

The Palestine Strategic Report 2020 – 2021



Edited By

Prof. Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh



Al-Zaytouna Centre For Studies & Consultations

Chapter One

The Internal Palestinian Scene

E-mail: info@alzaytouna.net

Website: www.alzaytouna.net

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The Internal Palestinian Scene

Introduction

The years 2020 and 2021 are organically linked to what stood before, including protracted Palestinian progression since the Palestinian schism of 2007, in terms of the continued divisions, and the inability of the Palestinian leadership to confront the major challenges that together pose an existential threat to the Palestine issue. Yet these two years saw a striking number of significant developments, most importantly the Sword of Jerusalem Battle (dubbed by Israel Operation Guardian of the Walls). The confrontation mobilized Palestinians across the borders of mandate Palestine and in the Diaspora and rallied them around their option of resistance, bringing renewed hope in the possibility of the Palestine issue regaining some of its status. In stark contrast, the internal political paralysis worsened, as the Palestinian Authority (PA) leadership insisted on monopolising power. Indeed, although 2020 ended with an agreement between the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) and Fatah on establishing a national partnership through elections, 2021 ended with the gap between the two main parties in Palestine having grown much wider, after the PA leadership cancelled the elections. The gap between the PA leadership and broad segments of the Palestinians also widened, following a series of incidents that exacerbated the domestic crises of the PA and pushed it to rely more than ever on external support.

First: Overview of the Two Years

The Palestinian factions entered 2020 distant from one another in the context of the normalization of the ongoing and open-ended political schism. The dissolution of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) at the end of 2018, and the selection of Mohammad Shtayyeh, the Fatah Central Committee member, in March 2019 to form a government to succeed that of Rami Hamdallah, were both an overturning of al-Shati' Agreement between Fatah and Hamas, which stipulated the formation of a National Consensus Government. These events are key to understanding internal national relations, for they indicated what future domestic policies the



PA would adopt over the subsequent two years, affecting even the judiciary. In July 2019, President Mahmud ‘Abbas formed the Supreme Judicial Council, and in January 2021, he issued decrees forming regular courts, amending the 2002 Law on the Judicial Authority, and formed administrative courts.¹ This meant the cementing of the PA’s domination of the executive authority, which in turn is focused on supporting the Palestinian presidency, after dissolving or marginalizing other institutions and branches of power.

These measures contradicted any stated intention of the PA to pave the way for a national partnership, end the division, fortify the Palestinian society against challenges, shore up national unity or frustrate the efforts to liquidate the Palestine issue. Nevertheless, another aspect of the picture began to emerge in early 2020, when the PA leadership announced steps aiming to rally Palestinian factions behind its plan to confront President Donald Trump’s “Deal of the Century.” Indeed, the PA leadership invited Hamas and the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine (PIJ), in addition to Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) factions naturally, to attend a “Palestinian leadership”—as the PA put it—meeting at the PA headquarters in al-Muqata‘a, Ramallah, to discuss the “Deal of the Century.”² Hamas and the PIJ agreed to attend the meeting.³

As has been the pattern for years, steps like these were followed with statements that overpromised or were unrealistic, such as claiming that the division was now over for the Palestinians who would engage henceforth in a popular struggle as one people, with one unified program, that would begin with changing the purely technocratic nature of the PA under the Oslo mandate. Such statements were made by Fatah leaders, after Hamas and the PIJ agreed to attend the 2020 meeting of the Palestinian leadership.⁴ The Hamas leadership also expressed some optimism, following the decision of President ‘Abbas to send a delegation of Palestinian factions from the West Bank (WB) to Gaza Strip (GS), saying this had laid the groundwork for a new stage of national dialogue.⁵ ‘Abbas himself was supposed to visit GS, to give these steps a higher degree of credibility. However, he changed his mind, and contented himself with the delegation attending without him.⁶ However, even the visit by the delegation was troubled, amid mutual accusations between the two sides about who was responsible for thwarting the president’s visit.⁷

While considering Palestinian internal relations in 2020–2021, we should bear in mind a set of facts and developments, and the PA’s conduct with regards to

them. These include the PA's measures in 2018 and 2019, which sought to put the control of the entire public sphere in the hands of the executive branch, which is exclusively run by 'Abbas' team and consequently Fatah. We must also think about the paralysis of the PA vis-à-vis the decisions of Donald Trump, which include: recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, in December 2017; transferring the United States of America (US) embassy from Tel Aviv to the holy city; cutting all US funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), in August 2018; attempting to revoke the status of Palestinian refugees to limit their numbers to no more than 40 thousand; closing the PLO representative office in Washington, in September 2018; and convening the Peace to Prosperity workshop held in Bahrain, in June 2019, which was seen as the economic prelude to Trump's big plans for the Palestine issue. In January 2020, Trump announced his Middle East Peace Plan, *Peace To Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People*, and in May 2020, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced his government's plan to annex areas of WB, based on Trump's plan.

The PA's policies and actions did not enable the completion of the reconciliation process or building of partnership and national unity. On the contrary, the PA dissolved the PLC and reformed the judiciary in a way that made it completely subordinate to the PA. The PA's response to US-Israeli measures was ineffective, even as they targeted the core of the Palestine issue itself. An unprecedented wave of normalizations between Israel and Arab countries followed. The PA was so dominant in the Palestinian arena that its negative energy in responding to the Trump-led developments was mirrored on the Palestinian street, while the Fatah movement, the spinal cord and main political component of the PA, did not show a serious pivot towards national reconciliation and unity, the re-formation of Palestinian institutions, and the repurposing of the PA's role. Instead, Fatah carried out a calculated manoeuvre that cost the PA leadership nothing, as it waited for the results of the US elections to produce a new administration in the White House.

The PA needed to fill the political vacuum pending the outcome of the election, and as a result, reconciliation talks continued from early 2020 until mid-2021. These talks took on multiple forms, from internal national appeals to regional and international initiatives and offers, bilateral agreements between Hamas and Fatah to launch popular resistance against the "Deal of the Century," and an agreement between the two parties and all national factions on completing the reconciliation



through staggered elections—legislative, presidential and the PLO’s Palestine National Council (PNC) elections. However, the PA President (with Fatah behind him) upended this agreement with the unilateral decision to abolish the elections. Consequently, the Palestinian scene entered a new phase of deadlock, with the PA’s purely technocratic role cemented, despite the early 2020 talk from PA leaders about changing this reality.

Second: The Mohammad Shtayyeh Government in the Heart of Crises

The formation of the Mohammad Shtayyeh government represented the overturning of al-Shati’ Agreement (2014), through the dismissal of the National Consensus Government, replacing it with a new government headed by a Fatah Central Committee member. This meant that this new government’s policies represent Fatah’s approach.

It is possible to say that the two years under scrutiny in this analysis were the worst for the Mohammad Shtayyeh government, whether because of the economic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing Israeli deductions from the clearance tax revenues, or the political and security developments in the Palestinian arena, especially after the cancellation of the elections and the death of Palestinian activist Nizar Banat. The two years were marked by the increased presence of PA security forces on the Palestinian scene, especially in the second half of 2021, prompting a number of rights groups to warn against a “descent into tyranny and authoritarianism, as a result of unilateralism of power, the hijacking of state institutions by powerful individuals, narrowing the scope of work of state institutions, and the denial of citizens’ rights to freedom of expression, opinion, assembly and organization.”

The rights groups also held the PA President Mahmud ‘Abbas and the government responsible for the “dangerous violations and assault on citizens through the security forces and plainclothes officers.” They called for putting the prime minister, as head of the cabinet and minister of interior at the time, on trial to be held accountable for the failure of his government to protect citizens’ rights; exercise responsibilities under the Palestinian Basic Law; deliver commitments on protecting the freedom of journalism, the right to peaceful assembly, freedom of

opinion, expression, and personal freedom; manage the current crisis; and protect rights and freedoms. These groups called for putting several police commanders on trial for the violations committed by their officers against the right of citizens to hold peaceful assemblies, and assaulting citizens through beatings, arrests and the use of excessive force. The rights groups held the civil public prosecutor responsible for “detaining participants in peaceful assemblies and putting them on trial for the mere exercise of their constitutional rights stipulated in the Basic Law.”⁸

The rights groups’ accusation that the Shtayyeh government was powerlessness was valid, because his government had the character of a caretaker cabinet, unable to make fundamental decisions on internal political affairs. Earlier, Shtayyeh had not been able to even fulfil his promise to pay the allocations for prisoners, saying the solution to this issue lay with the Palestinian president and the chief of General Intelligence Service (GIS).⁹

It is noteworthy that 63% of respondents to a poll conducted between 15 and 18/9/2021 said they believed the death of Nizar Banat was a deliberate killing by the Palestinian political or security leadership, not an individual error, while 69% believed that the PA measures in prosecuting Banat’s killers were insufficient, and 74% believed that the arrest of protesters demanding the prosecution of Banat’s killers was a violation of their freedoms and rights.¹⁰

Many Palestinian websites were also blocked following a decision by the Magistrate Court at the request of the public prosecutor, even as the Shtayyeh government called for the reversal of this decision.¹¹ This raised questions about who has the real decision-making powers on issues of citizens’ rights.

Furthermore, the salaries of Hamas lawmakers in the PLC continued to be unpaid, unlike those of the remaining PLC lawmakers. Lately, a decision was issued by the High Court of Justice (HCJ) reversing the decision to suspend the pension salaries of Hamas lawmakers, amid fears and concerns the government would not abide by the court order, despite being unappealable and immediately enforceable. The Ministry of Finance rejected seven requests by the court to submit lawmakers’ salary statements, and did not respond until lawyers resorted to using oral evidence and taking the testimonies of lawmakers from other parliamentary blocs.¹² Not long after, the Supreme Constitutional Court, a court with disputed legitimacy, issued a ruling invalidating Paragraph 3 of Article 54 of the Decree on Administrative Courts No. 41 of 2021, which stated that “the rulings issued by



the HCJ/ Court of Cassation, as an administrative court, do not accept appeal by any means of appeal.” The court made its ruling effective from the beginning of 2021, which effectively means cancelling the obligation of the HCJ’s ruling to the Minister of Finance to pay the salaries of Hamas deputies, without the possibility of appeal.¹³ This equated to the executive authority seeking further subjugation and domination of the judiciary.

