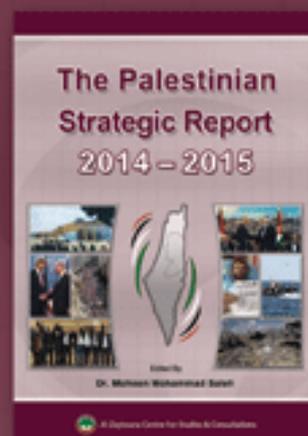


The Palestinian Strategic Report

2014 – 2015

Ch.2



The Internal Israeli Political Scene

2014 – 2015



The Internal Israeli Political Scene 2014–2015¹

Introduction

During 2014 and 2015, Israel continued to take advantage of the Palestinian political division, and Arab weakness and dispersion, a situation that was worsened by internal challenges and conflicts. Israel also benefited from US-western cover that maintained it as “a state above the law.” With the increasing trends of the Israeli society towards extremism and the forestallment of the peace process, the Palestinian people continued to affirm their steadfastness through numerous forms of resistance. This was manifested in the fierce confrontation of the Israeli aggression on GS in the summer of 2014 and the Jerusalem *Intifadah*, which escalated in late 2015.

This chapter attempts to draw the internal Israeli political map, in addition to providing demographic, economic and military data on Israel. It also discusses the issues of aggression and resistance and the peace process during 2014–2015.

First: The Internal Israeli Political Scene

2014–2015 witnessed a series of important political events in Israel, some of which were short lived whereas others continued for a while, interacting with other events in other contexts that are addressed in this report, notably:

1. The Fall of the Government and the Formation of Another

Netanyahu’s third government (2013–2015) suffered from instability,² as the right wing of the coalition showed its intention to rebel within the ranks of the government to prevent a peace agreement with the Palestinians according to the plan of US Secretary of State John Kerry.³ This plan involved the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of the future State of Palestine.⁴ The right wing refused to

¹ This study is the approved English translation of *The Internal Israeli Political Scene*, which is the first section of chapter two of *The Palestinian Strategic Report 2014–2015*, edited by Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh. The Arabic version of this Report was released in 2016, and the draft of this chapter was written by Dr. Johnny Mansour.

² *Al-Hayat* newspaper, London, 23/1/2014.

³ *Addustour* newspaper, Amman, 11/1/2014.

⁴ *Yedioth Ahronoth* newspaper, 29/1/2014.

negotiate with the Palestinians under the pretext that it was an immature interlocutor, implying that the Palestinian side had not yielded enough to the requirements of the Israeli extreme right.

In line with this instability, most of the coalition's parties were threatening to pull out and dismantle the government, and therefore ensure early parliamentary elections, i.e., before the end of the 19th Knesset.

The internal political scene in Israel was in constant turmoil due to the right's growing rejection of the peace or negotiating process with the Palestinians, along with the internal debate about the "Jewishness of the State." 2014 opinion polls indicated that the ranks of the right would be strengthened if early elections were held.⁵

Netanyahu was at the mercy of extremists in his party and other right-wing parties in the coalition government. Consequently, and following increasing contradictions within the government, a number of ministers submitted their resignations. Moreover, Netanyahu fired Yair Lapid and Tzipi Livni from ministerial posts, leading to the disintegration of the coalition and Netanyahu requesting the Knesset's approval to hold early elections. The differences within the government revolved around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which cast a long shadow on the government, despite all efforts to show otherwise.⁶

Following the announcement of early elections for the 20th Knesset, some of those who left Likud for personal or methodological differences with Netanyahu went on to form other parties. These included former Likud member Moshe Kahlon, who announced he was running for elections on the independent list, Kulanu (All of Us). The list won ten seats in the Knesset and joined the coalition government, with Kahlon becoming the Minister of Finance. The Avigdor Lieberman-led Yisrael Beiteinu party left its alliance with Likud in anticipation of the 2015 elections.⁷ It won only six seats, having won 11 seats in the previous Knesset during that alliance, its loss benefiting Kahlon's list. As for the Kadima

⁵ *Raialyoum* newspaper, London, 12/4/2014; and *al-Hayat*, 13/4/2014.

⁶ *Asharq Alawsat* newspaper, London, 10/6/2014; and *al-Quds al-Arabi* newspaper, London, 5/8/2014.

