisor to the Supreme Leader, affirmed that Iran would continue supporting Hizbullah and Palestinian factions, despite US pressure seeking to reduce Iran’s influence in the Middle East.⁸⁰

Bahram Qasemi, spokesman of the Iranian Foreign Ministry, called for prosecuting Israeli officials as “war criminals,” for “perpetrating barbaric and unparalleled massacres,” after dozens of Palestinians were killed in bloody confrontations near the GS border. He said that the murder of children, women and innocent Palestinians, and the occupation of their land had been a main strategy of Israel, over 70 years of occupation. Qasemi called on the international community to act immediately, condemn Israeli crimes and submitting Israel to an international tribunal for war crimes.⁸¹

For his part, Abbas Mousavi, another spokesman of the Iranian Foreign Ministry, strongly condemned what he called a “terrorist Israeli assault” on GS, stressing the need to prosecute the leaders of the Israeli occupation in international courts as war criminals, and noting the legitimate struggle of the Palestinian people and their resistance. Mousavi stressed that unity and resistance were the only option open to this people when confronting the occupation, pointing out that “the silence of international organizations regarding the attacks and terrorist acts carried out by the Israeli entity” and the continued support of the West emboldened Israel to persist in its crimes against the Palestinian people and the region.

The general secretariat of the International Conference on Palestinian Intifada condemned Israeli aggression on GS, stressing that the Palestinian people challenged the occupation militarily and politically through resistance and steadfastness. It called on all parliaments of Muslim countries and international organizations that support the Palestinian people, to condemn the crimes of the occupation that violate the Human Rights Charter and International Law, and to take the necessary measures to prosecute Israeli leaders in international courts.⁸²

Iran did not content itself with just reaffirming its fixed positions on the Palestine issue and the developments and threats that faced this issue, such as the US embassy move to Jerusalem, the Deal of the Century, normalization, and the repeated Israeli attacks on GS and the Palestinian people. Rather, Iran worked

at the same time to step up its support of the resistance in Palestine, with which the relationship evolved remarkably, especially with Hamas during the years 2018–2019.

The Development of Iran's Relations with Hamas

The years 2018 and 2019 witnessed a notable evolution of relations between Iran and Hamas, with visits exchanged and joint positions issued on regional issues, and with Iran affirming its support of resistance in Palestine. These relations regained their vitality in these two years, after deteriorating over the previous years. Perhaps it was the seriousness of the plots hatched to liquidate the issue of Palestine—transfer of US embassy to Jerusalem, accelerating normalization of relations between Arab states and Israel, US recognition of the legitimacy of settlements on Palestinian land, and the linkage of these developments with the campaign to encircle and contain Iran—that pushed the leaders of the two sides to step up their cooperation, joints positions supporting the resistance, and positions on addressing the threats and challenges facing both Palestine and Iran.

In 2019, a delegation of Hamas leaders headed by Saleh al-‘Aruri, deputy head of the Political Bureau, visited Tehran. The delegation included Musa Abu Marzuq, Maher Salah, ‘Izzat al-Rishq, Zaher Jabarin, Hussam Badran, Usama Hamdan, Isma‘il Radwan and Khalid Qaddumi.⁸³

The delegation met Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who emphasized, after receiving a message from the head of Hamas's political bureau Isma‘il Haniyyah, that “when it comes to the Palestinian cause, the Islamic Republic of Iran does not observe any reservations or ceremonies in dealing with any country of the world,” and added “We have always clearly and plainly announced our viewpoints regarding Palestine, and even on the international arena, our friends with who we do not see eye to eye on the issue of Palestine, know that the Islamic Republic is absolutely serious regarding the Palestinian cause.”

Khamenei thanked “the important and welcoming positions of Mr. Ismail Haniyeh” in his letter, praising “the extraordinary grit and resistance of the Palestinian people and resistance groups including Hamas.” He believed that “one of the major causes of hostility to the Islamic Republic of Iran is the question of Palestine, but these hostilities and pressures will not make Iran lose its stance on the question of Palestine,” emphasizing, “that some of the followers of the US, like Saudi Arabia, ignored the question of Palestine was a stupidity.”

Regarding the Deal of the Century, Khamenei pointed out that “This dangerous conspiracy aims to destroy the Palestinian identity among the Palestinian public and youth, and it must be confronted precisely on this point, so that they are not allowed to destroy the Palestinian identity by use of money.” He pointed out that “another way of opposing this conspiracy is for the Palestinian people to feel advancement, and this has happened already...not so many years ago, the Palestinians were fighting using stones. But today, instead of stones, they are equipped with precision missiles.”⁸⁴

Khamenei added, “ Hamas stands at the core of the Palestinian movement, as Palestine stands at the core of the Muslim World movement,” and he stated that the defiance and resistance of the people of GS and the WB is an indication of victory and success.⁸⁵

The delegation also met the head of the Strategic Council on Foreign Relations, Kamal Kharazi, who stressed Iran’s continued support of Palestine, saying that liberating Palestine and Jerusalem remained one of the aspirations of the Islamic Republic.

In turn, Saleh al-‘Aruri, deputy head of Hamas’s political bureau, expressed gratitude for the Iranian positions on the Palestine issue, and said he hoped that the fraternal cooperation between Iran and Palestine would continue until the liberation of Jerusalem.⁸⁶

Al-‘Aruri said Washington’s goal behind the Deal of the Century was to guarantee the interests of Israel and the US, adding that the regional powers, which were seeking to sacrifice Palestine and the aspirations of the peoples of the region, were implementing the deal. However, he asserted that the resistance, despite the financial, political, and military embargoes, had played its role to thwart this deal and will not allow it to pass.⁸⁷

Al-‘Aruri said that Hamas was on the same path as Iran by fighting Israel and the oppressors, while having faith in the promise of the divine, “we offered thousands of martyrs for the liberation of Jerusalem,” he added. The meeting also emphasized the rejection of US aggression in the region, particularly the embargo on the Republic of Islamic Iran and the attempts to provoke it militarily.⁸⁸

Ali Shamkhani, secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, revealed that Lebanese Hizbullah and Palestinian factions in GS were now in possession of precision-guided missiles. Shamkhani said that these missiles were

ready to respond to any provocative act by Israel, stressing that the claims by Israel's prime minister regarding tunnels was propaganda to deflect attention away from the corruption in his own government. Shamkhani said that the discovery of hundreds of kilometers of tunnels under the "feet of the Zionists was a major scandal for the Zionist security establishment."⁸⁹

Affirming the strong alliance between Iran and Hamas against normalization projects, the Deal of the Century, and attempts to encircle the resistance, Hamas's leader in GS Yahya al-Sinwar praised this relationship and Iran's role in supporting the resistance. He said that the resistance in any future conflict would bomb Tel Aviv many times over, stating that no one should blame his movement for its gratitude towards Iran, adding, "It is our duty to thank all those offering us help and support to fulfill the objectives of our people and our nation." In his speech delivered on the World Jerusalem Day, he added, "We wish the Arab leaders would stand in support of the steadfastness and resistance of the Palestinian people... we would be grateful to them and raise them above our shoulders if they do," and stressed that without Iran's support, the resistance would not have its formidable military capabilities. Al-Sinwar said that Iran supplied the resistance with missile technology that allowed Hamas to hit Tel Aviv. He added, "We know our friends and our enemies, and our compass is trained on Jerusalem. Anyone training their compass on Jerusalem then they are among friends."⁹⁰

This major development in Hamas's relations with Iran was in response to the threats jointly facing the two sides in 2018 and 2019, including embargoes, encirclement and wars launched by the US and Israel. It is safe to say that these two years, while being marked by evolving normalization of ties with Israel by Arab states, US legitimization of settlements and occupation of Palestinian territories, were also marked by dramatic developments in relations between Hamas and Iran, counter-balancing normalization and attempts to legitimize the occupation.

Despite the stalling of the Deal of the Century plan, and attempts to replace it with other projects such as the non-aggression pact, the quest to eliminate the resistance in Palestine remains a solid strategy pursued by Israel and the US. This is confirmed by the repeated assaults on GS and the assassination of resistance commanders and figures in WB.

Overt normalization, which made great strides between some Gulf Arab countries and Israel at the political, diplomatic, media, cultural and sporting levels,

constituted a dangerous attempt to reduce Arab animosity vis-à-vis Israel. In the meantime, highlighting Iran's fundamentals on the question of Palestine and the resistance carries huge importance in terms of confirming the continuity of animosity vis-à-vis Israel. Moreover, repeated Israeli assaults on the resistance and its leaders in Palestine, the crippling blockade of GS, and normalization projects seeking to end the Palestine issue, all mean that the resistance in Palestine, more than any time before, needs the support and strategic alliance offered by Iran. The US and its allies believe that no project in the region can succeed without weakening and economically strangulating Iran, being the only state in the world supplying weapons to the Palestinian resistance and representing a real threat to US and Israeli interests in the Middle East.⁹¹ Indeed, the Trump administration has linked negotiations over a new deal to other issues such as Iran's ballistic missile program, Iran's regional activities, and Iran's position on the Palestine issue and relations with Palestinian and other armed groups in the Middle East.⁹²

Normalization will not stop soon, rather, it may expand to include new fields including culture and art. Nor will the existential siege on the resistance stop. It seems that the trend of absolute US support for Israel will not change even after the next US election, which means that the strategy of betting on resistance in Palestine and the development of its relations with Iran is the correct and necessary strategy to counter the threats seeking to end the Palestine issue.

Fourth: Other Muslim States

Malaysia

Malaysia maintained its support of the Palestine issue in 2018 and 2019. In January 2018, Malaysia hosted a conference of Muslim scholars in Putrajaya, the administrative capital of Malaysia, in support of Jerusalem and its people. In its final communique, the conference rejected the decision of US President Donald Trump to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. It called on Islamic governments and peoples to sever all ties with Israel as an occupying force, and combat normalization, by preparing a blacklist of normalizers and criminalizing all those establishing relations with Israel.⁹³ The Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad assured the Palestinians that Malaysia would continue to do everything possible to resolve their issue. He added that the state terrorism practiced by Israel

had always been a source of concern to Malaysia, which would work to confront it by all means at its disposal.⁹⁴

In 2018 and 2019, Malaysia also continued rejecting the entry of Israeli athletes into its territory to take part in international sporting events. On 16/1/2019, despite appeals by the International Paralympic Committee to allow Israeli athletes to enter, the Malaysian Foreign Minister emphasized Malaysia's position. Minister Saifuddin Abdullah said the Malaysian government had decided that Malaysia would not host any event in which Israel would participate or be represented. He also said that the government had made this decision to articulate its strong position towards Israel, and Malaysia's effort to "fight on behalf of the oppressed." The minister made those comments following meetings with Muslim groups that praised the ban on the entry of Israeli swimmers, and called on the Malaysian government to stick to its policy of banning Israeli passport holders from entering the country.

In a memorandum handed to the minister, 43 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) expressed support for the government's position, citing the crimes perpetrated by the Israeli occupation against the Palestinian people, Israeli plans to alter the identity of Jerusalem and expand settlements, and Israeli violations of Malaysia's sovereignty and security.⁹⁵

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad outlined his position on Israel saying that Israel did not adhere to international laws and has continued the occupation and its settlement activities in the Palestinian territories. He added, "We are not against the Jews, but we cannot recognize Israel because of (its) occupation of Palestinian land." He added, "You cannot seize others' lands, and form a state. It's like a state of robbers."⁹⁶

It is noted that the Malaysian authorities are still open to all Palestinian parties, including Hamas. In the Kuala Lumpur Summit held in Malaysia on 18–21/12/2019, a high-level delegation from Hamas attended, and the issue of Palestine was highlighted in the speeches and the agenda of the conference. The summit brought together the leaders of Turkey, Malaysia, Iran, and Qatar, in addition to representatives of other countries. Leaders of Pakistan and Indonesia were scheduled to attend, but they came under immense pressure from outside countries to avoid the summit, which was seen by some as an alternative to the OIC.

