

The Palestinian Strategic Report
2014 – 2015
Ch.3



The Palestinian Issue and the Arab World

2014 – 2015



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Introduction

The impact of developments in the Arab world in 2014 and 2015 significantly influenced the strategic environment of Palestine, in their impact on both the domestic Palestinian scene and regional dynamics. They mostly enhanced the position of Israel in the conflict at the expense of the Palestinians and Arabs in general. Resistance forces took a particular hit.

Developments in the “ring countries,” especially the crises in Syria and Egypt, and their impact on Lebanon and GS, led to the deterioration of the position of major forces that threaten Israel on its northern and southern borders. On one hand, the continued fighting in Syria and the increased involvement of Hizbullah there, have participated to the exhaustion of the northern front on the military, economic and human levels. On the other hand, restoring the close “strategic relationship” between Israel and Egypt, the largest Arab military power, have secured the southern front and weakened the Resistance in the GS, which was also negatively impacted by the Syrian crisis.

Simultaneously, the increased internal conflict between change and counter change forces in many Arab countries, which led in 2014 and 2015 to a setback in the revolutions of Arab Spring and deepening of internal crises and their development into internal and regional wars, have weakened support for the Palestinian issue. Consequent human, political and economic losses inflicted on Arab countries and the social rift indicate that the region would be occupied for the foreseeable future with compensating the losses and repairing the destruction and damage wrought by conflicts, which might also extend for several years.

In addition, the ongoing conflicts have taken precedence over the Palestinian issue, as they are reshaping the geopolitical map of the region and have become a power struggle between the major regional powers, with the participation of international powers, most clearly visible in, but not limited to, the crisis in Syria.

¹ This study is the approved English translation of chapter three of the book entitled: *The Palestinian Strategic Report 2014–2015*, edited by Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh. Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations in Beirut released the Arabic version in 2016. The first draft of this chapter was written by Mr. Hasan Ibhais.

This transformation is currently a danger to the Palestinian issue, for reshaping the region means the reformation of camps according to new priorities and alliances, and a new assessment of sources of danger. This implies that the Arab-Israeli conflict is no longer the central regional conflict but has been replaced by an Arab-Iranian or Sunni-Shiite one. To this is added the re-emergence of extremist Islamic organizations that excommunicate and kill, further complicating the net of interests and alliances in the region.

First: Stances of the League of Arab States

1. Impact of Arab World Transformations on the Palestinian Issue

Studying the role played by the League of Arab States (LAS) in the Palestinian issue during 2014 and 2015, it is clear that its level of concern was more limited than during previous years.

The regional transformations that began in early 2011 continued to influence the LAS agenda, at the expense of the Palestinian issue. This was more so because of the crisis in Syria and its overlap with political developments in Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon. It became an international and regional arena for power struggle and a priority for Arab and regional countries, in addition to being another reason for Arab division.

Concerning internal crises, the confrontation between pro-change forces and those opposing change became a priority for a number of Arab countries in 2014. They launched a campaign to exclude Islamists, especially the MB movement, from the political scene. This confrontation has led to a discord between Qatar on one hand, and other Gulf countries and Egypt on the other, as was clear in the 25th summit of the LAS held in Kuwait in March 2014 when further departure from the Palestinian issue was noticed.

Besides the deterioration of the Palestinian issue among Arab priorities, the Kuwait summit and the following summit held in Sharm el-Sheikh in March 2015 maintained traditional position towards the Palestinian issue, whether concerning reconciliation, the peace process or any other matter.

In 2012 and 2013 the LAS stances improved concerning relations with Hamas and solidarity with GS against the Israeli aggression. While in 2014, the League demonstrated a weak position regarding Israel's summer aggression (dubbed



Operation Protective Edge by Israel and Operation Eaten Straw by Hamas), as compared to the stance during the 2012 Israeli aggression (dubbed Operation Pillar of Defense by Israel, and Operation Stones of Baked Clay by Hamas). Ultimately, the unprecedented visit to Gaza in 2012 by a delegate of Arab foreign ministers, headed by the LAS Secretary General was replaced in 2014 with support for the Egyptian initiative for ceasefire. This shows a deterioration in the influence of the Arab street on LAS stances, and the persistence of traditional Arab regime stances.

2. The Stance Regarding the Palestinian Internal Conflict

LAS stances mainly reflected official Arab positions towards the Palestinian schism. It supports the PA chaired by Mahmud ‘Abbas, the reconciliation agreement signed in GS in April 2014, and the National Consensus Government formed thereafter.