⁷ Site of Arabs 48, 2/12/2014.



party founded by Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert in 2005, it disappeared from the political scene after its Chairman Shaul Mofaz joined the Labor Party.⁸

2014–2015 also witnessed the retirement of many Israeli political figures from the political and partisan scene, including Limor Livnat from Likud, who had occupied several ministerial seats, and Uzi Landau, former Likud member and Yisrael Beitenu member in the 19th Knesset, who also held several ministerial positions. He was known for his extremist tendencies and anti-Arabism. This was in addition to Binyamin Ben-Eliezer from the Labor Party who had to retire against a backdrop of financial corruption and ensuing police investigations.⁹

Immediately after the announcement of the dissolution of the 19th Knesset on 8/12/2014, political parties and movements in Israel began to prepare for the 20th Knesset elections in March 2015. Consequently, Tzipi Livni, the leader of The Movement Party (*Hatnua*), announced an alliance with the Labor party under the name Zionist Camp, with the goal to prevent Netanyahu's return to power. Opinion polls showed that the Zionist Camp had a small lead over the Likud and right-wing parties, prompting Netanyahu to try to persuade Lieberman to share the premiership within an alliance, but the latter rejected the proposal.

Netanyahu endeavored to maintain the sole leadership of Likud under a constitutional amendment through the appointment of an external candidate in the Likud electoral list without going through the Likud primary (internal) elections. In addition, Netanyahu completely disregarded the party's institutions, especially the Central Committee. At the same time, he did not allow the emergence of a new generation of political leaders, which would have ensured continuity between the ranks of the Likud.

In addition to the above, the personal relationship between Netanyahu and Gideon Sa'ar, one of the most prominent Likud figures, hit rock bottom. Sa'ar gained popularity among Likud members, especially the youth who saw him as a promising leader of the party and a future prime minister. However, Sa'ar was disappointed by Netanyahu's policies and behavior towards the party and towards him, and announced his stepping down from political life, albeit temporarily, as

⁸ *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 6/12/2014.

⁹ *Almustaqbal* newspaper, Beirut, 12/12/2014.

indicated by a number of observers and political analysts.¹⁰ It must be noted here that prominent Likud leaders have abandoned the political arena entirely or in part, or abandoned Likud because of their disagreement with Netanyahu's approach, including: David Levy, Dan Meridor, Roni Milo, Moshe Kahlon, and others.

Regarding religious parties, Eliyahu (Eli) Yishai withdrew from the leadership of the Shas party and formed a new electoral list, and Aryeh Deri took over as the party's leader in anticipation of the 2015 elections.¹¹

Israel suffers from having many small parties in terms of representation in the Knesset, and this hinders the formation of a stable government. Accordingly, some political parties and movements sought to end it by raising the electoral threshold from 2% to 3.25%, which would lead to the disappearance of small parties. This was exploited by Lieberman to prevent the arrival of Arab parties to the Knesset as part of the exclusion of Arab citizens of Israel from the political process,¹² and to implement other discriminatory policies against them. But in spite of raising the electoral threshold, the Arab parties allied with each other in a Joint List, which took part in the 2015 elections as a single bloc and won 13 seats.¹³

Political parties took part in the 20th Knesset parliamentary elections in March 2015 with 26 electoral lists as per the following party groups:

Table 1/2: The Main Party Groups on the Eve of the 20th Knesset Elections

Political Spectrum	Parties
Right	Likud - The Jewish Home - Yisrael Beitenu – Kulanu
Center	Zionist Camp - Yesh Atid
Center Left	Meretz
Religious Parties	Shas - Agudat Yisrael - United Torah Judaism
Arab Parties	Joint List

¹⁰ *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 18/9/2014.

¹¹ *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 16/12/2014.

¹² *Al-Hayat*, 12/3/2014.

¹³ *Arabs 48*, 6/2/2015 and 14/2/2015.



A careful reading of the programs of the Israeli parties that took part in the parliamentary elections reveals that they mostly agree on maintaining the form and substance of the “Jewishness of the State” and dealing with Arab citizens based on their religious affiliations without recognizing their national rights. Israeli parties have a tendency to retreat from the idea of a two-state solution and prefer to maintain the status quo, with earnest attempts to strengthen Israeli settlements in WB in order to achieve more control over the Palestinian territories through confiscation or the extension of control over what they call “state land” in the WB. This is while it continues to impose a siege on GS, despite the lack of achieving any tangible military and political goal in the successive aggressions against GS.

Netanyahu tried to reach an agreement with the Zionist Camp to shore up his power, but they rejected him, based on their belief in an impending election victory. This was despite the fact that in there was a great affinity between the Zionist camp and the Likud concerning the political issues of the conflict, notably in the belief that Jerusalem is the only and eternal capital of Israel, and that the withdrawal from the city or its division are rejected.¹⁴ Netanyahu feared the possibility of a leftward political shift, believing that the settlement building project would end. During his campaign for the elections, he issued various forms of intimidation, the most notable one being those words he uttered on the eve of the elections: “Arab voters are coming out in droves to the polls,” which led to a state of panic among Israelis, and an increase in the number of votes for his party.¹⁵ This ostensibly racist phrase aroused the ire of Palestinian Arabs in Israel, along with Obama's US administration and some left-wing political circles in Israel, and Netanyahu was forced to apologize later on after winning the elections.