Indonesia

Successive developments in 2018 and 2019, led by the US embassy move to Jerusalem, forced Indonesia to slow down its normalization steps with Israel, manifested through facilities given to Israeli tourists to visit Indonesia, and reports of Indonesian officials meeting with Israeli counterparts. In the emergency ministerial meeting of the OIC in Jeddah, Indonesian Deputy Foreign Minister Abdurrahman Mohammad Fachir said that Israeli violations in Palestine undermined the future chances of a two-state solution, adding that Indonesia, being a member of the current Executive Board of UNESCO, called on all OIC members to help maintain the legal status of Jerusalem on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. He also stressed that the efforts to stop Israeli violations must be “consistent and have direct economic implications,” and that it is important that OIC members boycott Israeli products made in the settlements built on Palestinian lands.⁹⁷

In the context of Palestinian-Indonesian relations, Indonesia called for granting Palestine full UN membership. During a monthly session of the UN Security Council on the Middle East, Indonesia’s Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi said, “My presence here today is intentional. To show Indonesia’s consistent support towards the Palestinian cause...It is a natural and legal right of Palestine to be a full member of the United Nations...The Palestinian question defines the credibility of the Council.” The minister condemned Israeli provocations and sustained expansion of illegal settlements, and implicitly attacked the United States, saying that the “peace process requires legitimacy. And legitimacy comes when the process is under the guidance of a multilateral mechanism based on internationally agreed parameters. Any peace plans which fail to accommodate such parameters will not succeed.”⁹⁸

Pakistan

Pakistan continued supporting the Palestine issue in 2018 and 2019, without exceeding the OIC position regarding the peace process. Pakistan’s permanent envoy to the UN, Maleeha Lodhi said Pakistan remains firmly committed to the two-state solution to the conflict in Palestine and rejects the shift in the US position on the issue. Lodhi said, “We are seeing shifting of US policy...Pakistan does not agree with shifts in position,” adding, “Pakistan will continue to be part of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation in rejecting these shifts and calling for

a just and humane settlement of Palestine issue in line with UNGA [UN General Assembly] and UNSC [UN Security Council] resolutions.” Lodhi said, “We call for Two State solution based on pre-1967 borders with Jerusalem as capital of independent and contiguous Palestinian State,” and emphasized that “international consensus in favour of such a solution remains unaffected.”⁹⁹

In the context of the Pakistani-Indian conflict over Kashmir, Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan accused the leaders of both India and Israel of “moral bankruptcy” saying “When leaders in Israel and India show a moral bankruptcy in their readiness to annex occupied West Bank and IOK [Indian-occupied Kashmir] in defiance of int[ernational] law, UNSC [UN Security Council] resolutions and their own Constitution for votes, don’t their ppl [people] feel a sense of outrage and wonder how far they will go simply to win an election?”¹⁰⁰

Responding to the possibility of a shift in the Pakistani position vis-à-vis the Palestine issue, Malik Muhammad Ehsan Ullah Tiwana, Chairman National Assembly Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs affirmed that “Pakistan’s position on Palestine is unambiguous and the government does not have much space for deviating from it because of similarities between Kashmir and Palestine disputes,” He said, “Any shift in the position, if it were to happen, would have to be debated in the Parliament and the decision would have to be taken through consensus. There is no other way for changing the stance.”¹⁰¹

Fifth: Responsiveness of the Muslim Public to the Palestine Issue

In the past few years, the region witnessed several crises that impacted the attention afforded to the Palestine issue in the Muslim world. However, despite the scramble by some Arab regimes to normalize relations with Israel, directly and indirectly and on multiple levels, the Palestine issue remained prominent at the grassroots level in the Muslim world, which continued to interact with the Palestine issue in 2018 and 2019. Hundreds of thousands of Indonesians from all areas, parties, organizations and associations took to the streets of Jakarta, in solidarity with the issue of Jerusalem and Palestine, to reject Trump’s decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem, using the hashtag “#alqudsredline.”

The Indonesian Coalition Defending Baitul Maqdis considered Trump's decision a provocation to the sentiments of all humanity. In a statement, they demanded the US government to reverse its decision, and called on OIC member states to reject and denounce Trump's decision. During their protest near the US embassy, the Secretary General of the Council of Young Indonesian Intellectuals and Ulama Bachtiar Nasir said, "We raise our voices to challenge Trump on Jerusalem," adding that the protest was a message of defiance against the decision of US President Donald Trump on Jerusalem, calling on Muslim countries to unite and mobilize against the decision.¹⁰²

In its fifth session held in November 2018, the International Union of Muslim Scholars called for full rejection of all forms of normalization of Israel. The sessions, which lasted six days, was attended by more than 1,500 scholars from more than 80 countries, the largest in the history of the federation.¹⁰³

In Nigeria, protests were held in the state of Osun in December 2018 in solidarity with Palestine. The protesters called on the UN to recognize the state of Palestine and chanted slogans supportive of Palestine. The president of Friends of Palestine, the association organizing the protests, Sheikh Dawood Imran Mula Hasan, said such protests would continue until the Palestinian flag flew over Jerusalem, adding, "We, the Nigerians, will continue to stand with the justice-seekers in Palestine."¹⁰⁴

On World Jerusalem Day in May 2019, several Muslim capitals saw large rallies in support of the Palestinian people and celebrating this day in 84 cities, across 30 Arab, Muslim, and Western countries.¹⁰⁵

In 31/10–2/11/2019, the Global Coalition For al-Quds and Palestine organized its 11th annual conference in Istanbul. More than 700 important figures from 50 countries participated. The conference focused on confronting the Deal of the Century and the normalization with Israel.

Aid also continued to be provided by pro-Palestine associations active in many Muslim countries, including Malaysia, Indonesia among others.

Sixth: Normalization and Israeli Relations with Muslim Countries

In the context of normalization with Israel, the data of the Israeli Population and Immigration Authority indicated that up to 55 thousand tourists from countries with no diplomatic relations with Israel visited it in 2018. Indonesian tourists increased by 5% compared to 2017, to the tune of 37,555 Indonesian tourists.¹⁰⁶

A delegation from the Indonesian Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) organization visited Israel in mid-June 2018. The head of the delegation Yahya Cholil Staquf, member of the Indonesian President's Advisory Board, met with Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who said he was pleased with the move by Arab and Muslim countries to forge relations with Israel. The Indonesian President Joko Widodo justified the visit by saying it was personal and in response to an invitation to deliver a speech in Israel, claiming Staquf did not represent the Advisory Board and suggesting the visit would support the Palestine issue.

In the same context, NU Chairman Said Aqil Siradj said the organization had no relations with any Israeli entity, saying the visit of NU Secretary General Staquf was a personal one. Staquf's first appearance in Israel was his speech at the American Jewish Committee. He made a second speech at The Harry S. Truman Research Institute at the Hebrew University, then spoke at the Israel Council on Foreign Relations.¹⁰⁷

At the official level, Netanyahu held a secret meeting with the Indonesian Vice President Jusuf Kalla on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly 73rd session, according to Israeli army radio. However, based on an Indonesian request to maintain the confidentiality of the meeting, Netanyahu's office did not comment on the reports.¹⁰⁸

Clearly, 2018 was one of the most active years for Israeli diplomacy, led by Netanyahu himself, as he sought to win the 2019 Israeli general election by scoring diplomatic coups with Islamic nations and breaking the Islamic isolation of Israel, following such gains with Arab countries. According to news reports in 2018, Israel maintained strong diplomatic ties with senior officials in Chad, and sought to normalize relations with this majority Muslim African nation, in the hope that other Muslim African nations would follow suit. A report by Israel's Channel 10 said that, according to official documents, Chad's President Idriss Deby Itno was

seeking to bequeath power to his son and saw normalized relations with Israel as helpful for this. The report said other Muslim African nations like Mali and Niger were then likely to follow suit. The report said the liaison between the two countries was an Israeli Shabak agent codenamed “Maoz,” who served as special envoy to Israel’s National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabat to the Arab and Muslim worlds.¹⁰⁹

In November 2018, an Israeli delegation visited Chad to discuss the resumption of diplomatic relations between the two sides. In early 2019, Netanyahu announced the resumption of relations with the Muslim-majority African nation, saying, “The breakthroughs with the Arab world help us in the Muslim world,” adding, “We are making history.” He also indicated that his visit to Chad would reestablish ties with a “giant” country in Africa [referring to a possible resumption of diplomatic relations that Chad had broken in 1972]. “We are turning Israel into a rising world power. There are those who tried to prevent this, but without success”—a reference to Iranian and Palestinian efforts to stop Chad from establishing ties with Israel. The visit was the first by an Israeli prime minister to Chad, following a visit by the Chadian president to Israel in November 2018. At the time, Netanyahu and Idriss Deby Itno declined to say whether their talks included arms deals, but security sources said the Chadian army and national intelligence were procuring Israeli military equipment.¹¹⁰

In terms of trade between the Muslim world and Israel, according to CBS, Israeli-Turkish trade in 2019 rose slightly by 2.9% compared to 2018. In 2018, it increased by 11% compared to 2017. The value of Israeli exports to Turkey decreased by 7.9% in 2019 compared to 2018 (see table 3/7).

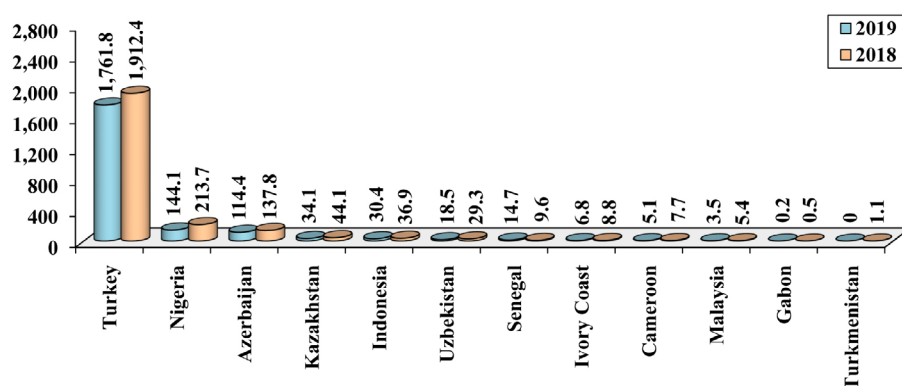
Israeli trade with Malaysia increased remarkably in 2019, by 18.6% on 2018, after it dropped in 2018 by 20% compared to 2017. Israeli trade with Nigeria clearly decreased in 2019 by 30.9% compared to 2018, after it had a significant increase in 2018 by 43.1% compared to 2017. Israeli trade with Azerbaijan decreased in 2019 by 17.5% compared to 2018, after dropping in 2018 by 31.7% compared to 2017. Israeli trade with Kazakhstan increased in 2019 by 2.9% compared to 2018, after recording an increase in 2018 by 30% compared to 2017. Israeli trade exchange with Indonesia dropped in 2019 by 29.8% compared to 2018, after it had also decreased in 2018 by 20.5% compared to 2017 (see table 3/7).

Israeli trade with Muslim countries remains, to a large extent, limited and marginal, except for Turkey, a country that distinguishes between its pro-Palestine political relations and its active trade with Israel. This is because most Muslim countries have no official relations with Israel, and Muslim populations maintain their animosity towards Israel.