As mentioned above, the Shtayyeh government came under sharp criticism following the killing of activist Nizar Banat by the PA’s security forces, with many parties calling for the sacking of the government and for it to be held legally accountable. Observers noted the PA’s confusion and dithering in dealing with the ramifications of Banat’s killing.¹⁴ After Banat’s killing, many reports talked about the possible sacking of the Shtayyeh government and appointment of another prime minister.¹⁵ Reports also spoke of potential cabinet reshuffles.¹⁶ However, the PA did not carry out a broad or even limited reshuffle, and did not appoint ministers to the interior and religious endowments ministries which had been vacant since the formation of the Shtayyeh government, and remained unfilled at the time of writing in early 2022.

In this context, it was noteworthy that the director of the Preventive Security Service (PSS) Ziyad Hab al-Reeh was appointed interior minister but was not replaced in the PSS.¹⁷ This suggested that the arrangements made resulted from the competition among the power centres in Fatah, involving the security establishment. Observers spoke about the rivalries between centers of powers inside Fatah and the PA over the succession of President ‘Abbas. This may partly explain the confusion around how to deal with the government’s crisis. Observers also speculated that a cabinet reshuffle may not have been sufficient for the PA to overcome the major dilemmas it was facing, especially considering the failures of its grand political project.¹⁸

Israeli media sources reported that the US, under new President Joseph (Joe) Biden’s administration, sent a “warning message” to President ‘Abbas demanding reforms in the PA and that he replaces the Shtayyeh government with another that would represent all Palestinians. The US administration, according to these Israeli sources, also demanded ‘Abbas to stop threatening to suspend agreements signed with Israel and stop playing games with Hamas, which had agreed to a technocratic government that would not force them to agree to the conditions of

the International Quartet. ‘Abbas has insisted that Hamas recognizes international resolutions and the Quartet’s conditions before forming a government of national unity. This suggests that one of the reasons for postponing a cabinet reshuffle was US and European opposition. The media reports said that the US proposal sent to the PA revolved around forming a technocratic government acceptable by Hamas, able to govern GS in a way that would facilitate reconstruction and the financial arrangements for Arab or international aid.¹⁹

With the year 2021 nearing its end, more reports came in of a financial crisis ravaging the PA. The PA needed \$400 million to overcome its financial crisis, amid warnings it may not be able to fulfil its commitments and would be forced to cut PA employees’ salaries,²⁰ despite having borrowed money from Israel at an earlier date. Shtayyeh’s government had also borrowed \$400 million in the first quarter (Q1) of 2020 from local banks to finance its emergency budget.²¹ The income of the tax authority had fallen from February to September 2020 by 70%, and in that same period foreign aid had dropped by 50%, leading to an increase in the volume of debt held by local banks by 7 billion shekels (about \$2 billion) up to that date, and 4.5 billion shekels (about \$1.3 billion) in external loans owed by the PA. This was in addition to 13 billion shekels (about \$3.8 billion) arrears to the private sector and the pension fund. The total debt of the PA up to that date was about 24.5 billion shekels (about \$7.1 billion),²² which rose to \$8 billion by August 2021.²³

This crisis and policy of cutting PA employee salaries came at a time of price inflation that raised the concerns of Palestinian citizens.²⁴ A report was later published by the State Audit Administrative Control Bureau (SAACB) on the presence of irregularities in many institutions of the PA, notably in the Anti-Corruption Commission, and the “Waqfet Ezz Fund,” which was formed by the Shtayyeh government to collect donations to confront the COVID-19 crisis.²⁵ The reports about a financial crisis and cuts to PA employees’ salaries was accompanied by the continuation of promotions to higher posts,²⁶ which steadily escalated the Treasury’s annual burden. Among what observers considered the major failures of the Shtayyeh government was the nearly expired COVID-19 vaccine deal made with Israel.²⁷

In the same context, President Mahmud ‘Abbas had issued a Decree Law in February 2020, amending the law on Salaries and Allowances of PLC members,²⁸ government members and governors; and another in April 2020 amending the



Public Retirement Law,²⁹ which, according to the Independent Commission on Human Rights,³⁰ gave additional financial and non-financial privileges to a category of senior state employees, specifically minister-rank posts of commission, public institution, and equivalent chairpersons. This added additional burdens on the Treasury and undermined the financial position of the Palestine Pension Fund Authority (PPFA), at a time when the public budget was undergoing a crippling financial crisis and dangerous deficits, due to malicious Israeli measures and the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. President ‘Abbas subsequently repealed the decrees.³¹

Politically, paradoxically, the Shtayyeh government participated in the Dubai Expo event,³² which prompted the Palestinian [Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions] BDS National Committee (BNC) to denounce them, considering participation to be an encouragement of Arab states’ official normalization with Israel, in violation of PLO resolutions supporting boycott of, and ending normalization with, Israel.³³ The PA government’s participation in the Dubai Expo took place after the Shtayyeh government itself had said it would not attend the event, in line with the PA’s backtracking on its political positions, such as its claim of suspending security coordination and agreements signed with Israel.

Local Elections

The Shtayyeh’s government issued a decision on 6/9/2021 to hold the first phase of the Local Council Elections in WB and GS in 387 localities, which are classified as C and village councils. It was later decided to exclude local bodies in GS (numbering 11) from the first phase, to be included instead in the second phase from 26/3/2022, bringing the number of localities covered in the first phase elections to 376 in WB, to be held on 11/12/2021.³⁴

Hamas and PIJ, in separate statements, rejected the PA’s decision to hold local elections after cancelling the legislative elections, saying the decision had not resulted from a national agreement, and instead indicated a continuation of the policy of unilateralism.³⁵ The PIJ said that any elections under occupation constituted a new distraction, and an escape from the most important obligation, which was rebuilding the national project according to a new and comprehensive strategy to manage the conflict with the enemy on the one hand, and form a national reference to manage internal affairs,³⁶ on the other hand.

However, as observers note, Hamas participated in several local elections in an unofficial capacity, to enhance the presence of its cadres and elements in social and civil circles. Therefore, its rejection was a political rejection, to delegitimize the PA's unilateral decisions.³⁷ This meant that the results may not reflect the true popularity of the political parties, as much as they reflect social complexities in civil societies and the influence of clan circles, which made the political presence weak in these elections. A very limited presence by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Palestinian National Initiative Movement and the Palestinian People's Party (PPP)³⁸ was observed. It is noted that the PA's decision to hold these elections was taken to fill the political vacuum with general elections that were cost-free, politically and helped improve the PA's image locally and internationally following the cancellation of the general elections. Remarkably, the PA organized the elections in stages, by holding elections for village councils in which the Fatah movement had higher chances of success first, before the cities, whose elections were postponed to the next stage.³⁹

The results of the local elections came contrary to Fatah's hopes, as independent lists won 71%, while the partisan lists won just 29%. Some lists affiliated with the Fatah movement won by acclamation. The results showed that the elections of 154 local bodies took place in different WB regions, while 162 local bodies were won by acclamation.⁴⁰ Despite this, Fatah declared victory in these elections, which Hamas circles responded to by saying that there was no competition between Fatah and Hamas, but rather between Fatah lists and lists belonging to families and independents in which some members of Hamas participated in their personal capacities. However, according to circles in Hamas, it was the independents and family lists in which some elements of the movement participated that really won, and these circles read the result a resounding defeat for the PA-affiliated movement, and an indication of the popular rejection of its economic, political and social policies.⁴¹



Third: The Path of Reconciliation and Putting the Palestinian Political House in Order

The Palestinian president called for national meetings aimed at coordinating efforts to confront the “Deal of the Century,” which, had the step been serious and truly facilitated by the PA bureaucracy and its ruling elite, would have been able to end the schism and build a national process for the struggle against common enemies. These calls were followed by optimism that the schism would be overcome, that President ‘Abbas would visit GS, and a GS delegation would visit WB in return. Regional and international mediation initiatives between the two movements also re-emerged, as happens from time to time, including the meeting between Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov with two separate delegations from Fatah and Hamas, with the aim of “advancing the reconciliation file” and “discussing developments on the Palestine issue.”⁴²

In early March 2020, Hamas presented four proposals to the Russian mediators to achieve Palestinian reconciliation: The first proposal was the holding of legislative and presidential elections to be followed by PNC elections. The second was to hold a national meeting outside Ramallah, that is, away from Israeli control, so that the Palestinian factions could participate freely. The third was to hold a meeting of the secretaries-general of the Palestinian factions, and the fourth was to form a national unity government with the agreement of all the Palestinian factions.⁴³

Other efforts not far from regional and international tracks also took place, including popular efforts, such as the initiative of Palestinians in Europe,⁴⁴ and the initiative to end the Palestinian division, launched by the “Arab Peace Group.”⁴⁵ Despite the significance of these initiatives, and the continuation of work on this issue, the same ideas continued to be repeated, including Hamas’ proposals to the Russians. In other words, the crisis was not only a crisis of ideas, vision and paths, but also a crisis of will, due to the complexity of the Palestine issue, where the peace process led to the consolidation of the PA as a technocratic entity and an end in itself rather than a means for achieving an independent Palestinian state capable of preserving the Palestinian fundamentals.

The complications of the Palestinian political scene intensified due to the policies pursued by the PA following the Palestinian schism, the emergence of a ruling elite who benefited in these circumstances, and the repercussions of these

dynamics on the overall national political, social and economic situation. Such conditions played a role in hindering the will and ability of people to carry on the national struggle.

However, a shift emerged and appeared to be more serious, based on the Palestinians' objective need to confront the plans of the Trump administration, its allies on the Israeli right and some Arab countries. Palestinians also needed to confront the annexation plan announced by Benjamin Netanyahu, who had threatened to annex the Jordan Valley and large areas in WB.

This shift appeared in a press conference held on 2/7/2020 between Hamas's Deputy Chief Saleh al-'Aruri and Jibril Rajoub, a member of the Fatah Central Committee. Its speech, formulations and initiatives appeared coherent, as if they were the results of previous meetings and arrangements. Observers' hopes were raised that this time there might be better opportunities to end the Palestinian division on a new basis.