The wording of resolutions adopted at the 26th Arab summit in this regard was a clear indicator of this position. It reiterated respect for Palestinian national legitimacy under President ‘Abbas, appreciating his efforts at achieving national reconciliation. It stressed the continued support of the National Consensus Government under ‘Abbas’s leadership and commitment to the unity of the Palestinian decision, while working within the framework of the PLO, as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.² However, the position bypassed any reference to the unified frame of leadership stipulated in the 2011 Gaza reconciliation agreement.

Notably, the LAS did not witness any genuine diplomatic or political action in 2014 and 2015 regarding Palestinian reconciliation, aside from supporting the agreements reached and hailing the Egyptian role in this respect, although it was limited in the final agreement.

3. The Position Towards the Peace Process

There were no changes in 2014 and 2015 in LAS stances regarding the peace process as it still clings to the Arab Peace Initiative despite 13 years having elapsed since it was proposed and the absence of any Israeli response to it. Efforts mainly focused on providing political cover for the Palestinian negotiator; supporting PA

² See Volume of Resolutions and Statements, Regular Summit 26, Summit Meeting of League of Arab States Council, Sharm el-Sheikh, 29/3/2015, pp. 8–22, <http://www.lasportal.org/ar/summits/Documents/%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%AF%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA%20.pdf>

steps in international forums most remarkably presenting a draft resolution for ending the Israeli occupation in the UN Security Council. In addition, the LAS reiterated its commitment to providing a financial safety net for the PA, but it never had any real impact on the course of negotiations.

In the context of stances supportive of the PA leadership, the LAS Kuwait summit completely rejected the recognition of Israel as a “Jewish state” and the pressures applied to the PA in this respect.³ Also, the Arab foreign ministers supported Palestinian efforts to attain membership in specialized international bodies and to join international agreements and treaties in concurrence with the consent to the demand by American Secretary of State John Kerry to extend the round of Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, which was supposed to end on 29/4/2014.⁴

As those negotiations failed, the LAS espoused a plan of action that adopted the PA recourse to the UN Security Council to present a draft resolution imposing a timeframe for ending the occupation. Indeed, the draft resolution was presented on 30/12/2014 via Jordan as the representative of the Arab Group; however, the step failed as it only secured eight of the nine votes needed to pass and was vetoed by the US.⁵

The 26th Arab summit in 2015 re-commissioned the Arab ministerial committee in charge of following up on the Palestinian issue to put forward a new plan to resort to UN Security Council with a similar resolution. It also reaffirmed its support for the PCC decisions calling for the reconsideration of all political, economic and security relations with Israel, which would ensure its commitment to signed agreements and its respect for international law and related international resolutions.⁶

But the efforts to submit a new draft resolution to the UN Security Council in 2015 did not crystallize despite the attempts to reach a wording acceptable for most sides. Thus, the efforts by France, the permanent member in the Security Council, to submit a draft resolution for ending the occupation failed and it withdrew it under US pressure.⁷

³ *Al-Ayyam*, Ramallah, 27/3/2014.

⁴ *Asharq Alawsat* newspaper, London, 10/4/2014.

⁵ Site of Aljazeera.net, 31/12/2014.

⁶ See Volume of Resolutions and Statements, Regular Summit 26, Summit Meeting of League of Arab States Council, Sharm el-Sheikh, 29/3/2015, pp. 8–22.

⁷ *Alghad* newspaper, Amman, 7/7/2015.



Second: Stances and Roles of Some Key Countries

1. Egypt

Egypt's internal transformations and its interaction with the Palestinian issue in 2014 and 2015 served to improve the strategic environment for Israel. They enhanced the latter's position as a regional partner, enjoying stable relations with Cairo in contrast to the deterioration in Egypt's relations with the Palestinian Resistance in GS, which was approached as a primary source of threat for Egyptian security on its eastern border.

At the same time, the disruption of the change course in Egypt was good news for Israel, which had eyed the repercussions of the Arab Spring and the rise of Islamists to power with concern. Israel welcomed the disruption as it enhanced the position of Arab forces that adopt the peace settlement as a strategic solution for the Arab-Israeli conflict, and it weakened its internal opponents without strengthening the Palestinian position vis-à-vis Israel. This was demonstrated in the strengthening of the position of the PA and Fatah Movement in the internal conflict with Hamas without any genuine support for improving the Palestinians' position in negotiations with Israel.

a. The Impact of Internal Changes on the Palestinian Issue

During 2014 and 2015, Egypt witnessed a series of internal changes, which impacted the Palestinian issue. These changes marked a continuation of the political crisis in Egypt since the January 25 Uprising, where there has been a conflict between the pro-change forces and those opposing it.