The following table shows the results of the 20th and 19th Knesset elections:

¹⁴ *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 16/3/2015.

¹⁵ Site of Aljazeera.net, 23/3/2015; and *The Washington Post* newspaper, 17/3/2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/03/17/on-israeli-election-day-netanyahu-warns-of-arabs-voting-in-droves/>

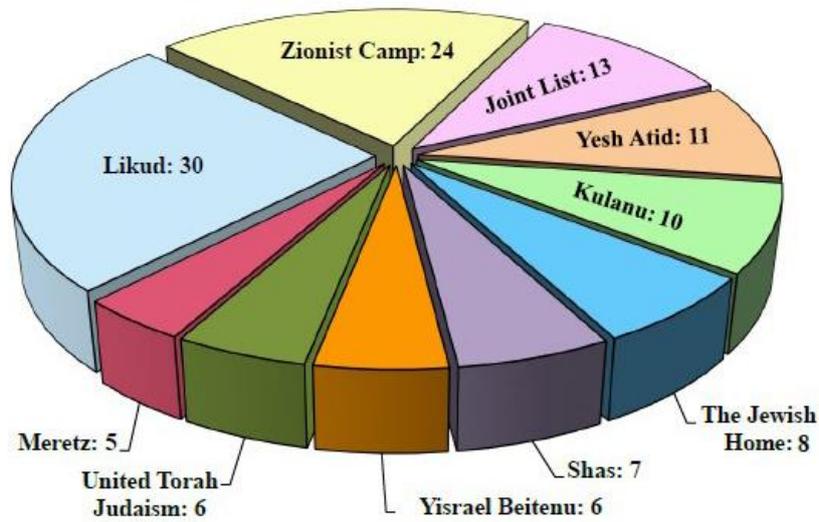
Table 2/2: Comparing the Results of the 20th and 19th Knesset Elections¹⁶

List name	20th Knesset 17/3/2015		19th Knesset 22/1/2013	
	Number of valid votes	Number of seats	Number of valid votes	Number of seats
Likud	985,408	30	885,163	31
Yisrael Beitenu	214,906	6		
Zionist Camp (Labor - The Movement)	786,313	24	–	–
Labor	–	–	432,118	15
The Movement	–	–	189,167	6
Yesh Atid	371,602	11	543,458	19
The Jewish Home	283,910	8	345,985	12
Kadima	–	–	78,974	2
Shas	241,613	7	331,868	11
United Torah Judaism	210,143	6	195,892	7
Meretz	165,529	5	172,403	6
Joint List (Hadash, National Democratic Assembly, Arab Movement for Renewal, United Arab List)	446,583	13	–	–
United Arab List	–	–	138,450	4
Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (Hadash)	–	–	113,439	4
National Democratic Assembly (BALAD)	–	–	97,030	3
Kulanu	315,360	10	–	–
Number of eligible voters	5,881,696		5,656,705	
Total number of votes	4,254,738		3,833,646	
Total number of valid votes	4,210,884		3,792,742	

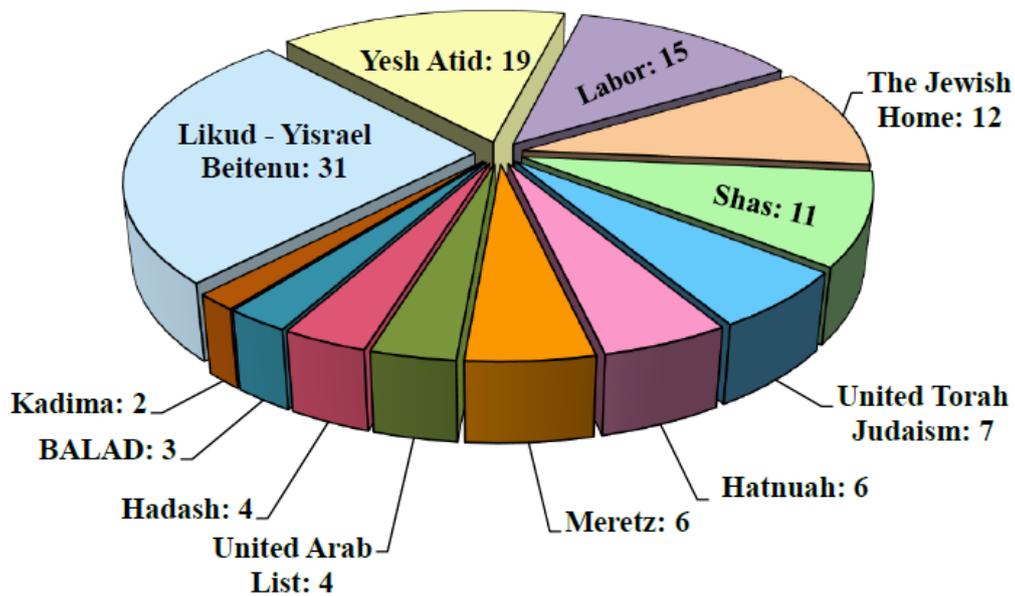
¹⁶ See results of the 19th and 20th Knesset elections, Site of The Knesset, http://www.knesset.gov.il/description/eng/eng_mimshal_res19.htm
http://www.knesset.gov.il/description/eng/eng_mimshal_res20.htm
 See also Final Results of the Elections for the 20th Knesset, site of Central Elections Committee, http://bechirov.gov.il/election/English/knesset20/Pages/Results20_eng.aspx