The agreement announced in that press conference was based on confronting challenges together, requiring the rearrangement of the Palestinian street to launch popular resistance against annexation and settlement expansion plans, after neutralizing internal Palestinian contradictions.⁴⁶ This was seen as an opportunity to develop national relations on the basis of resistance, not rivalry over an Authority controlled by Israel, although the need to agree on a mechanism for elections was also noted at the press conference.⁴⁷ This meant certain aspects of the dialogue remained within the traditional scope of Hamas-Fatah talks. However, the talk about popular resistance, and the optimistic tone in the speeches of the two movements' leaders, boosted optimism among observers, a boost that failed to consider the history of differences between the two movements, and the PA's policies on the ground that contradicted this rhetoric and its optimistic tones.

After this meeting, contacts continued between Fatah and Hamas to end the division.⁴⁸ Leaders in the two movements later expressed even more optimism, talking about coordinating to organize movements on the ground in WB and GS, and arrange a joint program of popular resistance.⁴⁹ This affected the prisoners affiliated to the two movements in Israeli prisons. Fatah prisoners declared a series of joint protest actions inside prisons alongside other prisoners including Hamas prisoners.⁵⁰ After that, a joint statement by the two movements was issued from inside Israeli prisons, blessing the "steps towards rapprochement and understanding



between the leaders of the two movements to confront the Zio-US annexation plan.”⁵¹ Profound insight was not required to realize that the prisoners’ actions were linked to the arrangements reached by the leaders of the two movements, led by the Rajoub-al-‘Aruri talks.

Nevertheless, these steps remained symbolic, according to Hamas Chief Isma‘il Haniyyah.⁵² Haniyyah saw these steps as important but emphasized the need for direct dialogue between the two movements to continue without mediation. He noted the importance of reaching a detailed agreement on steps to confront the annexation plan. There were subsequent talks about building on the symbolic steps towards more practical ones, such as ‘Abbas and Haniyyah addressing the Palestinian people in a popular rally,⁵³ or national festival in GS, which did not happen⁵⁴ despite prolonged talks about organizing it. Leaders in Hamas said that the delay in holding the rally was due to technical and logistical issues,⁵⁵ while popular protests were held in WB and GS against United Arab Emirates (UAE)-Israel normalization, which both movements attended.⁵⁶ Fatah’s leadership accused the UAE of seeking to thwart rapprochement between Hamas and Fatah.⁵⁷ Up until that time, there was Palestinian consensus on denouncing the UAE normalization with Israel, with both ‘Abbas and Haniyyah denouncing it in a phone call.⁵⁸

These efforts developed into more serious steps with a meeting of secretary-generals of Palestinian factions in Ramallah and Beirut simultaneously, with the participation of all Palestinian factions without exception.⁵⁹ This was an old idea agreed initially during the Palestinian dialogue conference in Cairo in March 2005, when a committee was formed out of the secretary-generals of the factions called the Interim Leadership Framework, tasked with rebuilding the PLO. President ‘Abbas was entrusted with the power of convening this committee,⁶⁰ which happened only twice in the following years.⁶¹ The idea of an Interim Leadership Framework was cemented in the agreements of 2011⁶² and the Doha Declaration in 2012,⁶³ as well as al-Shati’ Agreement in 2014.⁶⁴ However, the meeting of the secretary-generals this time (2020) did not convene as stipulated in those agreements, in that it was not convened to rebuild the PLO as the supreme institution that organizes the policies related to the conflict with Israel and the affairs of the Palestinian people. Instead, it was convened to enhance rapprochement between the factions, especially Fatah and Hamas, and pave the way for building a national consensus on confronting the challenges of the current stage.

The repeated experience of disrupting the Interim Leadership Framework leads us to question the seriousness of the PA/Fatah leadership to hold this meeting after waiting for many years, and whether it reflected serious shifts in the political choices of this leadership, or perhaps it was just a manoeuvre pending the results of the US elections. One way to know is by examining the speech given by President ‘Abbas during the meeting and see whether it contained a shift in policies based on this national cover. ‘Abbas’s speech affirmed the same old policies, calling for an international “peace” conference under the umbrella of the United Nations (UN), that would lead to negotiations on the basis of international resolutions and the Arab Peace Initiative. The speech rejected the exclusivity of US mediation, interpreting the current deadlock as the fault of the US administration and the Israeli government. In other words, ‘Abbas did not see the problem in the peace process per se, and at the same time called for the formation of a unified leadership of “popular resistance.”⁶⁵

‘Abbas’s speech was in harmony with his declared positions since the start of the rapprochement with Hamas, and the theoretical announcement of a shift in the PA’s policies. Indeed, President ‘Abbas previously affirmed his adherence to this political path, in a meeting of the “Palestinian leadership” convened in Ramallah in August 2020. ‘Abbas renewed his commitment to what he calls “international legitimacy,” international agreements signed, the resolutions of Arab and Islamic summits and the fight against “terrorism,”⁶⁶ without explaining his understanding of “terrorism,” a label used by Israel and some international powers against the Palestinian resistance. Moreover, the signed agreements that the Palestinian president is committed to, compel the PA to crackdown on the Palestinian resistance. This indicates that the PA does not intend to alter its path, or at least is unable to pave the way for a shift in this direction, even rhetorically, even when based on a national consensus established by the meeting of secretary-generals.

Hamas Chief Isma‘il Haniyyah and PIJ Secretary General Ziad Nakhleh, gave markedly different speeches. Haniyyah called for adopting comprehensive resistance, including military resistance, and withdrawing from the Oslo Accords.⁶⁷ For his part, Nakhleh⁶⁸ renewed his movement’s Ten-Point Initiative,⁶⁹ which it proposed back in 2016. The initiative calls for renouncing the Oslo Accords, withdrawing recognition of Israel and giving priority to the resistance, including armed resistance.



We can also evaluate this meeting through its outcomes: It was agreed to adopt popular resistance for the current stage, form a unified national committee for its leadership, form a committee of national figures who can present a strategic vision for ending the division, and implement reconciliation and partnership within the PLO framework in no more than five weeks. This committee must present its recommendations to the forthcoming session of the Palestinian Central Council (PCC) with the participation of secretary-generals.⁷⁰

The communique of the meeting unanimously adopted the outcomes of the National Conciliation Document of the Prisoners of 2006, affirming the establishment of an independent, fully sovereign state on the borders of June 1967, with Jerusalem as its capital. The communique also affirmed the need for a solution to the refugee question and to implement Resolution 194 which stipulates the right of refugees to return and to be compensated.⁷¹

The importance of this meeting lay in its uniqueness. Indeed, it was the first of its kind to be convened in many years. Its outcomes were an opportunity to explore whether a real shift had taken place in the PA's policies or not. For this reason, the decisions and speeches revealed a clear disparity in the evaluation of the meeting, between those who saw it, despite the different stances expressed in it, an opportunity to seek a shared destiny, and capitalize on the moment to build a serious and effective popular resistance; and those who saw it as the continued domination of "peace process" thinking.⁷² In general, the outcomes of the meeting appear to be result of bilateral agreements between Hamas and Fatah. According to some observers, this made it seem as though the pro-peace process leaders had become the political reference for Palestinian political action, apparent from the remarks by Isma'il Haniyyah who said that the reference point for the committees would be President 'Abbas. The meeting also failed to demand the PLO withdraw its recognition of Israel or renounce the Arab Peace Initiative,⁷³ albeit PIJ affirmed its rejection of the two-state solution and any references in the final communique to Palestinian statehood being limited to the borders of 1967.⁷⁴

The practical results of the meeting did not satisfy expectations. Indeed, the meeting, given the level of the challenges that prompted it (Israel's annexation plan, Trump's plan and the normalization with Arab countries) was expected to produce serious shifts, not to be a rhetorical exercise that deferred important decisions to committees and rehashed the same tired political ideas.⁷⁵ In the practical context,

the self-styled Unified National Leadership of Popular Resistance issued its first statement on 13/9/2020, calling for a number of symbolic events on 15, 17, and 18/9/2020.⁷⁶ In the view of some observers,⁷⁷ this reflected a poor awareness of the serious situation and the requirements for serious popular resistance. Consequently, there was a poor popular response, which had already been weakened in previous years owing to the PA's policies, including the dismantlement of resistance factions and the general frameworks of patriotic action. It exposed the lack of seriousness and the adherence to the same old politics, as part of a calculated manoeuvre pending the results of the US elections.

It should be noted here that among the preludes to this meeting was that in May 2020, the PA declared the suspension of security coordination with Israel, in response to the annexation plan and Israel's continued deduction of PA's clearance tax revenues. Other preludes included positive statements; a meeting of the "Palestinian leadership" in Ramallah attended by Hamas and PIJ; the joint press conference of al-'Aruri and Rajoub; and finally, the meeting of the secretary-generals, which declared the suspension of security coordination. This raised the expectations of some observers that a shift could take place in the Palestinian situation, in addition to media announcements in this direction made by the two major parties' leaders.⁷⁸ However, the facts on the ground linked to the PA's infrastructure, policies and operational role, continuously lowered expectations, the bleak outlook confirmed by subsequent developments, including the return to security coordination as will be tackled later.

The bilateral dialogue between Hamas and Fatah continued, culminating with a major shift that covered managing the reconciliation process based on popular resistance and altering the function of the PA, to holding general elections. Indeed, on 20/9/2020, Fatah leader Jibril al-Rajoub announced that legislative elections would be held followed by presidential elections, and the PNC's re-formation, followed by a national coalition government.⁷⁹ This meant that their agreement went beyond previous reconciliation accords, which had stipulated simultaneous legislative, presidential, and PNC elections, meaning that Hamas had given up its demand for simultaneous elections.

Indeed, an agreement was later announced between Fatah and Hamas in Istanbul, Turkey, that there would be legislative elections on the basis of proportional representation, followed by PA presidential elections, and PNC elections on an



“interlinked, gradual” basis within six months.⁸⁰ But while the Fatah Central Committee ratified the Istanbul accords,⁸¹ Hamas went back to demanding comprehensive and simultaneous elections, contrary to what had been agreed in Turkey.⁸² This could have been caused by the lack of prior agreement within the leadership of Hamas on al-‘Aruri-Rajoub accords. According to statements made by Fatah leaders⁸³ and the PLO,⁸⁴ Hamas put forward new demands related to the elections and civil servants in GS, reigniting rows and accusations regarding the obstruction of reconciliation. Indeed, while Fatah leaders held Hamas responsible for disrupting reconciliation,⁸⁵ media sources published information showing that Fatah had backtracked from the reconciliation efforts following the victory of Joe Biden in the US election.⁸⁶ The round of talks between the two sides in Cairo failed to solve the crisis, and the chances of reconciliation lowered further after the PA resumed security coordination with Israel,⁸⁷ less than six months after declaring its end.