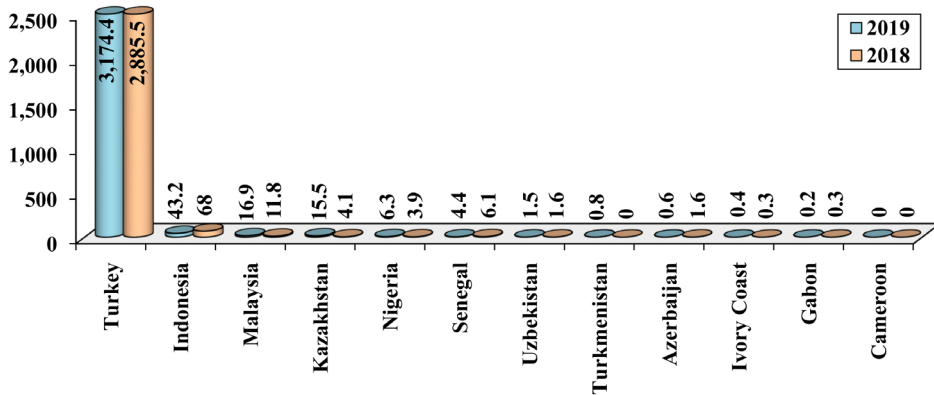
Table 3/7: Israeli Trade Volume with a Number of Non-Arab Muslim Countries 2016–2019 (\$ million)¹¹¹

Countries	Israeli exports to:				Israeli imports from:			
	2019	2018	2017	2016	2019	2018	2017	2016
Turkey	1,761.8	1,912.4	1,428.1	1,297.7	3,174.4	2,885.5	2,895.9	2,601.7
Nigeria	144.1	213.7	148.7	81.7	6.3	3.9	3.4	3.1
Azerbaijan	114.4	137.8	199.7	260.1	0.6	1.6	4.3	6.2
Indonesia	30.4	36.9	83.5	120.9	43.2	68	48.4	43.3
Kazakhstan	34.1	44.1	31.2	46.5	15.5	4.1	5.9	2.1
Malaysia	3.5	5.4	6.8	583.3	16.9	11.8	14.6	14
Uzbekistan	18.5	29.3	17.1	13.3	1.5	1.6	2.4	0.3
Senegal	14.7	9.6	11.9	7.1	4.4	6.1	4.4	4.9
Ivory Coast	6.8	8.8	9.7	10.7	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.2
Cameroon	5.1	7.7	5.8	8.8	0	0	0	0.2
Turkmenistan	0	1.1	4.5	2	0.8	0	0.1	0
Gabon	0.2	0.5	0.6	5.1	0.2	0.3	0.1	0.3

Israeli Exports to a Number of Non-Arab Muslim Countries 2018–2019 (\$ million)



Israeli Imports from a Number of Non-Arab Muslim Countries 2018–2019 (\$ million)



Conclusion

The Islamic grassroots interaction, defending and supporting the rights of the Palestinian people, continues to outpace official Islamic interaction. The years 2018 and 2019 witnessed many protests and activities opposed to the US decision to transfer the US embassy to Jerusalem, showing the extent of Muslim solidarity with the Palestine issue.

As for the official Islamic level, Muslim countries maintained their usual forms of support to the Palestine issue in 2018 and 2019, rejecting the Deal of the Century and the transfer of the US embassy to Jerusalem. Muslim countries also affirmed their support to the Arab Peace Initiative and the two-state solution. The Islamic Summit, organized by Malaysia and Turkey in Kuala Lumpur in December 2019, was a remarkable event proving key Muslim countries are seeking to invigorate their pan-Islamic role and support the Palestine issue.

There has also been a noteworthy, albeit gradual, evolution of the Turkish role in the Palestine issue. It can be said that the Palestine issue has remained present in Turkey's foreign policy in both word and deed, that is in both the official statements of Turkey's leaders and in Turkish diplomacy. This was helped by Turkey's periodic presidency of the OIC, and the dramatic events in Palestine, including the Marches of Return and the transfer of the US embassy to Jerusalem, which Turkey sought

to counter by leading joint Islamic action under the OIC umbrella. It is expected that the Turkish policy would continue this support, meaning there is potential for the Palestinian side to support and develop this role through several paths and contexts in the coming years. On another note, Turkey has maintained its “tense” diplomatic relations with Israel, while their trade relations improved to about \$5 billion in 2019.

Meanwhile, Iran has continued its support of the Palestine issue, despite sanctions and a financial-economic embargo. It continued to reject any recognition of Israel and maintained support for the Palestinian resistance factions, while rejecting any projects seeking to eliminate the Palestine issue such as the Deal of the Century project.

Despite the broad-based popular rejection of normalizing ties with Israel, Israel continues to make unremitting efforts to achieve more breakthroughs in Muslim capitals, as more and more Arab countries show willingness to normalize their relations with Israel. This requires unifying Islamic grassroots efforts to confront this, through a strategy seeking to prevent Israel from becoming a normalized entity in its neighborhood, and criminalize all forms of normalization, be it political, or in the fields of sports, arts or culture.

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Chapter Eight

The Palestine Issue and the International Situation

The Palestine Issue and the International Situation

Introduction

Given the geostrategic position of the Arab region, its problems are significantly affected by international developments even when they appear to be of a local or regional nature. The Palestine issue remains the most sensitive in the region vis-à-vis any event, sub-trend, or mega-trend (in data related to future studies) in the international environment. It is therefore essential to monitor the developments of this environment and the implications of the direct or indirect mutual influence with the Palestine issue.

First: The International Environment: Sub-Trends¹

The most prominent new or continuous trends in the international environment during 2018 and 2019, which had negative or positive impacts on the Palestine issue, can be identified in the following:

1. The continuation of the Russian-Chinese efforts to convert the unipolar international system into a multipolar one, which would weaken the US monopoly of the international decision in general, and affect the balance of power in the Middle East, and consequently influence the Palestine issue, in particular.²

2. The rise of right-wing populist parties, especially in Europe: Despite the differences among the wings of the Right, the strongest trend has the least desire to harmonize with US policies as it perceives the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as a tool serving US, rather than European, interests. These parties are more inclined to non-interference in the Middle East and their thinkers are concerned with the dangers of “Islamic extremism” and migration from the Middle East to Europe. The populist parties in Central Europe show greater sympathy with Palestinian demands, while in some Western European countries they take a pro-Israel stance.³

3. The Arab revolutions and the ongoing political unrest, which began in 2011, have made the concerns about the Palestine issue and its prominence over other issues decline. The regional-international interaction has been dominated by the US-Iranian-Israeli conflict, the wars in Yemen and Libya, as well as by the continuation of the Syrian crisis, with the tension extending to Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon and Iraq, yet it has still been permeated by the Palestine issue in one way or another.⁴

4. Migration crises, especially from the Arab world, in light of political turmoil, particularly towards Europe and Turkey, and the consequent implications on the issue of Palestinian refugees, besides the attempts to adapt attitudes towards the refugee phenomenon in general, so they would be applied to previous UN resolutions regarding the issue of Palestinian refugees.⁵

5. The repercussions of the trade war between China and the US on the Sino-Israeli relationship. The US has shown some concerns about the development of joint projects between China and Israel, their growing trade relations and the impact of this on the US, especially in projects such as the development of the Haifa Port, which is within the framework of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁶

6. Volatile energy prices and the security of energy transfers, in light of strained US-Iranian relations and Iranian-Gulf relations. The possibilities of closing the Strait of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab, the subsequent detention of Iranian ships in Gibraltar and in the Strait of Hormuz, as well as the Iranian response through the detention of British ships, further diverted attention towards these developments and overshadowed the Palestine issue, albeit within certain limits. They also paved the way for Israeli infiltration into the Gulf countries through profound changes in the orientations of some Gulf political regimes regarding the Palestine issue, under the pretext of the priority of confronting the Iranian threat.⁷

7. European preoccupation with the repercussions of the British exit from the EU, or Brexit, and its impact on the European economy, especially the Euro zone, and European-Israeli relations, as Israel welcomed Brexit. The UK is an important trading partner of Israel, with trade amounting to more than \$7 billion per annum. In addition, Israel has strong relations with some British political forces, where 80% of the Conservative Party MPs—who are mainly hostile to the EU—are members of the Conservative Friends of Israel (CFI). They

believe that Brexit would free the UK from some European orientations supporting Palestinian rights on one level or another.⁸ But at the same time, however, Brexit could make the EU less biased in favor of Israel.

8. The rising role of digital public diplomacy in influencing international public opinion, on which Israel has been working with remarkable vigor. In December 2017, the Israeli Foreign Ministry hosted Israel's Second Digital Diplomacy Conference, which was attended by representatives from 30 foreign ministries throughout the world, discussing the employment of digital platforms (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) in foreign policy, especially communication with various sectors of the international community. This matter became more important after Israel realized that its popularity was eroding globally.⁹ Israel established the Hasbara Ministry, a special ministry under the title of the Ministry of Strategic Affairs and Public Diplomacy, which specializes in explaining and interpreting official Israeli stances. This ministry has launched its own programs and courses for students in Israeli universities and colleges, to provide the tools and skills needed to market the image of the "State of Israel" through various digital platforms. The University of Haifa has begun teaching the "Ambassadors Online" course, imposed by the Hasbara, while the University of Tel Aviv offers the "Ambassador Club" course to promote digital diplomacy. In 2018, a Facebook page was created in Iraqi dialect to communicate with the Iraqi community, particularly the youth sector, benefiting from the input of Israeli Jews of Iraqi origin.¹⁰

The positive and negative impacts of these points on the Palestine issue is on two levels; the first is a direct impact, while the other is what future studies courses call Cross Impact Matrix; i.e., how these data interact to yield impact, which might not appear when directly considering them.

Second: The United Nations (UN)¹¹

1. Quartet on the Middle East (UN, EU, US and the Russian Federation)

The general trend governing the role of the Quartet mentioned in previous Palestine Strategic Reports has continued, for its efforts in international diplomacy has declined, including its statements, activities and meetings.

During the UN General Assembly meetings in 2018, the Quartet issued a statement expressing its concern over the escalation in GS and “support for the United Nations’ efforts to prevent further escalation, empower the legitimate Palestinian authorities in Gaza and address all humanitarian needs.”¹²

In December 2018, the Quartet presented a report on its activities to assist the Palestinian side in the areas of energy, water, movement and trade, effective governance and rule of law, telecommunications and economic mapping. The Head of Mission John Clarke would periodically review and facilitate the Quartet’s activities in the various mentioned sectors.¹³ Indeed, Clarke made interventions on these activities in March 2018 and April 2019, stressing that the Palestinians would only be able to achieve their full potential with the realization of a “final status” agreement, as stated in the agreements between the two sides (the Oslo Accords), or through the appeals to the international community seeking aid to Palestinians, especially after the cessation of UNRWA support from some countries, notably the US.¹⁴

The Quartet’s strategy for the period 2018–2020, which was announced in Jerusalem in January 2018, and formulated after consultation with the Quartet members and donor countries, focused on sectoral solutions (energy, water and wastewater, movement and trade, etc.) encompassing short, medium, and long-term measures, while seeking to bridge between the parties to resolve disputes.¹⁵

The Quartet has continued to see its effectiveness dwindle, a situation worsened as it has not put any pressure on Israel to abide at least by its decisions, despite the collective political weight of its members.

2. Nickolay Mladenov, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East “Peace Process”

Mladenov warned in his reports, in January and August 2019, that a political settlement based on the “two-state solution” had become difficult to achieve, given the Israeli settlement policies, particularly in Area C of the WB, in addition to its building of random settlements deep in the WB and its systematic demolishing of Palestinian-owned structures. He explained how Israeli laws are imposed in these areas, where in December 2018 the Israeli government had endorsed a bill to legalize 66 illegal outposts in WB during 2019–2020. Also, Mladenov called on the Palestinians to resolve the political impasse, by ensuring full implementation

of the 2017 Cairo Agreement, and he stressed that the “absence of a functioning elected Palestinian legislative body remains a cause for concern until credible elections can take place.” Mladenov pointed to the escalation of tension in areas A and B in the WB because of what he called “terrorist attacks,” and the increase of Israeli military operations in these areas. Mladenov noted the humanitarian crisis in GS, which had been complicated by cuts in donor funding, urging donors to continue their support for the critical services provided by UNRWA.¹⁶

In a later development, following clashes between the Palestinian resistance in GS and the Israeli forces in the period 14–16/11/2019, Mladenov highlighted the role of the UN and Egypt in preventing a major escalation in and around GS and called on all sides to “show maximum restraint.”¹⁷

3. Security Council¹⁸

The activities of the UN Security Council can be divided into three sections: first, its resolutions (which were passed or vetoed); second, the Council’s statements; and third, the reports presented to it by the Secretary-General or his delegates.

a. Resolutions

1. Throughout 2018–2019, Security Council resolutions regarding the Middle East were limited to extending the mandate of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), which was reassigned in late August 2019, as well as the mandate of international forces in Syria, in June 2018.
2. The US aborted, through veto, a Security Council resolution in June 2018 to protect Palestinian civilians in times of war, following the Marches of Return launched by the Gazans in March 2018. The US also sought to pass a draft resolution at the same session condemning Hamas as a “terrorist movement” and holding it, together with other Palestinian organizations, responsible for firing rockets towards Israel. However, the US endeavor failed when ten members abstained from voting and three others opposed the draft.