Politically, during these two years, Egyptian policy towards the Palestinian issue returned to the pre-January 25 revolution period. More specifically, the election of General 'Abdul Fattah al-Sisi as president and the restoration to power of the military meant Egypt approached the Palestinian issue based on two essential determinants:

The first was the adoption of peace settlement as a strategic option for resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. This would mean supporting the Palestinian side that adopted this position and a decline in relations with those who opposed it. Particularly, Hamas whose relations with Egypt have deteriorated, after it was accused of interfering with internal Egyptian affairs during the January 25 uprising and its aftermath, in support of the MB movement; the main opponent of the authority which assumed power after the July 2013 coup.

The other determinant is the management of relations with GS based primarily on Egyptian national security considerations, especially with the continued worsening of the security conditions in Sinai. Additionally, there was the refusal of any side to take responsibility for the GS humanitarian crisis, given that the Israeli occupation is the side imposing the siege and thus bears sole responsibility. Hence, Egypt would not perceive the tunnels between GS and the Egyptian territories as a normal state although they have been a primary passageway for importing commodities into the Strip and overcoming the Israeli siege. For the Egyptian regime, there were no guarantees that the tunnels would not be used for other purposes. The regime also seemed unconcerned with changing the nature of Rafah crossing as one dedicated only for the movement of individuals, and whose opening and closure constitute a sovereign Egyptian decision, subject to different security and political considerations.

These changes have had repercussions on Egyptian conduct towards the Palestinian issue in a number of areas, notably the following:

1. The War on Tunnels

The Egyptian Army continued its destruction of tunnels between the GS and Egypt, thus targeting the lifeline on which Gazans depended to import essential commodities and goods as the Israeli siege remained intact. The tunnels were categorized by the Egyptian authorities as the main reason for the deterioration of security conditions in Sinai as they had been used as a conduit for weapons and armed men. Targeting tunnels was a continuation of the campaign launched after the killing of Egyptian soldiers in the Egyptian Rafah on 5/8/2012, and for which Egypt accused Hamas of being involved, thus marking one of the first signs of conflict between toppled President Muhammad Morsi and the military establishment led by General ‘Abdul Fattah al-Sisi.⁸ This campaign was further expanded in 2014 and 2015 through military and legal procedures to completely destroy the tunnels, including:

- Establishing a military fence along the Gaza-Egypt border by virtue of a decision made by the Egyptian authorities after a self-immolation⁹ attack

⁸ See *Al-Akhabar* newspaper, Beirut, 23/3/2013.

⁹ The overwhelming majority of Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims consider these operations to be “martyrdom operations” while most Israelis and western writers and media describe them as “suicide operations”. We used the word “self-immolation” in this report to be as neutral as possible. However, such terms may need more discussion.



targeted a military outpost in Karam al-Qawadis in North Sinai on 24/10/2014, leading to the killing of 28 soldiers, for which Palestinian individuals were charged.¹⁰

The decision included the establishment of a buffer zone extending 500 meters from the border fence.¹¹ The zone was expanded to two kilometers in later decisions that included the complete removal of Egyptian Rafah city after the discovery of tunnels extending further in to Egypt.¹²

- Employing new techniques for the destruction of tunnels, mainly through pumping sea water in the soil via a huge pipe along the border in order to flood the tunnels and loosen the soil surrounding them thus causing their collapse.¹³ This step was of major concern to Palestinians as sea water would cause great damage to Palestinian groundwater, the main source of water in Gaza, as well as for agricultural land in the Strip. Besides, it would move the soil and cause the collapse of Palestinian buildings and structures established on the Palestinian side of the borders.¹⁴ In response to this controversy, President al-Sisi said that all measures pursued by the Egyptian authorities on the border with Gaza were being coordinated with the PA.¹⁵
- Issuing a law which punishes the digging of tunnels, using them or equipping them for any purpose with a lifetime sentence. The new law punishes anyone convicted of having knowledge of a tunnel and using it or of any plot to dig one with the same life sentence.¹⁶

As the Egyptian Army has destroyed more than 2000 tunnels between the GS and Egypt since the coup in July 2013,¹⁷ and the repercussions of tunnel destruction have mainly been experienced in the economic and environmental conditions in Gaza (and Sinai) while the security conditions in the Peninsula continued to deteriorate as attacks against the Egyptian Army and security forces

¹⁰ *Asharq Alawsat*, 26/10/2014; and *Assafir* newspaper, Beirut, 29/10/2014.