The two movements continued to exchange accusations about the obstruction of reconciliation, until January 2021, when Hamas agreed to hold elections in stages, without the condition of simultaneity that it had been trying to uphold.⁸⁸ President ‘Abbas received a letter from Haniyyah reflecting this new position, after Hamas said it had received guarantees from Egypt, Qatar, Turkey and Russia that the PA would hold the outstanding elections—presidential and PNC elections—within six months.⁸⁹

At this, on 15/1/2021, President ‘Abbas issued a presidential decree⁹⁰ setting the date for elections, which would start with PLC elections on 22/5/2021, followed by presidential elections on 31/7/2021, and PNC elections on 31/8/2021. The decree was followed by a meeting of the Palestinian factions in Cairo on 8–9/2/2021, which released a final communique containing recommendations based on the same ‘Abbas decree. This meant that the Palestinian factions agreed to this decree becoming their reference point. Indeed, President ‘Abbas’s decree, which set the dates for elections, was based on the decision of the Constitutional Court that dissolved the PLC, and Decree No. 1 of 2007 on General Elections and its Amendments. In other words, the factions, especially Hamas, had made a huge compromise.

The result of the factions’ compromise was the legitimacy of the dissolution of the PLC and the legitimacy of the Constitutional Court was implicitly recognized,

after it had been a subject of legal doubts, not just by Hamas and the other factions, but also by the majority of legal organizations in Palestine.⁹¹ The statement also dealt with President ‘Abbas as though he was the reference for the factions. For example, the statement recommended to President ‘Abbas to “look into amending the following points of the Electoral Law: Reducing the registration fees and security deposits, resignation requests, non-conviction certificates, women’s participation and lowering the voting age,”⁹² despite the fact that President ‘Abbas, as representative of Fatah, is one of the partisans.

The communique overall meant an agreement between Hamas and Fatah was reached. But while Fatah was insisting on its vision of staggered elections, President ‘Abbas as the reference frame, and the legal reference frames of the entire process, Hamas appeared to be reassured by the promises of Fatah leadership. For this reason, neither in that meeting nor in the one that followed on 16/3/2021,⁹³ did Hamas secure any of its demands, such as PA payment of its deputies, whose salaries were suspended. This suggests Hamas had an incentive at the time to hold elections based on bilateral agreements with Fatah. Multiple sources reported an implicit agreement between the two to run for elections on a shared list,⁹⁴ in return for Hamas backing ‘Abbas in the presidential election. While this may have been understandable at a certain moment, when the PA declared the suspension of security coordination with Israel, it is no longer so after the PA resumed this coordination and returned to the same path that is fundamentally contradictory to the path of Hamas and most factions, led by the PFLP and PIJ. At any rate, this was never a realistic prospect.⁹⁵ Eventually, each side decided to form a separate electoral list.

We should recall here that there was a boost for this direction when President ‘Abbas issued a decree to strengthen public freedoms, where the articles provide for “banning the detention, arrest, prosecution of, or holding to account individuals for reasons relating to the freedom of opinion and political affiliation”; “the immediate release of detainees or prisoners held in custody against the backdrop of practicing the freedom of opinion, political affiliation or for any other partisan reasons in all of the territories of Palestine”; and “consolidating the freedom to kick-start an election campaign of all its traditional and electronic forms, including publishing, printing, and holding and funding political and election-related meetings and conferences, in accordance with the law.”⁹⁶



As the electoral blocs began to register themselves for the elections, 36 lists were registered, including independent and partisan lists.⁹⁷ In these elections, the Palestinian left was divided into four main lists, and the Fatah movement was divided into three lists; one loyal to President Mahmud ‘Abbas, another represented the dismissed deputy of Fatah, Muhammad Dahlan, and the third represented an alliance between the two members of the Fatah Central Committee, Nasser al-Qudwa, and Marwan Barghouti, the prisoner in Israeli prison. Al-Qudwa was subsequently dismissed from Fatah.⁹⁸

However, the enthusiasm ended on 30/4/2021, with President Mahmud ‘Abbas postponing the elections, in a formula that was closer to cancellation, under the pretext of an inability to hold them in Jerusalem.⁹⁹ Naturally, Hamas rejected the decision, and considered it sabotage of the path of partnership and national consensus, taking the entire national situation and the popular and national consensus for the agenda of a particular faction hostage. Hamas called for imposing elections in Jerusalem on Israel and discussing ways to do so, rather than just surrendering to the will of the occupation.¹⁰⁰ The decision was also rejected by most of the Palestinian factions, electoral lists, and the Palestinian people at home and abroad. This undermined the sliver of trust and credibility ‘Abbas and the PA leadership had left among Palestinian political factions and in the general population. Paradoxically, the decision to postpone the elections came during the Damascus Gate Uprising, when it was possible, according to many forces, to exploit the situation in Jerusalem to impose elections in the city. Many independent blocs¹⁰¹ and Palestinian parties¹⁰² agreed with Hamas, in rejecting the cancellation of elections.

The decision to postpone the elections was criticised by many observers, given the division of Fatah, and the fragmentation of the votes of its electoral base in favor of multiple lists, while Hamas presented one coherent list after the failure of the idea of a joint list, through which President ‘Abbas could have guaranteed the results of the electoral process in advance.¹⁰³

Many observers were also skeptical about the seriousness of President ‘Abbas’ call for elections, given a number of factors, including his history of calling for elections without actually holding them; the nature and structure of the PA and its emerging ruling elite; and the PA’s decisions that excluded the legislative authority with its political and consensual role, and re-engineered the judiciary to ensure

the enforcement of the decisions of the executive authority, whose power remains concentrated in ‘Abbas’s hands. In addition, the PA did not take any actual steps indicating a practical shift in policies. The salaries of Hamas deputies remained suspended, as did the salaries of several Hamas prisoners, in addition to the PA blocking a number of websites affiliated with Hamas, Muhammad Dahlan’s faction, and other independent websites.

Many observers believed that the elections would not be a valid entry point for reconciliation, because the PA’s domain in WB remains entirely under Israeli hegemony, which may mean reproducing the schism again once the PA regains its legitimacy through legislative elections, without proceeding with the rest of the electoral commitments.¹⁰⁴

The cancellation of the elections was the conclusion of this long story, which began with convergence and a change in rhetoric, proceeded to the agreement on popular resistance and ended with the cancelled elections. This conclusion not only restored the acrimony between the two movements, but also brought the Palestinian scene to stalemate again. It renewed the PA’s functional role, by strengthening security coordination with Israel and returning it to a policy of political prosecutions, accelerated by the cancellation of the elections being swiftly followed by the Sword of Jerusalem Battle, which had significant repercussions at the national level, and huge implications for the interactions of the Palestine issue with the region and the world.

The path of reconciliation and elections, with their milestones and outcomes, are a prelude to the rest of this chapter’s sections, especially the internal conditions of the factions, their internal relations, and the issue of security coordination, which were touched on in this section. We next discuss national relations, then security coordination in 2020–2021.

Fourth: The National Relations of Palestinian Factions and Forces

The previous section on the national reconciliation, and the next section on security coordination, give a glimpse of how the failure of the reconciliation process and the continuation of security coordination with Israel have contributed to the deterioration of the general national situation. This is both in terms of national



relations between forces and factions, and in terms of the overall Palestinian situation, including the internal conditions of Palestinian factions. Matters were not limited to relations between Hamas and Fatah, and they went beyond security coordination and included political manipulation to weaken or blackmail national forces, including some PLO members. Indeed, the issues analyzed in the previous two sections and the issues analyzed in this section should not be viewed as separate, given the interplay between them.

As previously mentioned, in early 2020, Hamas and the PIJ attended a meeting of the “Palestinian leadership,” a term used by PA leaders and Fatah to describe a meeting that usually brings together members of the PLO Executive Committee, Fatah Central Committee, and the secretary generals of some factions as well as the leaders of security forces. Sometimes, Hamas and Fatah leaders are also invited to this framework meeting. In May 2020, Hamas and the PIJ refused to attend this meeting called by the PA leadership.¹⁰⁵ This has reflected as fluctuations in the reconciliation process and how stakeholders had dealt with it. It also reflected a lack of conviction in the seriousness of the PA’s policies and the usefulness of such meetings, which did not produce consensus on the steps required to confront the huge challenges faced, despite the fact that 2020 was rife with optimistic rhetoric about concluding reconciliation and unifying the Palestinian efforts to confront Trump’s plan.

Hamas and the PIJ demanded the convening of the PLO leadership framework, to agree on a national strategy to confront the annexation plan and the US project.¹⁰⁶ This reflected the two movements’ shared conclusion that the previous meeting had not been fruitful, and that attending such meetings gave legitimacy to the tactics of stalling and waiting, pursued by the PA leadership. Moreover, the PFLP representative withdrew from the meeting after a row with President ‘Abbas. The PFLP said it withdrew from the meeting “in objection against the political statement that remained trapped in the quagmire of negotiations and the singular focus on the international community, while renouncing resistance and unity” and to protest what the PFLP called “bullying by the president and his bodyguard.”¹⁰⁷

The PFLP had complained of a financial embargo imposed by the “powerful leadership,” as it termed it, with the aim of weakening, blackmailing and forcing it to compromise on the rights of the Palestinian people and their fundamental rights, calling on the “powerful leadership” to depart from the Oslo approach and

instead implement decisions of national consensus, especially “rebuilding the PLO on patriotic, democratic bases that restore the national project and end the state of monopoly and domination over the destiny of the Palestinian people.”¹⁰⁸

The row between the PFLP and Fatah came amid press reports about a “Fatah war on the PFLP,” citing a persistent campaign by the PA and its security forces against PFLP cadres. The media reports claimed that the campaign reached the point of “security collaboration with the occupation and a regular exchange of information on all issues related to the PFLP, both at the level of its structure and organization, and its acting leadership in the West Bank, after the wide arrests made by the occupation against its leaders and influential cadres following the Bubin attack that hurt the occupation.” This was in addition to the PA’s efforts to “dry up the financial resources of the PFLP,” according to the reports. The media reports claimed that the arrest of PFLP leader Khalida Jarrar by Israel came in this context, in which she paid a price for her opposition to Palestinian President Mahmud ‘Abbas.¹⁰⁹ The PFLP had accused Palestinian President Mahmud ‘Abbas of cutting the financial allocations from the PLO to PFLP, describing it as an act of piracy.¹¹⁰