Results of the 20th Knesset Elections on 17/3/2015



Results of the 19th Knesset Elections on 22/1/2013



According to the table above, 32 parties and lists participated in the 19th Knesset elections, with 12 electoral lists that exceeded the threshold and entered the Knesset. We also note that in the 19th Knesset elections, Likud formed an alliance with Yisrael Beiteinu within a single list. As for the Arab parties, they did not unite among themselves, each of them fighting the elections in a separate list, all of which exceeded the election threshold, thus maintaining their electoral strength.

What can be seen by comparing the two rounds of the last two Knesset elections is that the number of lists/parties shrunk to 10 in the 20th Knesset, apparently due to the unity of the Arab lists and the disappearance of Kadima. Moreover, Likud reinforced its positions and won 30 seats by going solo in these elections, without any alliance with Yisrael Beitenu like in the previous elections. Whereas the Kulanu list/party headed by Kahlon was not far at all from the thought and practice of Likud because its chairman broke away from Likud, whose ideas and aspirations he maintained. Right-wing and religious parties strengthened their positions in the 20th Knesset elections, helping Netanyahu to form a right-wing extremist coalition government, in spite of the differences between Likud as a secular party, and other very religious parties.

The Zionist Camp was comprehensively defeated by Likud. Indeed, the unity between the Labor Party and the Movement Party did not yield much. The former fought this election after having had 15 members in the 19th Knesset while the latter had 6 members. This camp gained only 3 members following the 20th Knesset elections, reflecting the impasse in which the Israeli left found itself, and even the center in the face of the right's force, especially the extreme right. It can be concluded that voters in Israel tended toward more extremism, both in these elections and the preceding ones.

What was remarkable about this election was that the Arab parties and lists united in a Joint List in order to raise the electoral threshold referred to earlier. The advocates of raising the electoral threshold, including Avigdor Lieberman, the Yisrael Beitenu party leader, wanted to prevent the election of Arabs to the Knesset. Arab parties felt that their political presence within the Israeli parliament was threatened and that they might disappear from the partisan scene if they went solo and did not make the electoral threshold. Despite the fundamental differences between the Arab parties, their coming together in a Joint List for the 20th Knesset elections had great benefits, most notably unity (albeit somewhat forced) among themselves and putting aside their differences, putting the public interest before their own. Also, the list's victory was a slap in the face of the Israeli far right that sought to exclude Arabs from political life in Israel. The actions of the Arab parties demonstrated a pragmatic ability to move and adapt to new circumstances and emerging challenges, in addition to appearing locally, regionally, and internationally, as advocates of unity and unification. Such an act is a huge challenge on the Palestinian Arab domestic scene.



There was a relatively high participation rate (63.5%) among Arabs in the Knesset elections, the highest since the 15th Knesset elections in 1999 (75%); after it reached 53.4% in the 2009 elections, and 56.5% in the 2013 elections. Moreover, Arab representation in the Knesset reached its highest level since the first Israeli parliamentary elections in 1949, with 16 Arab deputies, including 12 deputies from the Joint List (in addition to a Jewish deputy); while four other Arabs also emerged victorious from four Israeli parties: Zionist Camp, Meretz, Likud, and Yisrael Beitenu. For the first time, an Arab bloc became the third bloc in parliament in terms of the number of deputies, after Likud and Zionist Camp.

According to statistics, 82.4% of Arab votes went to the Joint List, while 16.8% of the votes went to the Israeli parties. The popularity of the Joint List reached 94% in the Triangle area, 87% in the Negev, and 77% in the north. Moreover, the 81% rate of Druze votes for Israeli parties reduced the overall Arab votes for the Arab List, for which only 18.8% of Druze areas voted, a rate comparable to the Druze rates in the elections of 2009 and 2013.¹⁷ There are usually Druze deputies in the Knesset representing Israeli parties.