b. Statements

The Security Council discussed the clashes between the Palestinian resistance forces and the Israeli army in GS, in the 11–13/11/2018 period, and issued a statement calling for calm, along with assurances from the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process on this issue.

c. Reports

The Security Council heard reports on the situation in Palestine from the UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs and Peacebuilding Rosemary DiCarlo, Mladenov (as indicated before) and other international bodies. Throughout 2018–2019, many topics were raised in different (almost monthly) sessions, with focus on the following:¹⁹

1. Emphasizing the increasing “risks” of the collapse of the “peace process” due to unilateral actions.
2. The growth of Israeli settlements at a high rate. The Security Council also warned that UNRWA’s \$1.2 billion budget had suffered a deficit of about \$211 million, which increased in the following year to \$446 million (a matter that was mostly dealt with, as we shall see later).
3. Discussing the escalation in violence between the Palestinian resistance and Israel in GS in 2018, which was the most violent year since 2014.
4. The UN Coordinator called for the exercise of restraint, which was the result of the efforts of the UN and Egypt, leading to a temporary truce on 6/5/2018 between the Palestinian factions and the Israeli army in GS.
5. Raising the issue of Israeli policies in Jerusalem and the continued settlement building there and in the rest of WB, which the UN Coordinator considered “a major obstacle to peace.”
6. The Security Council was briefed by the heads of civil society organizations on the humanitarian, economic and environmental conditions in the 1967 occupied Palestine, and the UN Under-Secretary-General reported the difficult conditions experienced by Palestinian women in the occupied territories.
7. The Security Council heard repeated warnings from Mladenov that the escalation of violence in GS constituted a threat to “peace” in the region, while mentioning the clashes between the resistance and the Israeli army in November 2018. Mladenov renewed his call for Israel to abide by UN Resolution 2334, issued in 2016, regarding the end of Israeli settlement building in WB and Jerusalem. He stressed that extremism threatens the two-state solution, especially in light of deteriorating economic conditions in WB resulting from Israeli confiscation of Palestinian income sources, and in GS from the continued blockade.

8. The increasing number of Palestinian civilians killed by Israeli forces at the GS border line during the Marches of Return.
9. Criticizing rocket launches at civilian settlements and holding the Palestinian factions in GS responsible, while pointing to the decline of these operations.
10. The UN Coordinator expressed concern over what he called “the weakening of the international consensus around a two-state resolution of the Israel-Palestinian conflict,” emphasizing the need to end the occupation.
11. The UN envoy criticized the US decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, noting that it would undermine “peace” efforts in the region and might lead to the return of “violence.” Remarkably, his criticism did not include any indication to the illegality of the US decision itself.

4. General Assembly²⁰

In 2018–2019, the UN General Assembly held two sessions (regular and special), and it approved several issues regarding Palestine, including:²¹

- a. Calling for the protection of civilians, expressing regret over Israel’s excessive use of force against civilians in WB, including Jerusalem, and GS (June 2018), and demanding Israel to adhere to the “1949 Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War” in WB, including Jerusalem, the Golan Heights and all occupied Arab territories. The General Assembly also expressed regret over the rockets launched from GS towards Israeli civilian areas, calling on both sides to respect the ceasefire.
- b. Supporting UNRWA in its financial crisis and thanking funders. On 15/11/2019, the General Assembly voted in favor of extending UNRWA’s mandate, despite the US and Israeli pressure to reduce the Agency’s role, and the Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee) adopted a decision to extend the Agency’s mandate until the end of June 2023, with 167 countries voting in favor to five against, including the US and Israel.²²
- c. Considering special reports related to:
 1. Israeli practices regarding the rights of the Palestinian people in WB, including Jerusalem, and GS.
 2. Discussing illegal Israeli settlement building in WB, including Jerusalem, the GS and Golan.

3. Applying the “1949 Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War” in WB, including Jerusalem, GS and the occupied Arab territories
- d. On 14/11/2019, the Economic and Financial Committee (Second Committee) voted in favor of a resolution demanding that Israel end its occupation of the Palestinian territories and the Syrian Golan Heights, while emphasizing “Permanent sovereignty of the Palestinian people in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and of the Arab population in the occupied Syrian Golan over their natural resources.” It also called on Israel to cease destruction of vital infrastructure and demolition of Palestinian homes, while stressing that reconstruction and development projects must be advanced, including in GS. The resolution was passed with 156 votes in favor to 6 against, with 14 abstentions.²³

The UN has been considering the Palestine issue since its foundation, especially in its central bodies (the Security Council, the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), and the United Nations Human Rights Council) in addition to the specialized agencies.

Examining the levels of support for Palestinian rights in the UN (especially in the General Assembly which is considered an international parliament) shows the need to observe a megatrend devoted in the General Assembly voting patterns in 2018, where support for Israel at the UN received 2.43% of the votes compared to 75.8% in support of the Palestinian position (see table 1/8).

**Table 1/8: UN General Assembly Voting Trends in the 73rd Session
18/9–5/10/2018²⁴**

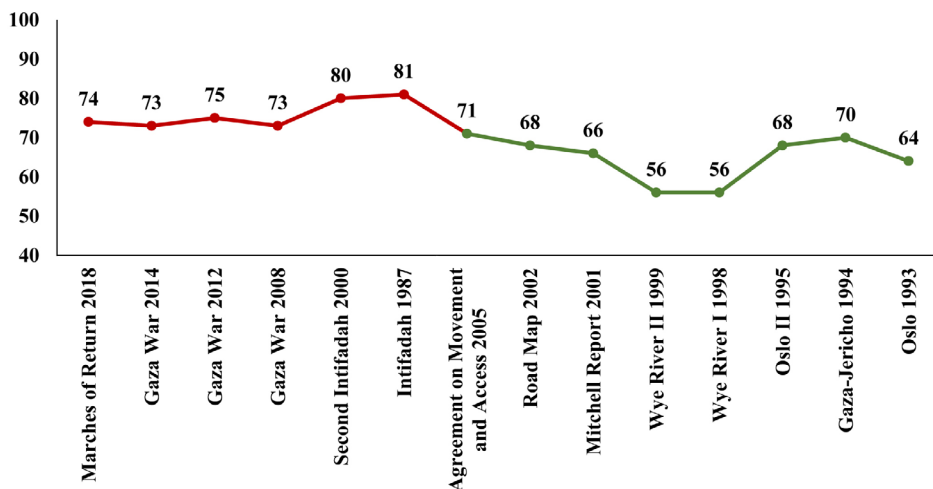
	Topic	Voting in favor of Israel	Voting in favor of Palestine
1	Assistance to Palestine refugees	2	161
2	Persons displaced as a result of the June 1967 and subsequent hostilities	5	155
3	UNRWA operations	5	158
4	Palestine refugees' properties and their revenues	5	155
5	Work of the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian People and Other Arabs of the Occupied Territories	8	77
6	Applicability of the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War to the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, and the other occupied Arab territories	5	154
7	Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, and the occupied Syrian Golan	5	153
8	Israeli practices affecting the human rights of the Palestinian people in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem	6	153
9	The occupied Syrian Golan	2	151
	Average	4.7	146.3
	Percentage of the total UN 193 members (%)*	2.43	75.8

* The rest of the percentage is countries which were absent or abstained from voting.

Remarkably, the percentage of support of the Palestinian position in 2018–2019, implies that there is a historic trend that needs to be considered in the UN. This trend shows that support rates of the Palestinian position increase at times of growing resistance against the occupation. Thus, monitoring the vote in the UN across various topics related to the Palestine issue (refugees, their properties,

Jerusalem, human rights, military operations, settlement, environment, detainees and prisoners, women and children...) reveals that (see the following chart) the periods of confrontation between the Palestinians and Israel have seen the highest percentage of voting in favor of Palestine among the UN members (the red line in the graph). The support has grown in the periods of the two *Intifadahs* and the three GS wars (2008, 2012 and 2014), as well as during the weekly Marches of Return, while it declined in concurrence with making agreements with Israel, which indicates the need for deep consideration regarding the strategic implications of this issue.

The Percentage of Votes in Favor of Palestine in all UN Bodies 1987–2018
(prepared by the researcher)²⁵



The international community generally tends to hold Israeli illegal policies responsible for escalations of violence; thus, the majority of members work to curb these policies through their support of the Palestinian side. Remarkably in this sense, the UN issued 27 decisions in 2018 regarding human rights in the world, including 21 decisions condemning Israeli policies.²⁶ Also, some countries, especially the major ones, consider regional escalations danger to their interests (oil prices, transport, investments, tourism, extremism, migrations, etc.) and hold Israeli policies responsible for them, which makes these countries vote, in most cases, for the Palestinians to pressure Israel and prevent it from straining the region and affecting their interests.

5. United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

The ECOSOC maintained its previous orientations regarding the repercussions of the Israeli occupation of WB, including Jerusalem, GS and the Golan. Thus, in its July 2019 sessions, the ECOSOC voted in favor of the following:²⁷

- a. Calling once again to open the GS borders in accordance with Security Council Resolution 1860 of 2009, especially providing humanitarian conditions for the crossing of people and goods.
- b. Demanding Israel comply with the Protocol on Economic Relations (Paris Protocol) it signed with the PLO in 1994, as well as restoring and replacing civilian property, vital infrastructure, agricultural lands and government institutions that have been damaged or destroyed due to its military operations.
- c. Reaffirming the inalienable right of the Palestinian people and the Arab population in the occupied Syrian Golan to all their natural and economic resources, and calling upon Israel to immediately cease its exploitation of natural resources and dumping of waste materials in the occupied areas.

The ECOSOC also took several decisions in its July 2018 session, the most important of which were:

- a. The international community has a duty to stand by their collective promise to protect the rights of the Palestinian people, and take decisive action to prevent Israel's planned construction of a record number of housing units in the WB settlements.
- b. The reference to the Civil Administration's Higher Planning Committee meeting, which approved the construction of about 2,400 housing units and public infrastructure in 21 settlements and outposts. Hence, providing the existing structures on official aspect, as well as providing initial permits to new structures. UN experts interpret such moves as solidifying the Israeli claim of sovereignty over the WB, which violates international law.
- c. The focus on two points related to settlement building:
 1. Illegality of settlements or annexation of the 1967 occupied territories.
 2. The failure of the international community to impose "effective sanctions" against Israel for defiance of international law.²⁸

- d. Calling on all donor countries to fulfill their financial obligations pledged in 2014, at the Cairo International Conference on Palestine, while calling on Israel to respect all international conventions on human rights, in the 1967 occupied territories.

These decisions were passed by 45 votes in favor to two against (Canada and the US), with two abstentions (Cameroon and Rwanda).²⁹

6. United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC)

In its meetings (March 2018 and 2019), the HRC adopted resolutions affirming the following:³⁰

- a. Emphasizing the inalienable right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and living in freedom, justice and dignity, alongside the right to an independent Palestinian state.
- b. Calling on Israel to immediately end its occupation of the 1967 occupied territories, while stressing the two-state solution.
- c. Emphasizing grave concern about any governmental or non-governmental organization violating the decisions of the General Assembly or the Security Council regarding Jerusalem.
- d. Expressing profound concern about the demographic changes caused by the continued Israeli settlement in the 1967 occupied territories.
- e. Confirming the right of the Palestinian people to permanent sovereignty over their natural wealth, and to benefit from their resources which must be used in the interest of their national development and well-being.
- f. Calling on the international community not to support Israeli violations in the 1967 occupied territories, and the need to help Palestinians realize their right to self-determination and support international efforts to achieve this goal.

7. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

Israel and the US announced their withdrawal from UNESCO in December 2018 given what they considered “anti-Israel” policies. The two countries had declared their intention to leave the organization as early as 2017. Both the US and Israel declared that they would continue their work in preserving world heritage sites in their countries, while the US also made it clear that it will continue to play a role in the organization as an “observer.”³¹

Third: The United States

Since the arrival of Donald Trump in the White House, US policy has exerted great political, economic and legal pressures on Palestine, as demonstrated by the following:³²

1. Supporting legislation calling for the cessation of aid to the Palestinian security forces, despite some Israeli officials stressing the seriousness of this step. In 2018, Congress decided to establish the Palestinian Partnership Fund Act of 2018 to facilitate and finance joint ventures between the US, Israeli and Palestinian companies, with the aim of deepening normalization between Israelis and Palestinians.
2. The transfer of the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, in May 2018, announced in 2017.
3. In August 2018, the US announced its intention to suspend all financial aid to WB and GS related to the fiscal year 2017, amounting to \$231 million.
4. Reprogramming of US aid to UNRWA in September 2018, which amounted to \$359 million in 2017, forming 25% of all international aid, as part of efforts to liquidate the refugee issue. The US administration justified its step as one intended to push other countries to bear these burdens and stop the inclusion of refugee descendants in aid. This made the Agency face “the worst financial crisis since its inception” with a deficit of about \$1 billion.
5. The PLO office in Washington was closed as well as the US consulate in Jerusalem, which had been providing services to the Palestinians, and it fell under the authority of the US ambassador in Jerusalem under the pretext of “increasing effectiveness.” However, the truth was that the closure was intended to give West Bankers the status of Israeli citizens, administratively and symbolically, rather than their status as Palestinians under the occupation. Jared Kushner, senior advisor to US President Donald Trump, explained the reasons for these actions when he said, “All we’re doing is dealing with things as we see them and not being scared out of doing the right thing. I think, as a result, you have a much higher chance of actually achieving a real peace.” Kushner has also said that he believes the Palestinian leadership is refusing talks with the US about the peace plan because “they are scared we will release our peace plan and that the Palestinian people will actually like it.” Trump has himself been even blunter about using US humanitarian aid as leverage, telling

the Palestinians publicly that “we’re not paying until you make a deal. If you don’t make a deal we’re not paying.” However, public opinion polls revealed that two-thirds of Palestinians now oppose the resumption of contact with US negotiators and 88% view the US as biased toward Israel.

6. Congress passed the anti-terrorism law, known as the Anti-Terrorism Clarification Act (ATCA), in October 2018 and enacted it in February 2019. The law allows US citizens to sue those receiving US aid over alleged complicity in acts of terrorism against US citizens. This law made the PA reject all remaining US aid, to avoid paying billions of dollars in potential legal obligations arising from the possibility of activating the anti-terror law against Palestinian sides. This refusal, which would also mean ending all US security assistance to the PA, raised deep concern among Israeli security forces.
7. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) suspended all projects in the WB and laid off most of its local staff.
8. The “Palestinian Territories” term has been removed from the list of countries on the US State Department website, while the term “occupied territories” was to no longer be used in reference to the WB.
9. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced, on 18/11/2019, that “After carefully studying all sides of the legal debate, this administration agrees with President Reagan. The establishment of Israeli civilian settlements in the West Bank is not per se inconsistent with international law.” Pompeo added that the “United States Government is expressing no view on the legal status of any individual settlement” and “we are not addressing or prejudging the ultimate status of the West Bank.”

This new position of the US administration was a departure from the legal opinion of the US State Department since 1978, which had considered settlement building in the 1967 occupied territories to be “illegal.”

10. Announcing a plan to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict, known as the “Deal of the Century,” despite the absence of direct public negotiations with the PA, and without announcing its terms, except on 28/1/2020, at a time when the US was actually resolving the conflict in favor of the Israeli side.
11. Supporting Israel in the issues to be negotiated in the final status negotiations.

All US measures regarding the Palestine issue, as well as its stances in international organizations, indicate a clear endeavor to prepare a regional and

international environment to impose a “peace settlement” identifiable with Israeli policies, that would take into account Israeli interests represented in:

1. Granting international legitimacy to Israeli policies regarding refugees, Jerusalem and settlements, in order to achieve the Jewishness of the state.
2. Providing economic and military assistance to Israel in 2018 and 2019 worth \$7.6 billion, and pledging to provide \$3.3 billion in 2020, which would bring the value of US aid to Israel throughout 1946–2020 to a total of \$142.4 billion.³³
3. Working to gradually expand Arab and Islamic normalization with Israel in all fields, so as to reach security and military coordination against regional powers, which might oppose the Zionist project.
4. Employing previous results to achieve political, economic and military gains for the benefit of the US, which faces competitive international projects in the region, especially by Russia, China and some European powers.

In return, US policy has suffered some confusion, which weakened the momentum of its projects in the region, namely:

1. Instability of the Trump administration: Since Trump took power, resignations and dismissals until mid-September 2019 numbered 303 top staffers, including 55 senior figures, the last of whom were two of the administration’s hawks: Jason Greenblatt, Trump’s special envoy for Middle East peace, and John Bolton, Trump’s national security advisor, the fourth national security advisor to resign (or be fired) from his post.³⁴
2. The halt of “public” negotiations between the US administration and the PA, leading to a stalemate in the peace process.
3. Increased diplomatic clashes between the US administration and a number of countries over Trump’s policies on Palestine and other international issues, such as North Korea and Iran, trade wars with China and Russia, and even the EU in some sectors, in addition to the repercussions of Brexit on the US as well as the tension with Venezuela.
4. The US policy regarding the Palestine issue lacks international acceptance. Most countries, including the major powers (China, Russia, the EU, and Japan), and most international and regional organizations, still refuse to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, relocate their embassies, accept the legitimacy of settlements, and accept most Israeli policies in the 1967 occupied territories.

Nevertheless, the main feature of the US policy during 2018–2019 was the declared intention to announce the “Deal of the Century,” the peace plan to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict, as declared by Trump during his election campaign in 2016. However, its content was not revealed until 2020, in a ceremonial press conference held in Washington on 28/1/2020, in the presence of Trump and Netanyahu. In 2018–2019, the announcement of the deal’s terms was continuously postponed, indicating its difficult enforcement and the failure to convince the concerned sides of its content. At the same time, this postponement was to make the political environment conducive for accepting the deal at the local (Palestinian and Israeli), regional (Arab in particular), and international (in general) levels. Then, the deal would be announced after ensuring enough promotion among the fundamental forces in the aforementioned three levels. (See details of the deal in this report, in Chapter Four, under the title: The Peace Process)

Statements by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo revealed the link between political circumstances and the announcement of the deal. On 23/1/2019, he declared that his country’s peace plan would not be unveiled until after Israel’s general elections, on 9/4/2019.³⁵ Yet, the elections were repeated in September 2019, and the deal was revealed when it was of the interest of both parties.

Trump’s Middle East Envoy Jason Greenblatt published the Economic Framework of the “Deal of the Century,” which was presented at the “Peace to Prosperity” workshop in Bahrain in June 2019. More than half of the \$50 billion Middle East economic plan would be spent in the occupied Arab territories during the next decade (that is, until the beginning of 2030), while the rest would be spent in Arab countries hosting Palestinian refugees.³⁶ After reading the 38 pages published on the White House website,³⁷ which include Kushner’s perception of Palestine’s environment as similar to those of Japan and South Korea, the following observations can be noted:

1. Although the Palestine issue is in its essence a political issue, the Bahrain document does not contain any description, direct or indirect, of the nature of the Palestinian entity, which would receive its economic project. The project talks about empowering the “Palestinian people” and the word “state” has not been included in the project. Also, the name of Palestine is not used at all, while the reference is made to the “WB and GS,” with no definition whatsoever of borders or the nature of the entity that would “hypothetically” receive and

interact with the project. This means that the Palestinians of the WB and GS would end up within a region similar to the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

2. The plan talks about “management, governance, and public sector” without any reference to a political authority, which suggests that such administration and governance are not of an international character but a regional government, as we have indicated, similar to what is in Iraqi Kurdistan or the provinces of the federal states.
3. A careful reading indicates that the Bahrain document aims to achieve two strategic steps:
 - a. The transformation of the WB and GS into a bridge through which the Israeli economies cross to the Arab market, evident when the plan said that this “vision will boost the economies of Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon and reduce trade barriers across the region. Increased cooperation between trading partners will support companies in these countries, which are seeking to develop international business, particularly in the West Bank and Gaza.” Notably, Syria is excluded here, although it is closer than Egypt to Palestine geographically, historically, demographically and even politically.
 - b. The project says that the “Palestinian diaspora offers a tremendous potential source of talent for the Palestinian economy,” in a way which suggests that they would remain where they are.
4. The project’s temptation lies in its economic and social dimensions (talking about employment, education, health, judiciary, investment, internet access and services, water, electricity, etc.), but inspection of this aspect indicates the following:
 - a. The total \$50 billion the project talks about, is distributed as follows:
 1. In terms of time, the sum is distributed over 10 years, or an average of \$5 billion annually.
 2. Of the \$5 billion, part is grants and another is loans (i.e., they are recoverable with interest/ usury), and according to the figures mentioned in the project, it turns out that 51.8% is loans, while 49.2% is grants. Thus, if we calculate the total grants mentioned in the project, the result shows that their value in the early stages is \$3,480 million, and when dividing this amount by the number of the Palestinian people at home and abroad (the Diaspora as the project classifies them), the result shows that the annual Palestinian per capita share is \$232 (i.e., about 164 Jordanian dinars).

If we take into consideration that Jordan, Israel, Lebanon and Egypt will participate in receiving the “loot,” the Palestinian per capita share will not exceed \$35.

- b. The project states that these sums will be placed “into a new fund administered by an established multilateral development bank,” and the “fund’s leadership will work with beneficiaries to outline annual investment guidelines, development goals, and governance reforms that will support project implementation.” This means that there will be a financial “trusteeship council” overlooking the Palestinian administration, with the need to be aware that Israel is a party to this administration, which will be entrusted with overseeing planning and implementation.

On top of that, the following observations should be considered:

1. Previous experience with grants and aid, since the Paris conferences and Arab support conferences, indicates that prospects for implementation decline annually, if any is launched in the first place. Also, it shows that even if agreements were concluded, implementation from the Western and Israeli side is uncertain; the Oslo accords are sufficient evidence in this respect.
2. The first requirement of the project is to obtain the Palestinian signature to legalize it (as was the case with the Oslo Accords), and then procrastinating over implementation begins.
3. The participation of some Palestinian figures in the Bahrain workshop may involve significant risks. It may hide a parallel negotiating track similar to what happened with the team of Haidar ‘Abdel Shafi at the beginning of the Oslo negotiations, or other administrations may develop, alternative to the PA and similar to “former village councils.”

The US team assigned for the “Deal of the Century” project, of which the Bahrain economic document was launched, openly adopted the Israeli perspective.³⁸ Remarkably, the changes in personnel it witnessed did not affect its general trend, with the team’s new members sharing the same orientations as the old ones. Avraham Berkowitz, who is of Jewish descent, replaced Greenblatt (also Jewish), lacks diplomatic experience (is aged 30) and is the cousin of Howard E. Friedman, who was president of AIPAC during the 2006–2010 period. He graduated from Harvard Law School in 2016, worked as a White House consultant for Trump and contributed to Trump’s election campaign through Facebook Live discussions. He

studied at Yeshiva Kol Torah (a Jewish-Orthodox religious school) in Jerusalem for two years and speaks fluent Hebrew. In 2009, he returned to the US and joined Ner Israel Rabbinical College in Baltimore, then became an employee in one of Kushner's companies. Berkowitz is one of four people who viewed the draft of the "Deal of the Century." Berkowitz was also among the US delegation that visited the Gulf countries and Turkey in February 2019, to inform the officials there about the outlines of the plan.³⁹

According to the *New York Times*, Berkowitz was among those who pressed for the relocation of the US Embassy to Jerusalem.⁴⁰ However, his appointment indicated Kushner's role in the decision, given their Jewishness and close personal relationship. His articles in the *Observer* newspaper showed that he is very conservative in his political thought, and that he was the one behind the special meeting of Jewish leaders with Greenblatt and Kushner to discuss "peace" in the Middle East.⁴¹

Robert O'Brien, who replaced John Bolton, was from the State Department's staff, and has worked with Democratic and Republican administrations. He has served as Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs at the US State Department, a lawyer who worked with the Bush administration to serve as a US Representative to the 60th session of the UN General Assembly. He also worked with Bolton, Condoleezza Rice and Hillary Clinton and is very close to Pompeo. O'Brien is a sharp critic of the UN role and has called Iran "the largest state sponsor of terrorism in the world." He criticized the UN in 2005 because, in his view, its decisions condemned Israel but not the Palestinians and this reduces the effectiveness of its role.⁴² His book shows that he adopts the following strategies, which reflect his general approach to international relations:⁴³

1. Adapting NATO's mission and increasing the contributions of others to its expenditures.
2. Developing strategic relations with Israel and Brazil.
3. Encouraging India to give up its arms sources, especially Russian sources.
4. Views the UN as a platform for criticism of the US and Israel.
5. Hostile to peace movements, Iran and immigrants.