Interestingly, this row and tension came alongside rhetoric about a climate of rapprochement and reconciliation, and talk of working to hold legislative elections, as explained previously. This reinforces the view that PA rhetoric against Israel, the US administration, or regarding favouring reconciliation with Hamas was a manoeuvre to stall for time, as evidenced in the meeting of the Palestinian leadership mentioned above (May 2020). Indeed, the sources said that the meeting witnessed a verbal altercation, with attendants silenced and threatened with the use of force to stop them from speaking. During the meeting, President ‘Abbas refused to answer questions about how he intended to implement the decisions he announced, including security coordination with Israel. In addition to what happened with the PFLP representative, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) representative was prevented from speaking at the meeting, while ‘Abbas Zaki, Fatah Central Committee member, was prevented from continuing his remarks that focused on the practical steps towards implementing those decisions.¹¹¹

These tensions in national relations decreased later following the meetings between Rajoub and al-‘Aruri, the Istanbul accords, the meeting of the secretary-generals, and the agreement to hold elections. Tensions returned later,



after the PA decided to resume relations with Israel, including security coordination, a decision denounced by all Palestinian factions. Hamas deemed the decision an affront to all national values and principles and the decisions made at the meeting of the secretary-generals of Palestinian factions, and a blow to national efforts to build a partnership and develop a resistance strategy against the occupation, annexation, normalization, and the “Deal of the Century.” Hamas demanded the PA backtrack from the decision and stop making bets based on speculation about the possible approach of the Biden administration.¹¹²

Similar to Hamas’ position, the PIJ deemed the PA’s resumption of relations with the Israel a violation of all the sincere efforts made for a genuine national partnership, and it stated clearly that the PA had chosen an alliance with Israel instead of a national alliance. The PIJ described these relations as criminal and unlawful, a violation of the decisions of national consensus, and a betrayal of the outcomes of the meeting of the factions’ secretary-generals, adding that their resumption disrupted efforts to achieve internal reconciliation and served the treasonous path of normalization with Israel that the factions had unanimously agreed to renounce and resist.¹¹³

In turn, the PFLP saw the PA’s announcement of their resumption of relations with Israel as weakness and surrender, and a betrayal of PNC and PCC decisions to withdraw from agreements signed with Israel, and the outcomes of the meeting of the secretary-generals in Beirut. The PFLP held that the resumption of relations with Israel also undermined reconciliation efforts, which the factions had agreed required the pursuit of a political path fundamentally opposed to the Oslo Accords.¹¹⁴ For its part, the DFLP called for ending “the dangerous deterioration of the political position,” and for respecting the decisions of the last PNC session held in 2018, the PCC’s decisions, the decision of the Palestinian leadership on 19/5/2020, and the decisions of the secretary-generals’ meeting on 3/9/2020.¹¹⁵

Early in 2021, the Palestinian factions continued to prepare for elections. Talks were held between Hamas and Fatah to form a joint list, despite the PA’s resumption of relations with Israel. The positive developments in national relations, such as the work towards holding elections, was not reflected on the state of political freedom or general climate of political action at that time. Indeed, according to Hamas leaders in WB, political detentions, assaults and the crackdown on free speech continued, while the salaries of liberated prisoners continued to be cut, and Hamas be persecuted.¹¹⁶

National relations deteriorated after the PA cancelled the elections, amid the rising popularity of Hamas. Indeed, Hamas was the leading faction in the Battle of the Sword of Jerusalem, which erupted in response to Israeli assaults on Palestinians in Jerusalem, beginning with the Damascus Gate clashes, then the Israeli efforts to evict the residents of Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood and the attempts to storm *al-Aqsa* Mosque in late Ramadan 2021. Remarkably following that battle, the PA security forces launched a crackdown on dozens of protesters who were active during the Jerusalem clashes.¹¹⁷ The killing of activist Nizar Banat at the hands of PA security forces further eroded national relations and signalled an inclination by the PA to resort to security options for factional political reasons, triggering protests in WB, in turn suppressed violently by the PA security forces and Fatah operatives. According to observers, using Fatah elements to suppress protests further widened the gap of distrust between the Palestinian street and the PA.¹¹⁸ The protests subsequently called for the downfall of the PA regime and the resignation of Mahmud ‘Abbas.¹¹⁹

National relations continued to deteriorate with the Palestinian president rejecting dialogue with Hamas, following mediation by independent figures. ‘Abbas insisted on Hamas recognizing what he called “the decisions of international legitimacy” as a precondition of any dialogue.¹²⁰ The security crackdown then intensified, amid rising resistance activity in WB, and the growth of the phenomenon of fugitives and militants in some WB regions, especially the Jenin refugee camp (RC). The PA also resumed its crackdown on all patriotic activities of a popular or symbolic nature, along with all resistance activities, carried out by all rival Palestinian factions,¹²¹ not just Hamas.

Observers believe that this reimposition of the security approach was due to the PA’s declining popularity, and the impasse faced by its political program, for it has lost its foundational legitimacy and reason for existing, be it political legitimacy, electoral legitimacy, or the legitimacy that comes with its ability to carry out its social and economic function in strengthening the steadfastness of the Palestinian people. These conditions meant the PA resorted to leaning into its security function to prove its worth to Israel and regional and international backers.¹²²

These practices made a dent in Fatah’s popularity as the movement was once again exploited to protect the official line of the PA. It eroded the popularity of Fatah’s current leadership, in favor of Hamas leaders or other Fatah leaders who



distanced themselves from the current PA leadership, according to opinion polls carried out by institutions not known for bias towards the PA's political rivals. Indeed, in a poll conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, on 9–12/6/2021, after the cancellation of the election and the Battle of the Sword of Jerusalem, 77% of respondents said they believed Hamas had won that confrontation with Israel, with 75% saying its performance was “excellent.” By contrast, only 13% said Fatah's performance was “excellent,” 11% said the PA government's performance was “excellent” and 8% said President ‘Abbas’ performance was “excellent.” Interestingly, more people in WB (80%) assessed Hamas’ performance as excellent than in GS (67%).¹²³

In the same poll, 65% said they were opposed to President ‘Abbas’ decision to postpone the elections, while 59% supported Isma‘il Haniyyah as president if he ran against ‘Abbas, who got the support of only 27% of respondents. If legislative elections were to be held, Hamas’ bloc would get 41% of the seats, compared to 30% for Fatah, 12% for all other third parties combined, and 17% were undecided. Of the respondents 36% said they would vote in for Hamas in the cancelled elections, compared to 19% for Fatah, 9% for al-Qudwa-Barghouthi alliance, 3% for Dahlan’s list, with the remainder distributed among the remaining lists: The Palestinian National Initiative Movement List obtained 2%, while the People’s Pulse List of the PFLP, the Together We Can List led by Salam Fayyad, the Democratic Change List led by Ibrahim Abu Hijlah, and the Palestine For All List led by Mufid al-Hasayneh were able to cross the electoral threshold simulated by the poll. The remaining lists failed to cross the numerical threshold.¹²⁴

It is clear from the above that the project of the cancelled legislative elections cast a heavy shadow on Fatah, which splintered into three main blocs: The first was the official list representing President ‘Abbas’ faction. The second was the list of the alliance between imprisoned Fatah Central Committee member Marwan Barghouthi and Fatah Central Committee member Nasser al-Qudwa, who headed the list registered under the name Freedom List. The Freedom List members included Fadwa Barghouthi, Fatah Revolutionary Council member and wife of Marwan. The list cost al-Qudwa his membership in Fatah.¹²⁵ The PA also suspended funding to the Yasser Arafat Foundation managed by al-Qudwa,¹²⁶ and later sacked him from this post.¹²⁷ The third list was the list of expelled Fatah leader and deputy Muhammad Dahlan, running under the name Future Bloc, led by Samir al-Mashharawi. Other Fatah figures also ran in independent lists.

The splintering of Fatah and its voter base into several lists, in comparison with Hamas' unified list, would have made the elections a serious gamble for Fatah's leadership, as analysts argued.¹²⁸ Polls conducted prior to the cancelled elections had given Hamas the support of 32.4% of respondents, while Fatah's official list received 17.2%, Dahlan's list 13.9%, and the Barghouthi-al-Qudwa list received 8.6%.¹²⁹

Hamas' list was registered under the name Jerusalem Is Our Promise. The Palestinian left, for its part, registered four official lists: The PFLP People's Pulse list; the DFLP's Democratic Change list; the Palestinian National Initiative Movement's list (Palestinian National Initiative for Change and Ending the Division list); and the Palestinian Democratic Union (Fida) party-PPP alliance's "United Left" list.

In a poll held prior to the cancelled elections, 4.1% of respondents said they would vote for the PFLP's People's Pulse list; 3% said they would vote for the Palestinian National Initiative Movement; and 1.8% said they would vote for the Together We Can list (Salam Fayyad). The remaining lists failed to get the minimum electoral threshold of votes in the poll.¹³⁰ This gives an indication of the overall impotence of the national situation, and the polarization between Fatah and Hamas. Indeed, the Palestinian left is still unable to unify its ranks and has continued to haemorrhage popular support to the point that the DFLP, PPP and Fida party cannot even meet the electoral threshold.

With the cancellation of the legislative elections, and the erosion of Palestinian politics, student elections were also cancelled primarily because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruption of in-person learning. This is particularly consequential in Birzeit University, whose student election usually signals the weight of Palestinian forces on the Palestinian street.¹³¹ The last student election in Birzeit was held in 2019. After the shift to online learning, the student council was suspended and elections put on hold.¹³² As a result, the sphere of political activity in Palestine became limited to elections such as the Engineers Association elections, which were won by Nadia Habash, who headed a coalition between Hamas and the PFLP.¹³³ This was in addition to the first round of the local elections analysed above.