After Netanyahu was tasked with forming the 34th government (his fourth), he was able to bring it together in the form of a coalition of 61 Knesset members from Likud, Jewish Home, Kulanu, Shas, and United Torah Judaism. The government won the confidence of the Knesset on 14/5/2015.¹⁸ The ministerial portfolios were distributed among the members of the coalition government, and two portfolios were added in violation of the set number of 18 portfolios as provided by the law.¹⁹

The government was formed by 11 ministers from the Likud, some of whom took over more than one portfolio, three ministers from the Kulanu list, three ministers from the Jewish Home Party, three from Shas, and one from the United Torah Judaism party.

Several petitions were submitted to the Supreme Court against the government, especially as regards the coalition agreements for being incompatible with the foundations of democracy, transparency and the public interest, as the interests of the parties forming the government emerged, as well as their interest in providing

¹⁷ See Arik Rudnitzky, "An Analysis of the 20th Knesset Election Results in the Arab Sector," in Bayan the Arabs in Israel, Issue no. 5, June 2015, <http://www.aftau.org/document.doc?id=385>

¹⁸ *Alghad* newspaper, Amman, 26/3/2015.

¹⁹ *Al-Hayat*, 15/5/2015.

the necessary funds for their institutions. But the Court rejected all these petitions and appeals based on the freedom to act within the law.

Observers believe that the coalition of Netanyahu's government is extremely fragile, and that any difference in opinion and attitude between him and a member of the government, whether from his own party or any other party, could lead to its collapse. And then Israel would hold new parliamentary elections, confirming that governments in Israel are not stable, and that it is unreasonable that the elections are held once every two years. This implies that elections and governance need to be revisited and built anew.

The Central Election Committee voted to disqualify Member of Knesset (MK) Hanin Zoabi from running in Knesset elections because of her participation on board the Mavi Marmara Turkish ship, which sought to break the siege on GS (in 2010). The High Court of Justice overturned that ruling and gave permission to MK Zoabi to participate in the elections. This was not the first time that right-wing parties operated to prevent the nomination of an Arab Deputy based on the premises of political differences, and to prevent Arab participation in political life in Israel.²⁰

Despite of the fragility of the Netanyahu government in the Knesset, it sought throughout 2015 to end the track of negotiations with the Palestinian side. Moreover, its repressive policies toward the Jerusalem *Intifadah* in the last quarter of 2015, confirmed its extremist tendencies to pressure Palestinians to give up what remains of their land and rights. But, along with this, there are signs of political turmoil inside Israel, which may lead to new parliamentary elections by the end of 2016 or early 2017,²¹ which are likely to produce a similar result.

2. Racist Laws

The “Jewishness of Israel” stirred a broad debate not only in the Knesset, but also the media and the education system. As regards education, a racist draft law²² was put forward stipulating that the role of the system is to promote Israel as a state for the Jewish people, and that the state is for the people of Israel only, with respect given to its religious minorities.

²⁰ Aljazeera.net, 16/2/2015.

²¹ According to Avigdor Lieberman Statements, Hebrew site of Walla, 30/8/2015, <http://www.walla.co.il>

²² *Asharq Alawsat*, 24/11/2014. See Draft law text, site of the Israeli Ministry of Justice, <http://www.justice.gov.il/StateIdentity/ProposedBasicLaws/Pages/NationalState.aspx>



There was also an attempt to enact a law that eliminates the legal status of Arabic as an official language in Israel. Arabic has been an official language since Israel was established in 1948. This attempt falls within a larger project of Judaizing all aspects of life in Israel, and as part of de-listing Arabic as a second official language and the mobilization of Arabic speakers for the Israeli project.²³

Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon issued a directive that bans Palestinian workers from traveling on Israeli-run public transportation in the WB, because they pose a threat to the lives of Israelis. The move falls within the Israeli apartheid policies in regard to the separation of populations.²⁴

He also pushed a bill declaring Israel as the “nation-state of the Jewish people,” spurring a heated debate in the Knesset between the right-wing, religious and secular parties. Some, including Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, considered it to be against the course of democracy in Israel. It was frozen at the request of the religious parties as a condition of their coalition with Netanyahu during the formation of his fourth government in 2015.

It was not the first time that Lieberman issues racist remarks, having called for the expulsion of Arabs from Israel to maintain the Jewish purity of Israel as well as guaranteeing the Jewish demographic advantage. He also called for the exchange of areas to get rid of the largest number of Arabs, thus alluding to the project that gave the Wadi Ara Triangle to the PA, in exchange for the annexation of settlements in the WB, which would lead to a decrease in the number of Arabs in Israel and an increase of Jews. Lieberman considers that the Arabs in Israel as the fifth column.²⁵

2014 and 2015 witnessed increasing attempts by the government of Israel and the Hebrew municipality of Jerusalem at the intense Judaization of Jerusalem. In the same context, there were continued attempts by ministers, Knesset members and leaders of the Israeli settler movement to storm the *al-Aqsa* Mosque in order to confirm Israeli claims that support Jews' rights in the “Temple Mount.” It is worth mentioning that these continued Israeli attempts are one of the reasons behind the Jerusalem *Intifadah*, which began in the last quarter of 2015. There were increased cases of harassment against the Jerusalemites and disruption of

²³ *Al-Hayat al-Jadida* newspaper, Ramallah, 28/8/2014.