As for the US legislative framework, there is still a strong movement supporting the previous peace process, as was demonstrated in a symbolic resolution passed by the US House of Representatives backing the two-state solution for the

Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The resolution passed by a 226–188 vote, stating that “only the outcome of a two-state solution... can both ensure the state of Israel’s survival as a Jewish and democratic state and fulfill the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people for a state of their own.”⁴⁴

In general, during 2018–2019, the US worked on:

1. Deepening the imbalance of power in favor of Israel through a series of measures, which strip the Palestinian side of its political, economic and military capabilities (the latter relating to the resistance, especially in GS), on the one hand, and demanding it to negotiate in such an environment, on the other hand.
2. For the diplomatic missions concerning the Palestine issue, a five-person US team was assigned, of whom three were Jewish, and all of them with track records of negative attitudes towards Palestinian demands.
3. Removing the notion of a Palestinian state in the US position; rather Palestine is dealt with as an estate rather than a state, evident in the Bahrain economic document.

Fourth: The European Union (EU)

The European Joint Strategy in Support of Palestine 2017–2020: Towards a Democratic and Accountable Palestinian State became the central aspect in European policy towards the Palestine issue, especially regarding the following pillars:⁴⁵

1. Governance reform, fiscal consolidation and policy.
2. Rule of law, justice, citizen safety and human rights.
3. Sustainable service delivery.
4. Access to self-sufficient water and energy services.
5. Sustainable economic development.

This document outlines the general conclusions of the EU regarding the “peace” process in the Middle East (January 2018) as follows:⁴⁶

1. Condemning the violence of all sides and respecting obligations related to the holy places, in accordance with relevant understandings, while respecting Jordan’s role in this respect.

2. Working to stop verbal or actual incitement by one side against the other.
3. Implementing the Quartet's recommendations, especially regarding Israeli policies in the 1967 occupied territories, Area C in particular.
4. Supporting the two-state solution and calling for the removal of the most significant obstacles to its achievement.
5. Calling for the establishment of an international support group, and holding an international conference to promote peace settlement opportunities and to settle the claims of the parties to the conflict.
6. The obligation to implement international humanitarian law and the commitment to it by states and non-state actors (institutions, parties, and individuals).
7. Condemning Israeli settlements and home demolitions; stressing the need to abandon settlements, including those in Jerusalem, besides ensuring continued, full and effective implementation of existing EU legislation and bilateral arrangements applicable to settlements products, in addition to stressing that all agreements between Israel and the EU do not apply to the 1967 occupied territories.

In this context came the EU response to the US Secretary of State's declaration in November 2019 regarding the "legitimacy of settlements in the occupied territories," where the EU swiftly announced that its position on settlements is "clear and unchanged: all settlement activity is illegal under international law and it erodes the viability of the two-state solution and the prospects for a lasting peace," further it called on Israel to end all settlement activity in the occupied territories. European diplomats saw that the US step would deepen the gap between the Palestinian and international position on one hand, and the US on the other hand, and they saw that the Trump administration was seeking through its decision on settlements "to woo evangelical voters."⁴⁷

8. Emphasizing Europe's assistance to achieve Palestinian reconciliation.
9. Working to lift the GS siege, while committing to Israeli security.

When looking at European positions in international fora, the following can be noted:⁴⁸

1. EU states voted 76.19% in support of Palestinian rights in the 37 draft resolutions submitted to the General Assembly in 2018–2019.
2. The increasing tendency of European policy to be independent of US policy, evident in the difference in UN voting trends between the two sides as well as in

the letter signed by 33 former European officials (25 former foreign ministers, six former prime ministers and two former NATO secretary-generals). They called for opposing Trump's "biased" policies against the Palestinians and demanded that "Europe should embrace and promote a plan that respects the basic principles of international law as reflected in the agreed EU parameters for a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict... that a viable peace requires the creation of a Palestinian state... with Jerusalem as the capital for both states."⁴⁹

3. The continued support of Egyptian and international efforts to stop the military escalation between the GS and Israel, as demonstrated in EU statements in August 2018 and May 2019, noting that these statements held both sides responsible for the escalation.⁵⁰
4. The EU criticized the "Jewish Nation-State Law" passed by the Israeli Knesset in July 2018, which limited the right to self-determination in Israel to Jews only, and reduced the status of the Arabic language from an official language to a language with "a special status." The EU believed the decision would complicate the realization of the two-state solution.⁵¹

European financial and economic aid to the WB and Gaza amounted to €380 million (about \$459 million) in 2018 and €45 million (about \$54 million) in 2019,⁵² and was distributed as follows:

1. €155 million (about \$187 million) Direct Financial Support to Recurrent Expenditures of the Palestinian Authority.
2. €153 million (about \$185 million) to UNRWA.
3. €71.35 million (about \$86 million) for project support to sustainable economic development and enhanced governance, improved access to self-sufficient water and energy services, and East Jerusalem.
4. €40.1 million (about \$48.4 million) to address the worsening living conditions of populations affected by the GS siege.
5. €5.9 million (about \$7 million) as an emergency response to demolitions and evictions, critical assistance for essential services, and improved access to quality and safe education.

Yet, it is necessary to note that no formal European measures were taken to counter Israeli policies, with the exception of some boycott of WB settlements products to make Israel respond to the main directions of European policy, especially the establishment of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital.

However, Europe is often inclined to criticize any armed Palestinian resistance and demands the Palestinian side to review the educational curricula, where “incitement to violence is fundamentally incompatible with advancing a peaceful two-state solution.”⁵³ Indeed, UNRWA schools responded to this demand as confirmed by the Agency’s Commissioner-General in his statement in November 2018.⁵⁴

In December 2018, the EU responded to Israeli pressure by issuing a declaration adopting a call to fight anti-Semitism, but at the same time, it considered “criticism of Israel similar to that levelled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic.”⁵⁵ Notably, European public opinion sees (as we shall see later) that Israel exploits the issue of anti-Semitism for its political interests.⁵⁶

Finally, the European stance remains less prejudiced than that of the US, whether in terms of the volume of aid to both sides of the conflict, voting indicators at the UN, or its role in the Quartet (which was already negative for the Palestinians). However, the European influence on the negotiating tracks and the application of international law remains quite limited.

Fifth: The BRICS States

The BRICS group (Russia, China, India, Brazil and South Africa) agreed in their statement of the July 2018 summit (in South Africa) on the following:⁵⁷

1. Establishing an independent, viable, territorially contiguous Palestinian State, living side by side in peace and security with Israel, based on the UN resolutions, the Madrid Principles, the Arab Peace Initiative and previous agreements between the parties.
2. The status of Jerusalem is one of the final status issues to be defined in the context of negotiations between the Israeli and Palestinian sides, a position that is less significant than the European position on this point.
3. Regarding GS, affirming support to the UN General Assembly Resolution (A/RES/ES-10/20) on the protection of the Palestinian population and the need for its implementation.
4. Reiterating support for UNRWA.

On 5/6/2018, the BRICS foreign ministers issued a statement in South Africa reiterating the same positions again.⁵⁸

The election of right-wing President Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil marked a significant change in the BRICS, especially as Bolsonaro's policies radically contrast those of the BRICS group, individually and collectively, as follows:⁵⁹

1. He supports Trump's protectionist trade policies, particularly against China and Russia.
2. He stands strongly against the policies of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, who is backed by the other BRICS countries, especially Russia and China.
3. His stances and visits to Taiwan have been severe provocations to China.
4. He supports Trump's policies in the Middle East, especially moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem. Days after winning the presidency in 2018, he promised to follow in Trump's footsteps,⁶⁰ which he had to retract under internal, Arab, Islamic and international pressure.
5. Hostility to the globalization policies adopted by the Chinese leader.

This means that the orientations of the BRICS may face complications under the new Brazilian policies, which will be reflected in the Middle East in general, and the position towards Israel, in particular. The Brazilian president may adapt the orientations of the BRICS in a way that makes them less supportive of Palestinian rights.

Sixth: Russia

The Russian position on the US "Deal of the Century" was a general indication of Russian policy during this period. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, while noting that the details of the deal had not yet been published, said that the economic part of the plan, especially leaving Palestinian refugees in the countries hosting them, was inconsistent with the Security Council resolutions.⁶¹ Lavrov also expressed sympathy with the Palestinian reaction to the "Deal of the Century," indicating that the Palestinians had made many years of concessions without receiving any compensation.⁶²

The Russian political scene witnessed several attempts to activate Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in Moscow. A meeting was held that included all Palestinian factions; a Hamas delegation was invited to visit Moscow; a meeting between President 'Abbas and Russian President Vladimir Putin was held in July

2018; and a meeting between Putin and Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu was held in April 2019.⁶³ Despite the positivity of inviting the resistance factions to Moscow, a negative aspect should also be noted, which was the Russian pressure to accept the peace process course, the same role the Soviet Union played with Fatah and the Palestinian factions.

Russia promised, through the Federation Council Committee on Foreign Affairs, to provide \$10 million in aid to UNRWA.⁶⁴

The downing of the Russian reconnaissance aircraft in September 2018, for which Russia held Israel responsible—for it was shot down by Syrian forces responding to an Israeli airstrike—“triggered testy exchanges of blame between Israel and Russia,” but then the crisis was overcome.⁶⁵

Seventh: China

Chinese policy towards the Palestine issue did not change, and perhaps the joint statement between the EU and China in July 2018 confirms this. It stated, “On the peace process in the Middle East, both sides confirmed their support for a two-state solution, under which the two states live side by side in security within internationally recognized borders, with Jerusalem as their capital, and in accordance with the relevant United Nations resolutions.”⁶⁶

However, it is necessary to note that, despite the US-Chinese trade war, Israeli-Chinese relations developed in the economic, technical, political and cultural fields, and increased at a noticeable rhythm, faster than those with the Palestinian side. This accelerated development can be linked to several factors:⁶⁷

1. The Chinese BRI project, which includes 1967-occupied Palestine and Israel, especially its ports.
2. The pragmatic approach continues to grow in the Chinese political structure, especially concerning adapting to and guiding economic globalization, as expressed by Chinese President Xi Jinping.
3. The linkage between the Chinese and Arab relations on one hand, and the Palestine issue on the other hand, has weakened. Chinese diplomacy has an impression that Arab official tendencies are gradually moving towards normalization with Israel.

The volume of trade between China and Israel in 2019 was \$11.4 billion, with a trade deficit of \$2 billion in favor of China.⁶⁸ Chinese tourism to Israel increased in the first half of 2019 by 67% compared to 2015.⁶⁹ However, these evolving Israeli-Chinese relations faced some criticism and paranoia from the US, as well as from the leaders of the Israeli security services, especially regarding:⁷⁰

1. Security and economic risks, due to transferring some aspects of advanced US technology to China, through Sino-Israeli companies and joint investment.
2. The development of Israeli ports, especially Haifa, through the Chinese BRI, would provide China with the ability to collect information on the US Sixth Fleet, which uses the facilities of this port extensively.
3. Sino-Israeli relations negatively affect US trade measures against China, which constitute one of the main pillars of Trump's policies.

In return, China has taken some steps to support the Palestinian side, such as:⁷¹

1. Prevented Chinese workers from working in Jerusalem or Israeli settlements in the 1967 territories.
2. Provided about \$15 million to help the Palestinians in the fields of development, in addition to about \$2 million to UNRWA.
3. Rejected Trump's "Deal of the Century" and emphasized the two-state solution in accordance with UN resolutions.
4. The inclination to sign a free trade agreement with the PA.

The Chinese and Russian positions remain within the parameters set by the Ramallah-based PA and have not yet reached the position of the Resistance factions.