At the internal level of Palestinian factions, the most prominent event was Hamas' regular regional and general election, which concluded in the third quarter



of 2021. The elections produced the cadres of the leadership office in GS, for which Yahya al-Sinwar was elected as president for a second term; for the leadership of the office abroad, Khalid Mish'al was elected; and for the leadership of WB office, Saleh al-'Aruri was re-elected. Hamas re-elected Isma'il Haniyyah as president, Saleh al-'Aruri as vice president,¹³⁴ and held the elections of its Central *Shurah* Council, formed its Executive Committee (political bureau), and distributed the working committees in the movement. This is considered an ongoing achievement for Hamas, amid the general deadlock experienced by the national movement, particularly considering the conditions of siege and persecution against Hamas and the geographical divisions between all Palestinians.

Fifth: The Impact of the General Situation on the PLO and PA Institutions

The above makes clear the status of Palestinian public institutions, be it within the PLO or the PA, and their position in the general political circumstances, both in terms of the struggle against the occupation and the shifts of the PA's rhetoric with regards to Israel; and in terms of internal national relations and the failure of reconciliation talks and the elections. The election project was not launched, preventing the rebuilding of these institutions as promised by the interlocutors, particularly Fatah and Hamas. The Shtayyeh government continued to be divisive, lacking consensual national support, as mentioned previously. The PLC was dissolved by the PA based on the Constitutional Court verdict of December 2018. Yet the Executive Committee of the PLO was unilaterally formed with new appointees, and President 'Abbas elected as its chairman, in consultation with PLO factions present, while the PFLP boycotted the meeting in May 2018.¹³⁵ We can say that the state of public institutions remained under the influence of this general situation, despite all the huge developments and events that took place during the two years in question.

The PCC's last meeting was its 30th session convened on 28/10/2018. There is no information about any upcoming sessions on the National Council website¹³⁶ or the Palestine News and Information Agency (WAFA). The council did not convene again in subsequent years, in contravention of its bylaws that require it to convene regularly at the invitation of its chairman, every three months, or in extra-ordinary

sessions at the invitation of its chairman based on a request from the Executive Committee or a quarter of the council's members.¹³⁷ The PCC, according to the WAFA website, convened three times in 2018 after a three-year hiatus, its last meeting before that having been convened in March 2015.¹³⁸ This means that the flouting of the PCC bylaws has become routine, which means, in turn, the disruption of the PLO. Indeed, the PCC is the intermediary institution between the PLO Executive Committee and the PNC, which last convened between 30/4/2018 and 3/5/2018.¹³⁹

The PLO is practically suspended, its institutions convene at intervals, in certain internal and political contexts without its decisions having any impact on public policies, such as the decision of the PCC's 27th session on 4–5/3/2015: "Suspending security coordination in all its forms with the Israeli occupation authority, in light of its non-commitment to the agreements signed between the two sides."¹⁴⁰ However, the PLO Executive Committee later decided to convene a new session of the PCC by no later than January 2022.¹⁴¹

In November 2020, Hanan 'Ashrawi resigned from the Executive Committee, saying the committee was marginalized. She called for reforms and the activation of the PLO, which she said must restore its full powers and functions. President 'Abbas accepted her resignation later.¹⁴²

With the de-facto suspension of the PLO; the dissolution of the PLC; the restructuring of the judiciary; the continuation of a government that has no legislative or consensus legitimacy, and is loyal to the president and headed by a Fatah Central Committee member; and with the collapse of reconciliation, the cancellation of the elections, and the increased reliance on security forces to maintain order, it is possible to summarize that the general trend in Palestinian political administration has been towards totalitarian security approaches led by a small number of individuals.¹⁴³ Those observing Palestinian affairs have been warning against this trend for years,¹⁴⁴ yet the PA has steadily marched towards cementing this approach to governance, making it structural and systemic.

The Civil Society Team for Enhancing Public Budget Transparency had in October 2021 revealed that the PA security forces received the biggest share of the PA budget. Indeed, in the first half of 2021, more than 50 million shekels (\$16 million) were spent on reforming the PA security forces. The PA security forces received 1.675 billion shekels (\$538 million), over 22% of the PA budget,



of which 88% was allocated to salaries, marking an increase of 115 million shekels (\$37 million) compared to the first six months of 2020.¹⁴⁵ It is no surprise then that 56% of respondents in polls said that the PA is a burden on the Palestinian people, compared to 35% who viewed it as an asset for the Palestinian people.¹⁴⁶

While the PA dissolved the PLC, Hamas' deputies in GS continued to convene legislative sessions and pass decisions.¹⁴⁷ This continued even after Hamas and Fatah agreed to hold (subsequently cancelled) elections, and after a statement of the factions' meeting in Cairo in February 2021 issued recommendations based on President 'Abbas' decree on the dates of consecutive elections. This decree was in turn based on the ruling of the Constitutional Court that dissolved the PLC, revealing the extent of paradoxes and spiteful moves in the Palestinian arena. This report had previously provided an overview of the state of the Shtayyeh government. Taken altogether, we can see a clear image of the state of Palestinian national institutions, and the Palestinian situation in general.

Sixth: Security Coordination Between Maneuvring and Reactivation

On 19/5/2020, President 'Abbas announced that "The Palestine Liberation Organization and the State of Palestine are absolved, as of today, of all the agreements and understandings with the US and Israeli governments and of all the obligations based on these understandings and agreements, including the security ones."¹⁴⁸ If taken at face value, the announcement meant a decision to go into a confrontation, as it required withdrawing recognition of Israel, abandoning economic agreements signed with Israel, and unleashing the Palestinian masses to take the initiative to resist occupation. However, none of this came to pass.

This announcement came in the context of a major crisis crippling the PA project, after then-Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu declared a plan to annex parts of WB. Practically, this meant the death of the peace process and the end of the PA's reason for existence, as Israel's occupation moved to consolidate the colonial facts on the ground and formalize them in law. This inevitably means the impossibility of establishing a meaningful Palestinian state in WB, including East Jerusalem, instead perpetuating the purely operational role of the PA in protecting

the occupation, and removing any substance and value in future negotiations as long as the colonial facts on the ground continue to be the reference frame for such negotiations. These conditions coincided with UAE-Israel normalization and Trump's plan for the Palestine issue, prompting 'Abbas' rapprochement with Hamas, declaration of withdrawal from agreements, and suspension of receiving tax clearance funds collected by Israel.¹⁴⁹

Refusing to receive tax funds was not just linked to the political position, but also Israel's decision to deduct from the funds the equivalent of what the PA pays in allocations to prisoners and martyrs' families. This is an old problem that predates the PA's decision to refuse clearance funds; in February 2019, the PA had also refused to receive the funds for the same reason.¹⁵⁰ This caused an economic crisis for the PA, forcing it to cut 50–60% of its employees' salaries above two thousand shekels (\$550) per month.¹⁵¹ However, in October 2019, the PA unilaterally decided to resume receiving the funds, despite Israel's continued deductions.¹⁵² The PA's decision to stop receiving the clearance funds then backtracking is nothing new, and was repeated this time as well.

In addition to refusing to receive the clearance funds, with its inevitable implications on people's purchasing power given the effect on the PA's ability to pay salaries in full,¹⁵³ and the economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and the decline in the PA's revenues, the other implication of suspending security coordination with Israel was the PA's withdrawal of its forces from Areas C and B, where the PA's presence requires the approval of the Israeli occupation under the agreements signed. The PA Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh, in conjunction with this, announced that the suspension of agreements signed with Israel had come into force, implemented by the official Palestinian institutions during a meeting with Nickolay Mladenov, then the UN Middle East Peace Envoy, in Ramallah.¹⁵⁴

Beyond that, there weren't any clearer implications for the suspension of security coordination, especially on the ground, as the PA continued operating in ways that were inconsistent with the suspension of security coordination and with the reconciliation process. For example, the PA continued to not pay the salaries of Hamas-affiliated prisoners and the pensions of Hamas-affiliated deputies in the dissolved PLC. The PA also failed to activate a comprehensive popular resistance in the WB, other than a timid statement of the so-called Unified Leadership of



Popular Resistance, which in turn was limited to calling for some symbolic steps such as raising flags and black banners of mourning and holding sit-ins,¹⁵⁵ all superficial steps that Israel assigns no importance to.

The manifestations of the suspension of security coordination with Israel were limited to the refusal to receive clearance funds, withdrawing forces from Areas B and C, and being unable to issue or renew official personal documents for Palestinians, including identity cards and birth certificates, which require submitting civil status records to the Israeli occupation that controls all aspects of Palestinian life and movement. Therefore, there is no practical value in any document issued by the PA that Israel does not recognize.¹⁵⁶ There were also reports that the PA security forces had stopped sharing information with Israeli counterparts and destroyed secret documents to avoid having them fall into Israeli hands if their buildings were raided.¹⁵⁷

The most important aspect of security coordination was in fact sharing information with Israel, which prevented any change to security coordination at this level. According to Israeli media reports quoting Israeli security officials, the Palestinian president cannot suspend security coordination as this would put his political rivals and opposition forces at an advantage, notably Hamas and the PIJ. The Israeli security sources also said the Palestinian president was not serious about this bid, citing the gap between his previous declarations about this, and his actions on the ground. These sources confirmed that security coordination continued.¹⁵⁸ However, other Israeli army sources said that PA security forces stopped answering calls from the Israeli army and no longer engaged in security coordination with Israel,¹⁵⁹ but said that this was probably a tactic pursued in the context of the rivalry with Hamas, predicting that coordination would soon resume.¹⁶⁰ The *New York Times* quoted Hussein al-Sheikh, PA Minister of Civilian Affairs, as saying that the PA would arrest anyone planning to attack Israelis,¹⁶¹ later confirmed on the ground. In other words, the PA's functional role did not change, regardless of whether phone calls with Israel stopped. Israeli sources also said that the PA arrested a Hamas cell in Hebron as it planned to carry out a military operation against Israeli targets.¹⁶²

To be sure, a real suspension of security coordination would necessarily invite a reaction from Israel, which the Palestinians would not notice happening. As a result, some observers raised questions about the seriousness of the decision, especially

since the suspension of security coordination would “mean the dissolution or collapse of the PA.”¹⁶³

In addition, as observed by Israeli security sources, the PA leadership had a history of not implementing decisions or threats of this kind. Indeed, since 2010, the Palestinian president had been threatening to dissolve the PA.¹⁶⁴ At other times, the Palestinian president would say the opposite.¹⁶⁵ In addition, the PLO and even Fatah, since at least 2015, had been issuing multiple decisions, recommendations and calls to suspend security coordination or withdraw from agreements signed with Israel.¹⁶⁶

Regardless of the truth about the suspension of security coordination and no matter at which level this would be enacted, the PA announced the resumption of coordination with Israel on 17/11/2020 through Fatah Central Committee member and PA Minister of Civil Affairs Hussein al-Sheikh, who justified the announcement by saying: “In light of the contacts made by his excellency the president regarding Israel’s commitment to the agreements signed with us, and based on the official written and verbal messages we obtained confirming Israel’s commitment, the relations with Israel will return to how they were.”¹⁶⁷ The PA subsequently resumed receiving tax funds from Israel,¹⁶⁸ reopened the offices and departments of the General Authority of Civil Affairs in WB and GS,¹⁶⁹ which are charged with contact with Israel.