²⁴ Site of Zamnpress, 20/5/2015, <http://zamnpress.com/news/75449> (in Arabic); and see *Haaretz* newspaper, 26/10/2014, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.622414>

²⁵ *Haaretz*, 14/2/2014, <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-1.642229>

their daily lives through the Israeli forces' continued inspection of individuals, homes, and shops. This was in addition to preventing the entry of Palestinians under 45 years old to *al-Aqsa* Mosque for Friday prayers; the demolition of houses under the pretext of a lack of a permit; and the expulsion of Jerusalemite families from their homes, especially in Silwan,²⁶ under various pretexts.

The conflict in Jerusalem reached its peak with the kidnapping of the young boy Muhammad Abu Khudair,²⁷ who was burned alive at the hands of three settlers. This horrific incident and the preceding and subsequent events led Jerusalemites and others to gather around and protect Jerusalem from escalating Judaization.²⁸

This was followed by the burning of the Dawabsheh family in the village of Duma south of Nablus, which showcased the horror of the crimes of occupation by settlers.²⁹ Defense Minister Ya'alon used security reasons to explain the Israeli authorities taking their time in identifying the perpetrators of this crime. But due to the sharp media and public debate in the Israeli street, indictments were submitted and the killers were identified and tried. The case went beyond a mere trial of the perpetrators, as it revealed racist backgrounds outlined in educational programs and books in addition to religious discourse in religious institutes that were forcefully established in the settlements in the WB and Arab Jerusalem. Moreover, it exposed the racism of settlers who raised a picture of the Dawabsheh family at the tip of a knife and danced during a wedding. Israeli intelligence began to expose Jewish terrorist gangs³⁰ with serious criminal plans against the Palestinians in the WB, their main objective being the expulsion of Palestinians from their land and homes. Inevitably, these painful events revealed the PA's inability to provide security and safety for its citizens despite the ongoing security coordination with Israel.

The Dawabsheh incident prompted Palestinians to respond to the crimes of settlers with a series of operations and confrontations with the Israeli soldiers and settlers that ultimately became known as the "Jerusalem *Intifadah*" or the "knives revolution." This situation pushed Lieberman to submit a proposal for the application of a law allowing the execution of Palestinian resistance fighters.

²⁶ *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 3/10/2015.

²⁷ Aljazeera.net, 4/7/2014.

²⁸ The Central Court of Jerusalem issued on 4/2/2016 a life sentence for one of the accused, and a sentence of 21 years for the other, site of the Israeli Ministry of Justice, <http://www.justice.gov.il/Pubilcations/News/Pages/SentenceAbuHadir.aspx>

²⁹ *Arabs* 48, 3/1/2016.

³⁰ *Maariv* newspaper, 12/5/2014.



3. Corruption Cases

The Tel Aviv District Court convicted former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of accepting bribes and committing a breach of trust in what became known as the “HolyLand scandal” in Jerusalem.³¹ The same court sentenced Olmert to a six-year jail sentence. However, Olmert’s attorneys appealed to the Supreme Court in Jerusalem, and he was acquitted of receiving bribes in the scandal, and the sentence was commuted to a year and a half on other issues.³² In addition to causing outcry in public opinion in Israel, this trial demonstrated the contradictions in the judiciary in dealing with cases of financial corruption concerning political figures. Another financial scandal in the ranks of Yisrael Beiteinu party leaders was revealed in 2014, as large amounts of money were illegally transferred to Israeli associations loyal to the party. Among the most prominent names linked to this scandal were the Minister of Tourism Stas Misezhnikov and Deputy Interior Minister Fania Kirshenbaum, who saw indictments submitted against them. The scandal undoubtedly affected the party’s voters who are mostly constituted of Russian immigrants.³³

There was another scandal regarding money laundering, bribery, fraud, tax evasion and breach of public trust by former minister and leader of the Labor Party Binyamin (Fuad) Ben-Eliezer, who was interrogated at the embezzlement and fraud unit. There were some who considered the indictment that was submitted against him as the most serious indictment in the history of Israel against a prominent political figure. “The investigation of Ben-Eliezer uncovered approximately ³⁴\$500,000 in cash in his home. He allegedly took tens of thousands of dollars in return for favors.”³⁵ The political scene in 2016 will witness his trial in addition to other financial corruption and breach of trust cases.³⁶

Another financial scandal that provoked strong reactions in political circles and the media was linked to the confession by senior settler movement leader Gershon Mesika of transferring large amounts of governmental funds to the settlement projects outside the framework set in the public budget.³⁷

³¹ *Haaretz*, 13/5/2014.