¹¹ *Assafir*, 29/10/2014.

¹² See *Almesryoon* newspaper, Cairo, 7/1/2015; and *al-Quds al-Arabi* newspaper, London, 29/4/2015.

¹³ Quds Press International News Agency, London, 18/9/2015.

¹⁴ See Mohammed Othman, Rafah farmers Watch in Horror as Egypt Floods Gaza Tunnels, site of al-Monitor, 25/9/2015, See <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ru/originals/2015/09/egypt-army-flood-rafa-tunnels-palestinian-houses.html#ixzz483VUICTf> (in Arabic)

¹⁵ Aljazeera.net, 27/9/2015.

¹⁶ Aljazeera.net, 12/4/2015.

¹⁷ Aljazeera.net, 19/9/2015.

increased again in January and February 2016. These were carried out by Wilayat Sinai, which has pledged allegiance to ISIS.

The above observations raise doubt as to the efficiency of the war on tunnels in achieving peace in Sinai. In addition, the lack of evidence of Palestinian involvement in these attacks casts doubt regarding the credibility of the accusations against GS, categorizing it as a source of danger for Egypt's national security.

2. Closing the Rafah Crossing

Internal political crisis in Egypt and the decline of security conditions in Sinai, had a major impact on the management of Rafah crossing, where conditions deteriorated significantly in 2014 and 2015, a situation reminiscent of pre-January 25 uprising conditions. The May 2011 Egyptian measures to facilitate the crossing of Palestinians were cancelled, thus terminating all positive developments witnessed in the crossing from that time until the June 2013 coup. The decline was represented in re-enforcing the requirement for prior security permits for all age categories after the measure had been restricted to those aged between 18 and 40 years.¹⁸ In addition to increasing the closure days and decreasing operating hours on opening days to four. Ultimately, the crossing was opened 241 days in 2014 (closed for 66% of the year) while it was closed 344 days in 2015 (closed 94% of the year).¹⁹

Besides the renewed suffering of the Palestinians as they had to wait several hours in the “deportation hall” at the Rafah crossing until they were transferred to their destination, the number of Palestinians trapped in GS by the end of 2015 exceeded 25 thousand registered on travel lists at the Interior Ministry in Gaza, as well as thousands of non-registered people.²⁰

The management policy of the crossing changed as compared to the pre-June 2013 coup policy. The crossing operated regularly (Seven hours per day) during the first six months of 2013, and was closed for only five days, other than the weekends and public holidays. Whereas, it was closed for 100 days in the second half of the year and the working hours decreased to just four.²¹

¹⁸ *Okaz* newspaper, Jeddah, 10/7/2013.

¹⁹ See Monthly Reports on the State of Gaza Strip's Border Crossings issued by the Palestinian Center for Human Rights between 1/1/2014–31/12/2015, site of Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR), Gaza Blockade, <http://pchrghaza.org/ar/?cat=72> (in Arabic)

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ See Monthly Reports on the State of Gaza Strip's Border Crossings issued by the Palestinian Center for Human Rights between 1/1/2013–31/12/2013, PCHR, Gaza Blockade, <http://pchrghaza.org/ar/?cat=72> (in Arabic)



The re-closure of the Strip to Arab and foreign visitors was another indicator of the change in Egyptian policy regarding GS, after the Strip was open to the world after the January 25 uprising. Also, the Egyptian authorities kept the Rafah crossing restricted for movement of individuals, as was obvious in the press releases of the Egyptian Army concerning its efforts to control the eastern borders. It frequently pointed out that Karm Abu Salem crossing was “the only legitimate outlet for access of goods into Gaza.”²²

In addition to the above changes, the Arab Affairs Committee in the Egyptian Parliament recommended that a legal study be conducted regarding the crossing between Egypt and GS and the method of its operation. It would allow the introduction of humanitarian aid to the Palestinians and provide them with petrol and electricity in case Israel abstained from fulfilling its obligations as an occupation authority.²³ Also during the same period, a three-stage plan was discussed to completely solve the electricity problem in GS and link it with the Eight Country Interconnection Project.²⁴

3. The Egyptian-Mediated Truce

There was a stark difference between the approach of Egyptian diplomacy towards reaching a ceasefire during the Israeli offensive on GS in summer 2014 and the efforts during the November 2012 attack. In 2014, Egypt refused the interference of any Arab side in the mediation as it sought to deal with the GS file as a solely Egyptian issue. This was in contradiction to the stance of President Morsi’s government during the 2012 offensive, where there was a keenness to include regional powers, such as Turkey and Qatar, which boosted Egypt’s position and its ability to pressure Israel to accept the conditions of the Resistance.