Eighth: India

India's June 2019 vote in favor of an Israeli motion at the UN's ECOSOC to deny a Palestinian organization based in Lebanon (Shahed Foundation) observer status, is an indication of the departure of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Hindu nationalist government from the traditional position supporting Palestinian and Arab issues,⁷² a trend which started when this party assumed power in 2014.

India has a stark need for Middle East countries, especially the Gulf states and Iran, as sources of crude oil, and Indian remittances from the Gulf states. In 2018, these states hosted 8.5 million Indians, who transferred about 68% of remittances

from Indians abroad, amounting to \$79.5 billion during 2019.⁷³ Yet, this did not have any impact on the official Indian stances regarding the Palestine issue, and the government of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi continued its approach without any change.

The opening up of some gulf countries to Israel throughout 2018–2019, which culminated in Netanyahu's visit to Oman, has helped Modi escape the criticism of Indian political forces for his "Look West" policy. This policy became more clear in Modi's rapprochement with Israel, especially when he visited it in 2017, marking a first by an Indian prime minister.⁷⁴ Thus, Gulf countries bear some responsibility for this decline in the Indian position towards the Palestine issue.

However, Indian-Israeli relations face some complications, such as limited trade relations, which have not exceeded \$5 billion. Also, Indian-Iranian relations are a point of disagreement in some aspects, while India seems concerned about a possible Pakistani-Israeli rapprochement.⁷⁵

Ninth: South Africa-The African Union (AU)

The statements by the AU and the African Union Commission (AUC) Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat, throughout 2018–2019, were an indication of the main African orientations as they focused on the following:⁷⁶

1. Expressing grave concern over the relocation of the US Embassy to Jerusalem and its impact on reaching a comprehensive settlement.
2. Condemning disproportionate Israeli uses of force against Palestinian demonstrators.
3. Supporting the Palestinians' legitimate quest for an independent and sovereign State with East Jerusalem as its capital.
4. The need to implement UN resolutions related to the Palestine issue.

Despite the difference of positions of some African countries, South Africa is the most supportive among non-Arab African countries to the Palestinian rights,⁷⁷ while Ghana is the one most keen to bring AU policies closer to Israel, especially the Ghanaian endeavor to grant Israel observer status in the AU, which mirrors the approaches of both Kenya and Ethiopia.⁷⁸ Notably, this Israeli endeavor aims to impact Palestine's activity in the Union, after Palestine was granted observer status in 2013.

In 2017, the Republic of Togo called for holding the first African-Israeli summit in its capital, Lome, on 23–27/10/2017. However, the summit was canceled due to Palestinian, Arab and African pressure and rejection. There was a Palestinian consensus to reject the summit and remarkable media and political pressure applied by the Popular Conference for Palestinians Abroad to abolish it.

In 2018–2019, normalization between Israel and several African countries developed. It was encouraged by the normalization and reciprocal visits of Arab and Israeli figures and delegations, as well as Israeli efforts in this regard. In November 2018, Chadian President Idriss Deby Itno visited Israel.⁷⁹ In September 2019, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed visited Israel and met Israeli officials, with Netanyahu calling Ahmed “one of the most important and influential leaders in Africa.” In July 2019, media outlets said that Israel was building a Spyder-MR air missile system around the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.⁸⁰

In February 2018, an Israeli security mission made a secret visit to Rwanda to market Israeli weapons and military technology. The Israeli Ministry of Defense mission included the International Defense Cooperation Directorate (SIBAT), the Special Unit for the African Continent of the Israeli army and representatives of the Israeli military equipment manufacturers including Israeli electronic equipment manufacturer Elbit, Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI), Israel Military Industries (IMI) and Israel Weapon Industries (IWI), among others.⁸¹ Furthermore, former Israeli officials launched a campaign to assist Rwanda to join the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), led by former Israeli Attorney General Yehuda Weinstein and former Israeli Ambassador to the UN Ron Prosor. Indeed, Rwanda was formally admitted to the OECD in May 2019, having applied to join the body in November 2018.⁸² Israel opened its embassy in the Rwandan capital Kigali in February 2019.

Throughout 2018–2019, Israeli relations with South Africa witnessed high tension until the latter withdrew its ambassador from Tel Aviv and reduced its level of representation in April 2019, having summoned its ambassador in 2018 for consultation in light of moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem. The ambassador withdrawal came in response to the massacres committed by the Israeli forces against demonstrators in GS.

South Africa is still one of the strongest supporters of the rights of the Palestinian people. It voted in the General Assembly session, on 6/12/2018, against the US

draft resolution to condemn Hamas, at a time the US and Israel had tried to pressure countries to vote for the draft. South Africa also received a delegation from Hamas in late 2018.

PA President Mahmud ‘Abbas participated in the 32nd and 33rd AU sessions in 2018–2019. In his two speeches, he called on the AU countries to support Palestinians in international fora and for the AU to have a role in the peace process, while offering to provide his services in combating “terrorism” and in the areas of sustainable development.

Tenth: Brazil – The Organization of American States (OAS)

Most of the 35 OAS countries’ orientations have been known as closer to the Palestinian position, but since 2017, the South American continent has witnessed developments that Israel used to strengthen its position when it comes to voting at the UN. Notably, Benjamin Netanyahu visited the region three times throughout 2017–2019. The growth of right-wing parties, populist leaders and the evangelical Christians might have contributed to create these favorable conditions for Israel. Brazil said it was considering moving its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, following the election of the right-wing President Jair Bolsonaro.⁸³ The trade relations between the two sides in 2019 amounted to \$1.2 billion. Israeli companies were also active in this region (for example, there are about 150 companies in Mexico, more than 100 companies in Colombia and Argentina and 200 in Brazil). Israel has been seeking to tempt some countries to transfer their embassies from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in exchange for providing them with weapons, such as Honduras and Guatemala, as well as Paraguay that later backed off.⁸⁴ However, some countries with leftist leaderships, such as Venezuela, Bolivia (whose President Evo Morales is supportive of Palestinian rights and has resigned in November 2019 leaving the country after being replaced by right-wing leadership) and Cuba, still hold firm in their solidarity with the Palestinians in the face of Israeli policies.⁸⁵

Latin America and the Palestine Issue

Latin American countries have always supported the Palestine issue over the decades of the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, notable developments have occurred during recent years, especially with the rise of right-wing parties supporting Israel. After the US moved its embassy to Jerusalem in May 2018,

some Latin American countries called for supporting this move, where Paraguay decided to relocate its embassy after Guatemala had done so, and Brazil promised to follow suit. However, they had to reverse their decision either because of the political changes, which occurred in Guatemala and the election of Mario Abdo as president, or because of political and commercial pressures from some Muslim countries having relations with Brazil.

Support from these countries came only as a result of changes in the political landscape of Latin America, and the decline of the left-wing role in policymaking in favor of right-wing supporters of Israel. Consequently, cooperation became available, and Netanyahu made a tour to Latin American countries in 2017. Netanyahu also received Brazilian Foreign Minister Aloysio Nunes in February 2018, signing a social insurance agreement. During their meeting, Netanyahu “expressed desire to enhance bilateral cooperation and said that Israel is greatly interested in ties with Brazil and believes in their latent potential.”⁸⁶

In December 2018, Netanyahu visited Brazil to participate in the swearing-in ceremony of the new Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, whose election has gained Israel more support from Latin American countries in international fora. For example, Brazil voted in the General Assembly, in December 2018, in favor of a US draft resolution condemning Hamas.

Certainly, the US administration has played an important role in changing the attitudes of South American countries in favor of Israel. Netanyahu held a tripartite meeting during the Bolsonaro inauguration ceremony with the President of Honduras and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, where they discussed moving the Honduran Embassy to Jerusalem. Indeed, Honduras announced, in late 2019, its intention to open an embassy in Jerusalem and anticipated this announcement by opening a trade office in Jerusalem in September 2019, which was a step towards developing relations with Israel.⁸⁷

In the context of political changes within Latin American countries, the Bolivian interim government announced in November 2019 its intention to restore diplomatic relations with Israel. The former Bolivian President Evo Morales, who fled the country after what he described as a coup, has accused the interim government of having requested support from Israel to fight the left in his country.⁸⁸

On the 70th anniversary of *Nakbah* in 2018, many Latin American countries witnessed demonstrations and protest marches against the transfer of the US

Embassy to Jerusalem, and in support of the Palestinian people, as in Mexico and Argentina.⁸⁹ In May 2018, Mahmud ‘Abbas made a trip to Latin America, and met the presidents of Cuba, Venezuela and Chile, to mobilize international support for rejecting the relocation of the US Embassy to Jerusalem.

In an important step, a conference of Palestinian communities in Latin America and the Caribbean was held in the Salvadoran capital, San Salvador, on 13–16/6/2019, to unite them and serve the Palestine issue and community members. The closing statement of the conference stressed the necessity of rebuilding the PLO through PNC democratic elections, with the participation of all the Palestinian people. It also affirmed its commitment to defending the national rights of the Palestinian people, foremost of which is the right to self-determination, building an independent sovereign state with its capital in Jerusalem, and the right of return of all refugees to their homes from which they were forcibly expelled in 1948.⁹⁰ The conference declared the establishment of the Palestinian Union of Latin America (*Unión Palestina de América Latina*—UPAL) to represent Palestinian communities. The importance of such entities in Latin American countries stems from the size of the Palestinian community and the history of its presence in Latin America, and from the influence of many of its members who have high positions in these countries.

Eleventh: Japan

The book of the current Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, “Towards a Beautiful Country: My Vision for Japan,” can be considered a general indication of Japanese foreign policies, especially concerning the Palestine issue and its Arab environment. It includes:⁹¹

1. The tendency to have some independence from US policies, especially after Trump’s election. Japan’s refusal to participate in the maritime force proposed by the US to protect maritime transport routes in the Gulf is an indication in this respect.
2. The urgent need for energy resources in the Gulf, which amount to about 90% of its needs, especially with Iran, in addition to the large trade volume with the Gulf countries that reached \$115.8 billion in 2018.

3. The tendency to be more deeply embedded in international politics, especially in the Middle East, with an emphasis on employing “soft” rather than hard power, through affirming three directions: “tolerance, coexistence and cooperation.”
4. The continued work of developing the “Corridor for Peace and Prosperity” initiative, which Japan is adopting in the Jordan Valley for the benefit of the countries of the region.

Japanese government statements, throughout 2018–2019, criticized Israeli policies in the following aspects:⁹²

1. The continuation of Israeli settlement policies despite their inconsistency with international law, and Israel’s failure to respond to Japanese calls to stop this policy.
2. Condemning Israel’s demolition of Palestinian homes and facilities, considering it an impediment to reaching a two-state solution supported by Japan.
3. Refusing to move the Japanese Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

As in European policies, Japan does not take punitive actions against Israel, but rather expands its relations with it. During the visit of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to Israel in 2018, Netanyahu stressed that the volume of Japanese investments in Israel doubled throughout 2014–2019 by about 120 times, while the number of Japanese companies in Israel increased thirty-fold. In return, Japan has provided the Palestinians with around \$63 million in aid, including support of agricultural and industrial projects in Jericho, aid to some families and childcare programs, as well as to UNRWA.⁹³

Twelfth: International Public Opinion

International non-governmental public opinion consists of three main sectors: individuals, local non-governmental civil society organizations and international non-governmental civil society organizations. Israel clearly knows the impact of these sectors on international politics, even if in the long term, making it work on curbing the impact of growing support of Palestinian rights. The impact of these sectors is demonstrated in the following models:

1. The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) Movement

In 2018, this movement succeeded in a number of aspects, such as the announcement of two members of the US Congress, Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar, of their intention to visit the 1967 occupied territories, accompanied by a congressional delegation, to expose Israeli policies on issues like Israel's detention of Palestinian children, education, access to clean water, and poverty, and all issues preventing peace settlement in the region.⁹⁴ As Israel denied the two US elected officials entry to the WB and GS, the Americans for Peace Now (APN) organization called on the Israeli government, on 15/8/2019, to reverse its decision, describing the measure as "outrageous."⁹⁵ The BDS movement also succeeded in the following:⁹⁶

- a. Ireland's Senate approved a bill criminalizing the import and trade of goods and services from Israeli settlements, by a vote of 30–13.
- b. The BDS movement managed to persuade British-based bank HSBC to disengage from projects with companies that produce weapons for Israel.
- c. Following a BDS campaign, the University of Manchester in Britain stopped dealing with certain brands, because of funding the Israeli army.
- d. BDS succeeded in persuading international singer Lana Del Rey to cancel her Israel show, which was scheduled for September 2018.