Later, it was revealed that Hussein al-Sheikh had, on 7/10/2020, sent a message to the Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), which included a question from al-Sheikh about whether “the government of Israel is committed to the agreements and accords signed with the Palestinians and the PLO or not, as they are the reference frame for the bilateral relations between the two sides since 1993.”¹⁷⁰ COGAT’s answer was:

Regarding your letter of October 7th, 2020, Israel has previously stated that the bilateral Israeli-Palestinian agreements continue to form the applicable legal framework governing the conduct of the parties. On financial and other matters. Therefore, in accordance with these agreements, Israel continues to collect taxes for the Palestinian Authority. Unfortunately, it was the Palestinian Authority which decided not to receive these collected funds from Israel.¹⁷¹



It is noted that this correspondence took place with a low-level Israeli official, the coordinator, who is considered the WB Israeli governor, revealing the nature of the relationship between Israel and the PA. This correspondence also entails recognition of COGAT, which is considered a de-facto alternative to the Israeli Civil Administration required to be dissolved under the Oslo Accords. Moreover, Hussein al-Sheikh's letter to COGAT was sent a month before the US elections. In other words, the PA did not wait to see who would win the US election, meaning that the decision to suspend security coordination was neither strategic nor real, but was rather a manoeuvre, as many observers had stated from the beginning.¹⁷² This was consistent with the PA's unwillingness to change path or confront Israel and further indicates that the PA wanted to resume relations with Israel in conjunction with the election of a new US administration, be it a returning Trump administration or a new Biden administration.

It is also noted that the correspondence included a question from the PA to Israel about whether it was committed to the agreements, when according to the PA's own official announcements, it was supposed to have withdrawn from its own commitments to these agreements. In other words, there was no point asking the "other side" about its position vis-à-vis the agreements if the Palestinian strategic choice was to withdraw from them. No less important was the timing of the resumption of relations with Israel, which came amid talks between Hamas and Fatah to resume the plan to hold legislative elections. In other words, the PA's move towards elections was not based on a shift in policy, which raised concerns that the elections would legitimize the PA's path, including by Hamas, without this leading to real reconciliation or alteration to the political path.

It should be noted that the PA has a precedent in suspending contacts with the US, in November 2017; after the Trump administration's decision to relocate the US embassy to Jerusalem and the closure of the PLO office in Washington.¹⁷³ The PLO office was actually closed later. Those PA announcements coincided with talks with Hamas that led to the Cairo Agreement on 12/10/2017.¹⁷⁴ However, the agreement collapsed on 13/3/2018, when the convoy of then PA Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah was the target of an explosion.¹⁷⁵ The two sides blamed each other for the attack, with relations between them becoming deadlocked between escalation and estrangement, until rapprochement returned in early 2020 as explained previously. However, it is important here to note the relative similarity

between the events of 2017/2018 and 2020/2021, in terms of sharpening the rhetoric and the rapprochement with Hamas, before backtracking on both counts.

The experience of 2020 ended with the resumption of security coordination, echoing the end of 2019 during which PA security forces committed 4,703 violations against political freedoms, including 1,079 cases of detention.¹⁷⁶ In the same context, Israeli sources said the PA had, in 2019, shut down around 300 associations and foundations affiliated to Islamic groups.¹⁷⁷ As for the Israel Security Agency—ISA (*Shabak*), it said that the PA's stability served Israel's interests, warning against any attempts to undermine it, and against the effects of deductions from tax clearance funds.¹⁷⁸

In fact, the *Shabak*'s stance sheds light on how the relationship with the PA has been rooted in security coordination, which is consistent with remarks by then Israeli FM Yair Lapid, in September 2021, that 90% of Israel-PA relations revolve around security coordination.¹⁷⁹ This pattern of relations continued until at least May 2020, with US security backing, as evidenced by a secret visit to Ramallah undertaken by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director Gina Haspel.¹⁸⁰ Again, this contradicted the PA's self-declared decision to suspend contacts with the US. This pattern of relations was then renewed in November with the PA's official resumption of relations with Israel.

As soon as security coordination resumed, according to Israeli sources, the PA told Western counterparts it was ready to amend the law governing prisoners' salaries.¹⁸¹ However, the PA had no solution to the prisoners' issue except to integrate them into its civilian and security institutions and refer those who did not meet the conditions to retirement in accordance with a decree issued by President 'Abbas in early 2021. Later, 'Abbas expressed readiness to discuss sensitive Palestinian issues, including the prisoners' salaries, with the Israeli government, if the Israeli government agreed to talk to him.¹⁸² Moreover, the PA continued to deduct the salaries of a number of liberated prisoners and others still inside prisons,¹⁸³ meaning that the steps towards rapprochement, or raising the rhetorical ceiling against the occupation did not positively impact the PA's policy vis-à-vis the issue of deducted prisoners' salaries.

After the resumption of relations with Israel, multiple meetings were conducted between Palestinian and Israeli officials at various civilian levels, such as health officials.¹⁸⁴ On the security side, from the resumption of coordination until the end



of 2020, the PA invariably stopped popular confrontations with the occupation¹⁸⁵ and thwarted stabbing attacks,¹⁸⁶ irrespective of Israeli claims that security coordination never stopped and that the announcement to that effect was little more than politicking.¹⁸⁷

After the resumption of security coordination, high-level officials in the PA described it as a form of sovereignty and defense of the people.¹⁸⁸ Yet the security crackdown would peak straight after the cancellation of Palestinian elections, and following major events, which some observers saw as a momentous failure of the PA, further eroding its popularity and legitimacy. This applied to the negative, disruptive role played by the PA during the Battle of the Sword of Jerusalem, the deal of nearly expired COVID-19 vaccines between the PA and Israel,¹⁸⁹ and the killing of Palestinian activist Nizar Banat at the hands of PA security forces.¹⁹⁰ These rapid developments prompted the PA to rely increasingly on security forces to consolidate its power and assure its backers of its continuing value, with sources talking about the PA having played a role in pursuing the militants responsible for an attack against Israeli troops at the Za‘tara checkpoint near Nablus,¹⁹¹ as well as cracking down on broader popular protests against Israel.¹⁹² In this context, the PA, according to Israeli sources, asked Israel to supply it with crowd control equipment to use against protesters.¹⁹³

And in what appeared to be various international powers and Israel sensing threats to the PA’s stability following the Battle of the Sword of Jerusalem, the new CIA Director William Burns visited the PA headquarters in Ramallah, in August 2021, to discuss financial and political support for the PA, and ways to head off the Hamas movement.¹⁹⁴ This was preceded by a visit by Hady ‘Amr, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Israel and Palestinian Affairs at the Department’s Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, to Ramallah in July 2021,¹⁹⁵ where he stressed, in a meeting with Israeli officials, that “the combination of the financial and political crises puts the Palestinian Authority in a very precarious situation. ‘It is like a dry forest waiting to catch on fire’ ” proposing “several measures the Israeli government can take to help the Palestinian economy and the Palestinian Authority’s budget, and ultimately strengthen its standing.”¹⁹⁶ In the same context, the chief of British intelligence (MI6) Richard Moore visited Ramallah and met with PA officials.¹⁹⁷ These arrangements paved the way for a meeting between President ‘Abbas and Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz, after which Israel took steps to provide economic support to the PA, including a loan of \$155 million and an increase in

the number of work permits for Palestinians inside Israel, but without any revival of the peace process on the political horizon as the PA would have desired.¹⁹⁸

There were other normalization meetings held at different levels. For example, the PLO held a meeting with Israeli figures in the town of al-Bireh,¹⁹⁹ following events in Jerusalem, starting from those of the Damascus Gate, Sheikh Jarrah, *al-Aqsa* Mosque and then the Battle of the Sword of Jerusalem. Moreover, the PA Communication Committee met with Israeli writers,²⁰⁰ and artists and President ‘Abbas met with a delegation from the Israeli Meretz Party, headed by Israel’s Health Minister Nitzan Horowitz, at the PA presidency headquarters in Ramallah.²⁰¹ Media reports said that President ‘Abbas asked the Meretz delegation to convey a message to Israel’s Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked expressing his desire to meet her. Shaked later rejected the request.²⁰² Media reports claimed that the PA had agreed to collaborate with Israel to search for the prisoners who escaped from Gilboa prison,²⁰³ who were later recaptured. However, the most important meeting was perhaps the one between President ‘Abbas and the new Shabak Director Ronen Bar in November 2021.²⁰⁴ The meeting was held in secret and was the first of its kind with the new director, but not the first with a Shabak director since the sides started their security cooperation. Indeed, ‘Abbas had met with the ex-Shabak director Nadav Argaman in Ramallah in March 2021. At the time, the meeting was described as tense, after Argaman asked ‘Abbas to cancel the legislative elections.²⁰⁵ The elections were cancelled a month after that meeting.