This conduct also reflected Cairo’s rejection of recognizing any legitimacy or authority for Hamas in GS. Egypt was keen to prevent the Resistance from achieving any political gains as its Foreign Ministry ignored the Resistance in GS in the formulation of its initiative, which was announced on 14/7/2014. It ignored the demands of the Resistance fighting on the ground. This, consequently, encouraged the Resistance to reject the Egyptian proposal, while Hamas stressed that it had not been officially consulted or informed about it.²⁵

²² Official website of Egyptian Ministry of Defense, Armed Forces News, Press Releases, <http://www.mod.gov.eg/Mod/MoreConf.aspx>

²³ Site of The Palestinian Information Center (PIC), 1/3/2012.

²⁴ Sama News Agency, 19/2/2012.

²⁵ Aljazeera.net, 15/7/2014.

The initiative, which placed at equal footing the Israeli acts of war against GS and the resistance operations, labeling both as aggressive acts, was immediately hailed by Israel, where the cabinet approved its announcement the next day.²⁶ Israeli Minister of Finance Yair Lapid praised its provisions, which sought to deprive Hamas of any genuine achievements on the ground, while ensuring that Israel would not have to make any concessions.²⁷ Later, Egypt rejected amending the initiative to meet the Resistance demands, while Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shukri even implicitly accused Hamas of extending the war and delaying the conclusion of a ceasefire agreement. In a press interview after the end of the aggression, he said that failing to accept the Egyptian initiative at an earlier time had caused an increased death toll.²⁸

At the same time, Egypt sought to enhance its role in GS through a call to convene an international donor conference for GS reconstruction in partnership with Norway and the PA. The conference, which was held in Cairo, on 12/10/2014, garnered \$5.4²⁹ billion in pledges, mainly from Qatar (\$1 billion), KSA (\$500 million), United Arab Emirates (UAE) (\$200 million) and Kuwait (\$200 million). Added to these commitments was additional aid approved for the Palestinians by the EU (\$568 million) and the US (\$212 million).³⁰

b. Egyptian-Palestinian Relations

Official relations between Cairo and the Palestinians generally restored the traditional form prevalent President Hosni Mubarak era, which supported the PA and the peace process with Israel. It backed the PA in its internal conflict with Hamas, rejected any influential political role for the Palestinian resistance factions, and restricted the relationship with them to within security issues (intelligence apparatus). This was considered a deterioration in relations, which had become inclusive to different Palestinian factions after the 2011 revolution.

Egyptian support for the PA in its conflict with Hamas was clear in the declarations of Cairo and Ramallah regarding the tunnels and Rafah crossing. In this sense, Egyptian President al-Sisi reiterated that the measures by the Egyptian

²⁶ Aljazeera.net, 15/7/2014.

²⁷ Site of Arabi21, 15/7/2014.

²⁸ Site of Deutsche Welle (Arabic), 1/9/2014.

²⁹ US Dollar.

³⁰ *The New York Times* newspaper, 12/10/2014,
http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/13/world/middleeast/us-pledges-212-million-in-new-aid-for-gaza.html?_r=0



Army to regulate the borders with GS were carried out in complete coordination with the PA, which, he said, should return to the GS and supervise the crossings, claiming this would help open them on regular basis.³¹ The Egyptian Ambassador in Ramallah, Wael Attia issued a similar statement regarding Rafah crossing as he said that the issue related to providing a mechanism for opening it under the supervision of the legitimate Palestinian authority.³² On the Palestinian end, there was a notable declaration by President ‘Abbas regarding the GS tunnels, where he said that he never wasted an opportunity to demand closure of the tunnels, whether through flooding them with sea water or building an iron fence on the borders. ‘Abbas’ statement came in an interview with al-Balad television in Egypt more than nine months before the Egyptian Army started this operation.³³

This imbalance in relations between Egypt and the PA leadership and Hamas, and the impact of political and security conditions, prevented Egypt from acting as an impartial mediator in the internal conflict between the two Palestinian factions, and affected its capacity to host dialogue. Although Egyptian efforts did not stop and a reconciliation agreement was signed in GS between Fatah and Hamas in the presence of the PLO factions on 22/4/2014, the above factors led to a decline in the pace of the reconciliation process in which Cairo insisted on monopolizing the process.

The continued deterioration of the Egypt’s official relations with Hamas after the July 2013 coup, which was the main issue in the Egyptian-Palestinian relations in 2014–2015, stemmed from Egypt accusing Hamas of interfering in internal Egyptian issues. This was in the context of the campaign launched by the Egyptian authorities against the MB movement, accusing it of involvement in “terrorism” against Egyptian security forces in Sinai.