The BDS movement continued its activities in 2019, organizing around a 100 activities in European countries, while British newspapers, such as *The Guardian*, and dozens of universities cooperated with it, especially in focusing on exposing Israel's racist policies. BDS also coordinated activities in African countries, holding meetings with parties and unions to focus on exposing Israeli policies on the issues of human rights, racist practices, settlement building and enforcement of racist laws.

It also succeeded in organizing various activities in Latin American countries, especially Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico, holding seminars on the role of Israel in the militarization of Latin America and the need to thwart that policy. In the US, more than 20 universities and colleges, including Harvard University, participated in the "Israeli Apartheid Week (IAW)," holding student media activities and publishing related material in student newspapers. In Asia, the BDS movement organized activities in India and Malaysia, by displaying posters and films at universities, while focusing on exposing the growing Indo-Israeli relations and some right-wing sides in Malaysia.⁹⁷

According to a report issued by the Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs, the level of BDS movement activities has increased to such an extent that supporters of Israel are no longer able to express themselves and organize activities on US college campuses, to defend Israel and its policies. According to the report, which was quoted by *Israel Hayom* newspaper, BDS activists do not hesitate to call anyone expressing solidarity with Israel a “baby killer.”⁹⁸

However, the important accomplishments by the BDS movement in expanding the global boycott against settlements, does not eliminate the difference between its position and that of the resistance factions, especially regarding adherence to the Palestinian fundamentals including the right of return.

2. The International Criminal Court (ICC)

ICC Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda announced that, based on an independent and objective analysis of the information available to her office regarding the situation in Palestine, she had decided that statutory criteria under the Rome Statute for the opening of an investigation have been met. Also, she was satisfied that there was a reasonable basis to proceed with an investigation into the situation in Palestine, and she sought from the Pre-Trial Chamber “a confirmation that the ‘territory’ over which the Court may exercise its jurisdiction...comprises the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza,” stressing that “such determination is made strictly for the purposes of determining the Court’s ability to exercise its jurisdiction and the scope of such jurisdiction under the Statute.”⁹⁹ Bensouda’s declaration caused widespread satisfaction among Palestinian, Arab and international circles, and President ‘Abbas called on the Palestinians affected by the occupation to file cases against Israel before the ICC, considering that day as a “great day.”¹⁰⁰ In return, Netanyahu said that the ICC “has no authority to adjudicate the matter. It has jurisdiction only in lawsuits presented by sovereign states, but there has never been a Palestinian state,” and claimed that Bensouda’s decision represented a “dark day for truth and justice.”¹⁰¹

3. Amnesty International

Amnesty International criticized the new Israeli laws promoting racial discrimination against non-Jews, as well as the violent Israeli policies, which claimed the lives of 290 Palestinians in 2019, including more than 50 children, none of whom posed danger to anyone. The organization also criticized the Israeli blockade of GS, which at that point had been imposed for 11 consecutive years.

It also pointed to Israeli restrictions on the freedom of movement of the Palestinians in the WB, especially with the erection of military roadblocks and the closure of roads with concrete walls. The organization affirmed that thousands of Palestinians, including hundreds of administrative detainees, were still being detained without charge, while torture and other ill-treatment of detainees, including children, were being committed with impunity. Amnesty also said that Israel had continued to demolish Palestinian homes and facilities, forcing residents to leave their homes. It added that the judiciary had failed to be just and respect humanitarian law, for the Israeli authorities had denied asylum-seekers—African migrants in particular—access to a fair or prompt refugee status determination process, while conscientious objectors to military service were imprisoned.¹⁰²

4. Freedom House

In 2019, Freedom House contributed to the disclosure of a number of Israeli practices, such as restricting the movement of the population, demolishing homes and public facilities, restricting civil and political freedoms and the continued expansion of settlements, while granting settlers the same rights enjoyed by Israelis in Israel. The organization also criticized the level of freedoms in the areas administered by the PA.¹⁰³

5. Human Rights Watch

Human Rights Watch reports for 2018–2019 included reference to the following:¹⁰⁴

- a. Enforcing severe and discriminatory restrictions on the human rights of Palestinians.
- b. Restricting the movement of people and goods into and out of GS.
- c. Facilitating the unlawful transfer of Israeli citizens to settlements in the occupied WB.
- d. The use of excessive lethal force by Israeli forces stationed on the Israeli side of the fences separating GS and Israel.
- e. The Israeli army launched intermittent air strikes and artillery shelling against the GS during the period 30/3–19/11/2019, killing 37 Palestinian demonstrators protesting for Palestinian rights in GS.
- f. Israel continued to maintain its more than decade-long effective closure of GS, exacerbated by Egyptian restrictions on its own border with GS, limiting access

to water and electricity (households in GS received power for between 4 and 5 hours a day on average during most of the year).

- g. The Israeli authorities continued to expand settlements in the occupied WB, and to discriminate systematically against Palestinians and in favor of settlers, in providing services, allowing freedom of movement, and issuing building permits, among other actions.
- h. The occupation authorities continued to demolish hundreds of Palestinian homes and properties, forcibly displacing large numbers of Palestinians.

6. Reporters Without Borders

Based on all the inhumane procedures outlined in the reports of international NGOs, in May 2018 Reporters Without Borders formally asked the ICC to investigate what it regarded as war crimes committed by the Israel army against Palestinian journalists covering protests in Gaza since late March 2018.¹⁰⁵

7. International Public Opinion Polling Institutions

The Palestine issue has been under the scope of many specialized international public opinion polling institutions. Polling results mostly indicate that there is a linear decline of popular sympathy with Israeli policies, as evident in the following models:

- a. Of 22 countries, Israel was the fourth-most-disliked nation.¹⁰⁶
- b. Shifts in the US perception of Israelis in 2019:¹⁰⁷
 - 1. 77% of Republicans and 57% of Democrats have favorable opinions of Israel's people.
 - 2. 61% of Republicans and 26% of Democrats have favorable opinions of Israel's government.
 - 3. Only 27% of young Republicans (under 30 years) viewed Israel's government favorably compared to 57% among those over 65, and "This trend is something important to watch," according to a lecturer at the Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya.¹⁰⁸
- c. The position of the Israelis towards the UN: 65% of Israelis have negative view of the UN compared to 26% of respondents worldwide.¹⁰⁹
- d. 35% of Europeans said supporters of Israel use accusations of "anti-Semitism" to shut down criticism.¹¹⁰

- e. 71% of people in 24 countries opposed Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the unified capital of Israel and thereby move the US embassy there, compared to 11% who supported the decision. Concerning the Europeans, 55% opposed the decision, while the lowest opposition rate was in the Ivory Coast at 27%.¹¹¹
- f. In a poll of French public opinion conducted by the French Institute of Public Opinion in 2019, it was found that 57% of the French people surveyed had a negative image of Israel, 69% had a negative image of Zionism, and 71% believed that Israel has a heavy responsibility for the lack of talks with the Palestinians.¹¹²
- g. 37 former European foreign ministers representing 19 European countries signed a letter criticizing Israeli policies, and demanding a European stance in this context, especially as "the current US administration has departed from longstanding US policy and distanced itself from established international legal norms. It has so far recognized only one side's claims to Jerusalem and demonstrated a disturbing indifference to Israeli settlement expansion." They called on Europe to "embrace and promote a plan that respects the basic principles of international law as reflected in the agreed EU parameters for a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," including "the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel on borders based on the pre-1967 lines," while making "security arrangements that address legitimate concerns and respect the sovereignty of each side and with an agreed, fair solution to the question of Palestine refugees." The letter warned that the situation in Palestine was "sliding into a one-state reality of unequal rights."¹¹³

Thirteenth: Future Implications

Israel is facing several opportunities and challenges in its international relations, and its response will vary depending on the issue itself and a set of future changes, the most important of which are:

1. The results of the US presidential elections in 2020, as President Trump's chances of winning a second term do not seem reassuring to the Israeli side. There is instability in his administration and the Democrats have been trying to isolate him. Consequently, the US stance may return to its pre-Trump status.

However, if Trump wins and continues with his current policy, some problems may arise between Israel and the US regarding the Chinese-Israeli relations, as was indicated by some US officials, especially regarding cooperation in Israeli infrastructure facilities within the BRI framework.¹¹⁴

2. The victory of the pro-Israel Conservative Party in the UK elections—which were held due to disagreements over Brexit—was not in the Palestinians’ interests, whose rights have been supported by the opposition Labour Party leadership. This means more US-British coordination will increase pressure on the Palestinians in the future.

3. Britain’s exit from the EU means imbalances within the European decision-making body, which is against Israel’s interests. For the UK was the country most supportive of Israel within the EU, and its exit might weaken the support given to Israel, given that Britain had a significant role in the Union.

4. The continued expansion of the Israeli-Chinese relations and the Israeli-Indian relations, in light of the deterioration of Arab diplomacy regarding the Palestine issue, could further complicate the international situation for the Palestinian side.

5. The change in the Brazilian presidency will probably mean the BRICS have internal political contradictions, and might be faced with:

- a. The possibility of Brazil withdrawing or freezing its BRICS membership—taking into account its weight in Latin America—especially if its differences with China and Russia escalate over Brazilian support of Trump’s policies towards Venezuela, Bolivia and other leftist governments in Latin America.
- b. The possibility of Brazil, with its new leadership, adapting to the BRICS decisions, according to specific constraints. This was clear in the statements of China and Brazil during the organization’s summit in November 2019, where it was important to take into consideration that China is Brazil’s prime trade partner. These conditions may lead to mitigating the Brazilian president’s bias towards Israel, or they may lead the BRICS to avoid issuing certain positions on the Palestine issue, especially in light of the great divergence between the positions of Brazil and the rest of the member states, thus constituting a major loss to the Palestinian side.

Fourteenth: Recommendations

Based on the above, it is necessary to work in the following directions:

1. The need for international or regional NGOs to give more attention to international public opinion, especially in European countries, where the Palestinian and Arab communities would work more on lobbying in these countries and Latin America. In this context, it is necessary to distribute the results of international public opinion polls, as much as possible, to international institutions and international governmental and non-governmental organizations, and the results of UN voting and levels of condemnation of Israeli policy to intergovernmental organizations.
2. Increasing dialogue with pro-Palestine political forces known in:
 - a. China: Here it is necessary to establish a specialized intellectual cell to identify the most pro-Palestine Communist leaders and contact them, while focusing on Chinese concerns about US-Israeli relations.
 - b. India: The Indian National Congress, with its traditional positions, is one of the most important pro-Palestine forces in India. It also has its extensions in Indian society and might return to power again, which should be noted and invested in.
 - c. Russia: The Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) (espouses nationalist ideology) are the most sympathetic forces with Palestinian rights. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on developing relations with them, especially their intellectuals, such as the famous Russian thinker Aleksandr Dugin, who has significant influence on President Putin.¹¹⁵
 - d. The need to study what we have concluded in this chapter, that international support of Palestinian rights increases in periods of confrontation with the occupation and deteriorates with the relaxation of resistance activity.
 - e. The need to take decisive stances by the PA and the resistance forces regarding any unauthorized Palestinian participation in international conferences, as was the case when Palestinian personalities participated in the Bahrain workshop. Such participation might have more serious consequences than those appearing at first glance.
 - f. The necessity of achieving the broadest possible international unity against US policies, including the so-called “Deal of the Century.”

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This Report

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

This report is the result of collaborative work between 14 experts and researchers. In eight chapters, it addresses the internal Palestinian scene; Palestinian demographic and economic indicators; the situation in Jerusalem and the holy sites; the specifics of Israeli aggression, Palestinian resistance and the peace process; the complexities of Israeli-Palestinian dynamics, including the internal situation in Israel; and Palestine's Arab, Islamic and international relations.

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

Prof. Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh

The Palestine Strategic Report 2018 – 2019



Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies & Consultations

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