³² Palestinian Press Agency (Safa), 25/5/2015; and site of Walla, 29/12/2015, <http://news.walla.co.il/item/2920077> (in Hebrew)

³³ *Arabs* 48, 19/4/2015.

³⁴ US Dollar.

³⁵ Site of The Jewish Press.com, 2/12/2015, <http://www.jewishpress.com/news/breaking-news/labor-party-icon-ben-eliezer-indicted-for-bribery-and-money-laundering/2015/12/02/>

³⁶ *Haaretz*, 2/12/2015, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/law/1.2789821>

³⁷ *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 22/5/2015, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4660225,00.html>

The involvement of several politicians and government employees in financial fraud and money laundering reflected deteriorating standards of values and ethics, and circumvention of the law with the assistance and coverage of police and senior officials in the state apparatus.³⁸

The Israeli media published news and reports on sexual harassment scandals by politicians, police officers, military officials and Jewish clerics, the most notable of which being minister Silvan Shalom's scandal at the end of 2015.³⁹ However, the charges against him began to spread in 2014, and continued throughout 2015. Shalom, a prominent Likud leader, had to step down from political life due to political, popular, and media pressure against him. It should be noted that scandals like this have followed one another over the past two years among senior officers in the army and police, so much so that it was said derisively that there were no longer officers to run the police.⁴⁰

The Jewish Home MK Yinon Magal, a former journalist, was forced to resign from the Knesset due to complaints lodged against him by women who were subjected to sexual harassment, as he admitted himself.⁴¹ Moreover, MK Oren Hazan (Likud) was accused of managing a casino and a prostitution ring in Bulgaria, but he had not yet resigned at the time of writing.

These scandals increased in the period covered by this report, the most notable of which was the scandal involving the Prime Minister's wife, Sara Netanyahu. It emerged that she "kept thousands of shekels from deposits on empty bottles that were returned, on her orders, to supermarkets in Jerusalem over the course of several years even though the bottle deposits were state property."⁴² This was in addition to her rude and coarse manner with the residence staff, which raised the ire of public opinion, the media and the judiciary, and police began investigating her based on complaints made by a number of staff members, namely by the residence caretaker Menny Naftali. An indictment was submitted against Sara Netanyahu in

³⁸ Researcher Doron Navot discusses the history and evolution of this phenomenon from the founding of Israel until 2015 in his book: Doron Navot, *Political Corruption in Israel* (Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, 2015), <https://www.idi.org.il/media/2447100/00045112.pdf> (in Hebrew)

³⁹ Calcalist indicated a 5% rise in sexual harassment complaints and it published a list of relevant complaints for 2015, <http://www.calcalist.co.il/home/0,7340,L-3704-832,00.html>

⁴⁰ Site of The Marker, 5/4/2015, <http://www.themarker.com/> (in Hebrew)

⁴¹ *Maariv*, 4/12/2015 and 12/6/2015.

⁴² *Haaretz*, 29/1/2015.



the Labor Court in Jerusalem, and the court awarded Naftali 170 thousand shekels (about \$44 thousand) in damages over claims of verbal and emotional abuse.

4. Prosecutions and Political Strictures

Prosecutions and political strictures increased significantly over the past two years and were directed against Arab citizens of Israel. The most prominent political and judicial prosecution was against former MK Said Naffa⁴³, who was accused of visiting Syria and meeting with parties hostile to Israel as stated in the indictment, noting that hundreds of Arab citizens of Israel have visited Syria as per specific arrangements that were conducted for this purpose. The Israeli court sentenced Naffa⁴³ to nine months in jail.

In this context, the Government of Israel's decision to outlaw the Islamic Movement - Northern Branch and ban its activities⁴⁴ carried out by 19 associations and foundations represented a strong blow to the movement, primarily as it was obliged to cease all activities in accordance with the law to avoid any sanctions.⁴⁵ Secondly, it revealed more of Israel's concerns about the movement's surge in popularity among the Muslims of the 1948 occupied territories, especially since the movement carried out a series of political, religious, social, economic and cultural activities, which prompted the government to consider it a state within a state. However, these activities would not have taken place had it not been for the state's shortcomings in meeting the needs of some of those who are supposed to be its citizens. In addition, this move revealed the functioning of the Israeli government towards the besiegement, crackdown, and surveillance of Arab citizens, whom it always treats with suspicion.⁴⁶

Sheikh Raed Salah, head of the Islamic Movement inside the Green Line, confirmed that banning the movement's activities would not discourage it from performing its mission and emerge victorious in its principles, the most prominent being to defend Jerusalem and *al-Aqsa* Mosque. Sheikh Salah also pointed out that the Islamic Movement's popular base would continue to march forward, stressing that the prosecution and arrest of its leaders would not dismantle it. He also accused

⁴³ Arabs 48, 19/9/2015.