The Egyptian judiciary’s verdicts against Hamas reflected the deterioration of relations between Cairo and Hamas, although the executive authority tried to avoid any effect of those verdicts on its role as an influential player in the Palestinian issue.

The first verdict was issued on 4/3/2014 as a “precautionary measure” which proposed temporarily banning Hamas’s activities in Egypt pending the ruling in the “spying” and “prison break” files in which Hamas members, together with toppled President Morsi and MB movement leaders, were accused of criminal

³¹ Aljazeera.net, 27/9/2015.

³² *Alquds* newspaper, 2/3/2015.

³³ Aljazeera.net, 19/9/2015.

responsibility.³⁴ In the context of holding Hamas responsible for the deterioration of security conditions in Sinai, in May 2014 Egypt's Public Prosecutor accused the Movement of supplying Ansar Bait al-Maqdis (later known as Wilayat Sinai after pledging allegiance to ISIS) with money and arms to attack the Egyptian Army in Sinai, and of training them in the GS.³⁵

However, the more severe verdicts targeting Hamas included designating Ezzedeen Al-Qassam Brigades as a "terrorist organization," on 31/1/2015, then designating the Movement itself within this category on 28/2/2015. Both verdicts accused Hamas of being directly involved in armed attacks against Egyptian security and military forces in Sinai as well as of killing protesters in Tahrir Square and supporting the "terrorist MB movement."³⁶ Nonetheless, neither verdict presented tangible evidence proving that Hamas or any of its members were involved in the acts.

Designating Hamas as a terrorist organization raised controversy regarding its consequences on Egypt's stance towards Hamas and the possible restrictions on the role of Egypt in the Palestinian issue. Accordingly, the Egyptian government appealed the ruling of the Cairo Court for Urgent Matters through the State Lawsuits Authority, for the lower court lacked jurisdiction to issue the original ruling. On 6/6/2015, the Cairo Appeal Court for Urgent Matters overturned the ruling,³⁷ a decision that was welcomed by Hamas and several Egyptian parties.

Although since that time Hamas has repeatedly expressed its desire to improve its relationship with Egypt, developments in early 2016 did not suggest that a thaw is imminent. Egypt accused Hamas of involvement in the internal Egyptian crisis, days after Mahmud al-Zahhar, Hamas political bureau member, declared the Movement's aspiration for a new phase of relations with Egypt. He talked about the possibility of holding meetings with the Egyptian authorities to prove that the Movement does not interfere in Egyptian internal matters, especially in the ongoing developments in Sinai.³⁸ This time the accusation was launched by Egyptian Interior Minister Major General Magdy Abdel Ghaffar who said that Hamas and leaders of the MB movement were behind the assassination of former Attorney General Counselor Hisham Barakat through targeting his convoy with a

³⁴ *Asharq Alawsat*, 5/3/2014.

³⁵ *Al-Hayat* newspaper, London, 11/5/2014.

³⁶ *Almasry Alyoum* newspaper, Cairo, 1/2/2015 and 1/3/2015.

³⁷ Site of Ahramonline, 6/6/2015, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/132074.aspx>

³⁸ Aljazeera.net, 26/2/2016.



car bomb on 29/6/2015. Abdel Ghaffar announced in a press conference that “There is a major conspiracy targeting the Egyptian state... It began a long while ago and included a number of militant attacks, including the assassination of prosecutor-general Hisham Barakat.” He added that Turkish-based MB movement leaders masterminded the assassination, while Hamas “provided training for militants to execute it and also took part in planning it.”³⁹

As for the “prison break,” the Egyptian judiciary sentenced 107 people to death, including Hamas and Hizbullah leaders, along with President Muhammad Morsi, the General-Guide Muhammad Badi‘ and the President of the International Union For Muslim Scholars, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, after accusing them of involvement in al-Natrun prison escape case at the beginning of the January 25 uprising. Notably, 70 of the 107 names were of members and leaders in Hamas, including Ayman Nawfal and Ra’ed al-Attar,⁴⁰ who was killed during the offensive on GS in summer 2014. The “Hamas espionage case” was concluded with the sentencing of 16 persons to death, including Deputy General-Guide of the MB movement Khayrat al-Shatir, after they had been accused of “conspiring with foreign powers,” disclosure of national security secrets, and coordination with the Jihadi organizations inside and outside Egypt to destabilize the country.⁴¹

In addition, withdrawal of Egyptian citizenship from Palestinians, who had obtained it after the January 25 uprising, was also one of the issues that unfolded in the Egyptian-Palestinian relations of 2014. Egyptian Interior Minister Muhammad Ibrahim announced in November 2014 that all citizenship decisions granted at that time were being reviewed by committees that had already examined the origins of 24 thousand Palestinians, including Mahmud al-Zahhar and 11 of his family members, in order to withdraw citizenship from those who were not qualified to receive it.⁴² Yet, the Egyptian government did not pursue any further effective measures in this regard following this declaration.