Media sources and observers linked the intensifying crackdown by the PA in WB, against activists and rival Palestinian factions, with ‘Abbas’ meeting with the new Shabak director. The meeting came on the heels of increased resistance activity in WB, especially in Jenin, of which one manifestation was the appearance of armed militants of Hamas and other factions, during the funeral of former minister and Hamas leader Wasfi Qabha. PA-affiliated forces tried to raid the Jenin RC but were repelled by locals inside the camp.²⁰⁶ Jenin’s deputy governor at the time, speaking on behalf of the PA, expressed concerns over the armed manifestations of resistance, describing them as a “dangerous indicator.”²⁰⁷

The PA then stepped up its crackdown on activities by rival factions, confiscating Hamas banners and taking down banners celebrating the return of a liberated prisoner from the village of Zawata near Nablus. PA forces also confiscated Hamas banners during the reception of a liberated prisoner from Ramallah. Remarkably,



the crackdown was not restricted to Hamas, but also included a convoy celebrating the return of a liberated prisoner from the PIJ in Tammun near Tobas. PA forces seized banners of the PFLP during the funeral of Amjad Abu Sultan in Bethlehem,²⁰⁸ all amid continued politically motivated detentions.²⁰⁹ In 2021, The Committee of the Families of Political Detainees in the WB recorded 2,578 violations committed by the PA forces, related to human rights and public freedoms, including political arrests. The committee described the year by the black year of freedom suppression.²¹⁰ In December 2021, the PA ended the year with further political detentions,²¹¹ targeting several sectors of public activism, including student activism, as the PA raided the dorms of students of the Islamic Bloc.²¹²

The PA's security crackdown spread to Lebanon, when Hamas accused a group affiliated with the PA National Security in Ramallah of firing at the funeral of Hamza Shahin, a Hamas operative, who—according to Hamas—died in an explosion following an electric fire at a warehouse containing materials used in COVID-19 response, including oxygen tanks.²¹³ The shooting killed three further Hamas operatives at the funeral and injured 20 others.²¹⁴ The growing security crackdown and general security policies, in addition to their effect on the broader national situation, overviewed in this report, portend a dark period of time where freedoms are further restricted and the security forces are further relied upon by the PA.

Conclusion

The years 2020 and 2021 were characterized by huge contradictions between, on the one hand, the necessities of that stage acknowledged by all Palestinian factions, and the challenges facing the Palestine issue, people, and forces—including Trump's plan, Arab normalization projects, the annexation plan, and the death of the peace process—and, on the other hand, the facts, and practices on the ground. The period saw sharper rhetoric by the PA, which also remained committed to the peace process. It also led to a dialogue and rapprochement efforts between Fatah and Hamas, which underwent several phases, from talks about agreeing on a unified leadership of the popular resistance, to agreeing on holding staggered legislative, presidential, and PNC elections. However, the PA leadership backtracked on all

these agreements, setting the Palestinian internal landscape back to the now-usual crisis mode, deadlock and stalemate, as had been the case after 2007.

The PA also backtracked from its agreements with Hamas, cancelling the elections and resuming security coordination, the suspension of which it had announced between May 2020 and November 2020, amid scepticism about the seriousness of the claim. The resumption of coordination followed a series of major events, starting with the Damascus Gate Uprising in Jerusalem, then the events of Sheikh Jarrah and *al-Aqsa* Mosque, and then the military confrontation of the GS resistance forces with Israel, which increased the popularity of Hamas, the PIJ and other resistance factions. The PA thus relied on security forces to consolidate its power, especially after it was hit by scandals, such as the deal for the near-expired COVID-19 vaccines with Israel and the killing of activist Nizar Banat.

With the disruption of the elections, the reconciliation efforts, and the PLO, the PA effectively re-consecrated its commitment to the path of the Oslo Accords. It also cemented a repressive authoritarian approach and monopolistic governance, tainted by accusations of corruption and lack of transparency, and evidenced by the PA's financial crisis and incomprehensible financial policies, such as promotions in high positions accompanied by deductions from civil servants' salaries.

Because of these practices, relations between the leadership of the PA and Fatah, and most national forces, soured thereafter, especially with Hamas, the PIJ, and the PFLP. The PA launched a crackdown on these factions' activities in WB, including their symbolic and popular activities. The PFLP also accused the PA of financially embargoing it.

The PFLP entered an alliance with Hamas in the elections for the Engineers Association, a rare political development in the two years under study, which witnessed very little political progress, with the disruption of student elections because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the cancellation of legislative elections. At the end of the year, the PA said it would hold staggered local council elections, but these were boycotted by Hamas and the PIJ, while leftist parties participated in a limited way.

The overall policies of the PA moved towards cementing a security-based totalitarian approach to governance, which portends further restrictions on freedoms and political life, and the entrenchment in power of a cabal of oligarchs made up of security leaders, powerful Fatah figures, and influential local allies. Inevitably, this



prevents any real reconciliation and produces scepticism and distrust whenever the PA raises the ceiling of its political rhetoric or invites its rival for rapprochement. Indeed, by doing so, it is understood that they are likely be stalling for time and political legitimacy, before again returning to the same political paths. More dangerously, this trend puts the ruling elite in the corner, forcing them to seek protection from international and regional backers, and empowerment from the security functions of the PA, deepening the organic links to Israel and regional and international powers.

Due to the lack of institutions, and the monopoly of administration by this small elite, amid division and subjugation to Israel's dominance of the PA's spheres of control in WB, it is likely that the battle for the succession of Mahmud 'Abbas will play a key role in shaping the Palestinian political landscape in the next two years. That is, unless new major events move beyond the plans of the actors in the Palestinian arena, which remains a distinct possibility given the regional and international state of flux and renewed Palestinian uprisings against Israeli occupation.

Therefore, given the aforementioned factors, the PA's policies, and its structure, ruling elites and relationships, as well as the overall national situation and relations between Palestinian factions following the Battle of the Sword of Jerusalem, the following may be forecasted for the year 2022:

1. The continuation of the crises of the PA, which can be summarized as follows:
 - a. A crisis of political legitimacy, with the total deadlock of the peace process, leaving the PA without a political horizon, turning power into a goal in its own right. This crisis forces the PA to adopt a repressive security approach to consolidate itself and pushes it further away from a commitment to popular resistance to confront the Zionist colonial challenge that would otherwise lay the ground for national unity on the basis of popular resistance.
 - b. The crisis of electoral legitimacy, and the related crises of arranging the Palestinian leadership and preparing for the succession of Palestinian President Mahmud 'Abbas, given the cancellation of the legislative elections, and the need of the Fatah power centers to maintain legitimacy to share influence and organize the post-'Abbas phase. This crisis will also necessarily reflect on the relationship of the PA and the Fatah movement, with the Palestinian masses and the national forces.

- c. The deepening economic crisis, for which the PA leadership does not have radical solutions, forcing it to postpone tackling the crisis, through internal and external borrowing. Consequently, its need for economic facilities on the part of Israel could grow, which would increase the link between the PA's policies and Israeli goals.

2. The above crises will lead to:

- a. Seeking protection from external forces, and proving the PA's competence through the security function, which will be the most visible during the next phase, among the PA's tools of managing the Palestinian scene, at all levels.
- b. Attempting to provide political legitimacy for the internal arrangements of the PA frameworks, through the PLO, which is considered the reference that founded the PA. There were precedents in this regard, as happened in 2009, when the PCC was summoned to grant legitimacy to both President 'Abbas and the PLC.
- c. Despite internal disagreements that hindered the convening of the PCC, the Eighth Conference of Fatah, and the filling of vacancies in the Executive Committee of the PLO, especially after the death of Saeb Erekat and the resignation of Hanan 'Ashrawi, Fatah will be forced to convene these institutions to resolve the conflict within its ranks and therefore it needs to reach compromises. In this regard, it is likely that the elite surrounding President 'Abbas will go on to lead the Fatah movement, especially since it is this entourage that is regulating the relationship with Israel and the US, whether in terms of security or economic arrangements.
- d. If Fatah manages to hold these conferences and manages to allocate centers of power and authority among its various political wings, then Shtayyeh's government may be changed, or a wide reshuffle of it pursued.
- e. It is not expected that large-scale positive transformations will occur at the level of internal political relations, and the political scene may not go beyond holding a second round of local elections, in which the PA would continue the same political approach, adhering to the peace process with its rapidly dwindling prospects of success.
- f. This will mean either a stalemate in the reconciliation process, or a further deterioration in national relations, with the increasing alienation of national and popular forces from the Fatah movement and the PA, the continued



emergence of hotbeds of tension and rebellion against the PA, amid further erosion of the PA's popularity.

3. The two years under study witnessed a notable rapprochement between Hamas and the rest of the national forces, not only in the field of resistance in GS, but also at the level of political discourse, amid convergences of opinion on criticisms of the PA, and joint cooperation in some fields such as in the Engineers Association elections, and other events related to the student movement. This can be built upon, to form a national framework that develops national relations within the framework of resistance and the rejection of the political line of the PA. Those who expressed interest in this proposal grew in number after the cancellation of the legislative elections and following the Battle of the Sword of Jerusalem.
4. Intensifying resistance in WB may lead to surprises that radically alter the scene during the next stage, which could upend some of the forecasts mentioned above. This depends on unforeseeable transformations, yet these remain a possibility in view of the expansion of the struggle and the intensification of provocative elements in the Palestinian arena (attacks on *al-Aqsa* Mosque, attacks by settlers in WB, prisoners, events inside the territories occupied in 1948 and the escalation of the GS resistance), in addition to the decline of the PA's ability to control and crack down, or to provide economic and development services to the Palestinians.
5. If the resistance factions and forces opposed to the PA's line succeed in forming a national framework, reinforcing their ability to exploit the rise of popular resistance in WB, and taking advantage of the erosion of the PA's popularity and legitimacy, then they might be able to apply pressure and form an interim leadership. This framework would take the necessary measures to put the Palestinian political house in order, or to transfer its authority to a neutral party with full and indisputable powers. However, the implementation of this is met with great challenges because the influential forces in Fatah will resist a trend of this kind, and the Arab and international environment still supports the peace process and the political line of Fatah, and still rejects the progress of the resistance movement and the Islamic movement to take over the leadership, despite it having a strong chance of winning elections. Moreover, the Israeli factor obstructing any national solutions is an important one, given its complete dominance over the vital sphere of the PA, and given the nature of the influential elite in the PA and its network of interests.

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This Report

Al-Zaytouna Centre is pleased to present to its readers the Palestine Strategic Report (PSR) 2020–2021, the 12th PSR to be published.

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

This report is the result of collaborative work of 15 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 internal situation in Israel, politically, economically and militarily; and Palestine's Arab, Islamic, and international relations.

The PSR now occupies a prominent position as an indispensable reference, 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 2020 – 2021



Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies & Consultations
مركز الزيتونة للدراسات والاستشارات

P.O. Box: 14-5034 Beirut - Lebanon
Tel: +961 1 803 644 | Tel-Fax: +961 1 803 643
info@alzaytouna.net | www.alzaytouna.net



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