⁴⁴ Ma'an News Agency, 18/11/2015.

⁴⁵ According to a decision issued by the political security cabinet in Israel on 17/11/2015.

⁴⁶ Muhammad Khalayleh, Containment and Exclusion Policies: The Case of the Arab Community in Israel, site of al-Jabha, 21/11/2015, <http://aljabha.org/index.asp?i=95819&titi> (in Arabic)

an unnamed Arab side of supporting the ban on the movement.⁴⁷ Moreover, Salah's Deputy Kamal Khatib accused official Arab parties of being complicit with Israel in the movement's ban. He believed that the reason for the ban was the movement's position on the *al-Aqsa* Mosque and its defense of it. Khatib said, "Netanyahu and his government are mistaken if they think that we will stop defending *al-Aqsa* [Mosque]. We will spare no means and we will never back down from our goal."⁴⁸

As for Lieberman, he considered that the Islamic Movement and the Arab MKs constituted a strategic threat to Israel, and this opinion was shared by Silvan Shalom, former Minister of the Interior. For his part, Netanyahu saw that the movement incited violence in East Jerusalem and Arab towns and villages in the interior. He accused the Islamic movement of being behind the violent events in the Palestinian territories. As for MK Ayman Odeh, head of the Joint List, he considered that the ban of the movement an incitement against Arabs, and stated that the Joint List would prevent the implementation of such a decision.⁴⁹ Moreover, academic Zakaria al-Qaq, who is a professor at Al-Quds University in Abu Dis, near Jerusalem, thinks that Israel is seeking to block the Islamic Movement from doing its work in *al-Aqsa* Mosque and will weaken the movement by outlawing it.⁵⁰

Some Israeli and Arab observers believe that the ban of the movement is a political mistake committed by the government and has led to the strengthening of the movement and its activities, which has lasted for three decades. Yoram Cohen, the then chief of the Israel Security Agency (*Shabak*) or Shin Bet said that "the Shin Bet had no intelligence linking the group to terrorism."⁵¹ This step was considered part of the measures undertaken by the Netanyahu government and its predecessors to impose more restrictions and surveillance on Arabs since they are the "internal enemy."

⁴⁷ Aljazeera.net, 17/11/2015.

⁴⁸ Site of Anadolu Agency, 17/11/2015, <http://www.aa.com.tr>

⁴⁹ *Al-Ayyam* newspaper, Ramallah, 18/11/2015.

⁵⁰ Anadolu Agency, <http://www.aa.com.tr>

⁵¹ *Haaretz*, 2/11/2015.



5. Election of a New Israeli President

The Knesset elected Reuven Rivlin as the new Israeli president (a Likud MK who served as Speaker of the 16th and the 18th Knesset).⁵² He is known for his radical right-wing stances and has been a steady presence in the Likud. He is not concerned with dissidents and he was one of the most vocal opponents of Netanyahu. His election was a setback for Netanyahu, who wishes to abolish the presidency in Israel and allow the prime minister to wield increased power. In other words, internal politics in Israel should tend toward the dictatorship of management and decision making according to Netanyahu's vision. It is worth mentioning that the presidency is more symbolic than practical or effective. However, a number of Israeli presidents, and in particular those who possess a strong political background, have left their impact on certain political issues. This is the case of Rivlin, who has expressed his opinion freely, especially in regard to racist laws, knowing that he is not a supporter of the establishment of a Palestinian state. Indeed, he supports a one-state system according to the Zionist-Israeli perspective.

6. The Repercussions of the Israeli Aggression on GS

The domestic scene in Israel witnessed a split regarding the aggression on GS, as the intelligence figures severely criticized the political side by claiming that the aggression was not necessary. A number of former intelligence figures issued strong criticism against the government's policies in GS. Israel incurred gross human and financial losses, and its attempt at garnering international sympathy as the permanent victim failed completely. However, there was a tightening of the blockade on the GS with only essential items allowed to enter in limited quantities monitored by Israel. Moreover, the international community has failed to put an end to these Israeli practices against the Palestinian people. As for the internal political dealing in Israel, there is almost a consensus among all Israeli parties on the need to continue the GS blockade under the pretext of preventing the exposure of southern Israel to shelling from there. The voices condemning the aggression were not sufficient to lift the siege and give the Palestinians more freedom of movement and access.⁵³

⁵² *Asharq Alawsat*, 11/6/2014.

⁵³ Shahar Benhorin, *Repercussions of the Gaza War*, site of Socialist Struggle, 14/9/2014, <http://socialism.org.il/maavak/?article=1261>

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