The negative Egyptian position towards Hamas was used to incite public opinion. Remarkably, distortion campaigns went as far as supporting Israel during its offensive on GS in summer 2014.

³⁹ Ahramonline, 6/3/2016, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/190310.aspx>

⁴⁰ *Al-Hayat*, 17/5/2015.

⁴¹ *Al-Hayat*, 17/5/2015; and Ahramonline, 16/5/2015, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/130369/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt-court-issues-preliminary-death-sentence-to-M.aspx>

⁴² *Almasry Alyoum*, 6/11/2014.

Among the most notable examples in this context were the declarations by TV presenter Tawfiq ‘Okasha, cursing the Gazans on live shows aired on his channel al-Faraeen and his denouncement of sending aid by the Egyptian Army to those “who have sold themselves and their cause,” according to ‘Okasha.⁴³ Another example was the tweets by journalist ‘Azza Sami, deputy editor of al-Ahram newspaper, thanking Netanyahu for striking Hamas, “the basis of MB movement corruption, treason, and betrayal,”⁴⁴ as she claimed. Remarkably, these stances were mostly issued via pro-regime outlets, which could be interpreted as official consent, tacit approval, or at least ignorance, that encouraged their continuation. The danger of these campaigns is that they target the popular support of the Palestinian issue, which is an essential leverage for enhancing Egypt’s positive role towards the issue. This was proved in the short-lived experience of Egyptian foreign policy after the January 25 uprising.

c. The Stance on Peace Settlement and the Relation with Israel

In 2014 and 2015, calm was restored in Egyptian-Israeli relations and the Camp David Accord restored to its stable condition, for its fate was of concern for Israel since the outbreak of the January 25 uprising and the ouster of President Mubarak. This development came about because the military regained control over the reins of power in Egypt and the situation restored the conditions as they were during the rule of former President Anwar Sadat, who perceived the peace settlement with Israel as the main factor for maintaining Egypt’s strategic position in the region.

This orientation was demonstrated on 22/1/2015, in the speech of Egyptian President ‘Abdul Fattah al-Sisi at the World Economic Forum in Davos. He said that Egypt would continue its efforts to end the Palestinian-Israeli conflict based on the two-state solution and the establishment of a Palestinian state on the June 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital, considering it the only way for the people of the region to enjoy security. He added that prior to the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel no one had imagined that peace would take its current form, adding that no one could have imagined what President Sadat was thinking of when he proposed his vision for peace, but that time had proven the accuracy of his vision.⁴⁵

⁴³ Donia al-Watan electronic newspaper, 14/7/2014.

⁴⁴ Site of Yanair, 2/7/2014.

⁴⁵ *Asharq Alawsat*, 23/1/2015.



Comfortable relations were reflected in Egyptian and Israeli statements, security coordination reached unprecedented levels, correspondences between the two were continuous, and diplomatic relations were restored, where the Egyptian ambassador returned to Tel Aviv three years after he had been recalled to Cairo.⁴⁶ On the Egyptian side, declarations by President al-Sisi started as soon as he announced his candidacy for presidential elections, declaring that the peace treaty with Israel had been stable for more than 30 years and that although it has faced challenges, Egypt respects it and always would, adding that the Israelis know that very well. Al-Sisi also stressed that commitment to the peace treaty is a key issue for all leaders and public opinion in Egypt.⁴⁷ A few days later, al-Sisi stated that Israel realized that the absence of the Egyptian Army from Sinai was more dangerous to Israel than Egypt, and that Israel did not object to the presence of the Egyptian Army in Sinai or to its deployment there in contradiction to the provisions agreed in the peace treaty. He added that the Egyptian Army operates in Sinai as it sees necessary and should the repercussions of violence in Sinai make it necessary to amend the agreement then it would be amended and Israel would not object, because it was aware of the gravity of the situation.⁴⁸

Al-Sisi reaffirmed these stances on several occasions after his election, including his speech at the international donor conference for GS reconstruction, where he stressed Egypt's commitment to achieving peace in the region.⁴⁹ Later, in an exclusive interview with France 24, he rejected the idea that his country was a "backyard" for attacking Israel.⁵⁰ Al-Sisi even went further in an interview with the Italian *Corriere della Sera* newspaper, stating that Egypt was ready to send military forces into the Palestinian state, help the local police and reassure the Israelis as guarantor, a role that would last the time necessary to re-establish confidence. He added that a Palestinian state must exist where troops can be sent, further explaining that he had discussed the idea with Mahmud 'Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.⁵¹ At a later time, al-Sisi confirmed in an interview with *The Washington Post* the presence of a strong and warm

⁴⁶ Reuters News Agency, 21/6/2015.

⁴⁷ Reuters, 15/5/2014.

⁴⁸ Site of Arabs 48, 20–21/5/2014.

⁴⁹ *Al-Ahram* newspaper, Cairo, 13/10/2014.

⁵⁰ Site of France 24, 20/11/2014. (in Arabic)

⁵¹ Site of International Business Times, 23/11/2014, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/egyptian-president-al-sisi-says-he-would-send-troops-future-palestinian-state-1476179>

relationship with Israel and Netanyahu to whom he talks “a lot,” asserting that there was huge trust and confidence between the two sides.⁵²

On the Israeli side, various media outlets welcomed al-Sisi’s declarations towards Israel. Thus, different articles and analyses hoped he would be victorious in the elections and later hailed his election as president, while the Israeli government was clearly pleased with the outcome of the elections.

Following his election, Israeli President Shimon Peres and Prime Minister Netanyahu phoned al-Sisi to congratulate him, announcing their country’s full readiness to cooperate with Egypt at the political and security levels. Both Israeli leaders also expressed their conviction that the new president would lead his country to the status and position it deserved based on his background as a combatant and leader who appreciates responsibility and served his country.⁵³

On the media and research level, Israeli expert Yossi Melman described Israeli relations with Egypt, during al-Sisi’s term, as a strategic treasure for Israel. He said that since al-Sisi’s victory, Israeli-Egyptian relations had reached their closest point, with security coordination gradually improving. He added that mutual interests in fighting the Islamic State in Sinai and Hamas in GS, enhanced this coordination.⁵⁴ An Israeli study issued by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), which is affiliated with Tel Aviv University, said that electing al-Sisi was the best and most appropriate opportunity for Israel due to his perception of peace with Israel as a strategic asset and his awareness of the positive impact of security coordination with Israel given his military background.⁵⁵

During the Israeli offensive on GS, Hebrew media praised al-Sisi and his relationship with Israel. In this context, Walla website said that the strong security coordination between Israel and Egypt during al-Sisi’s rule had reached unprecedented levels that impressed Israeli leaders who believed that al-Sisi and other leaders in the region were ready to open a new and historic chapter in relations with Israel and ignore the Palestinian issue or, at least, cave in quietly to the idea that the problem could not be resolved.⁵⁶

⁵² *The Washington Post* newspaper, 12/3/2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/egypts-president-says-he-talks-to-netanyahu-a-lot/2015/03/12/770ef928-c827-11e4-aa1a-86135599fb0f_story.html, 12/3/2015

⁵³ *Al-Ahram*, 7/6/2014.

⁵⁴ See Aljazeera.net, 1/2/2016 and 14/4/2016.

⁵⁵ *Raiyoum* newspaper, London, 3/6/2014.

⁵⁶ *Arabs* 48, 18/10/2014.



In the same context, Haaretz newspaper commented on al-Sisi's speech at the Gaza reconstruction conference saying that the Israeli public perceived the Egyptian president as a "loyal ally." The paper described al-Sisi's speech as one of the most important speeches any Arab leader has given in recent years.⁵⁷

Israeli Channel 10 pointed to the enhanced relations between al-Sisi and Netanyahu. The Channel also said that Netanyahu was satisfied with the strategic relationship established with Egypt.⁵⁸

On the security level, different leaders praised the level of coordination between Egypt and Israel. In this context, General Roi Alkabetz, Commander of Eilat Territorial Brigade, responsible for securing the borders with Egypt, commended the security coordination shown by the Egyptian Army since the July 2013 coup. He said, on 6/6/2014, in an interview with Israel Hayom newspaper, that his forces sometimes did not find anything to do because of the role assumed by the Egyptian Army whose operations have decreased the level of danger faced by Israel.⁵⁹

Additionally, Head of the Israeli Army Planning Directorate, Major General Nimrod Shefer described Egypt as an "excellent partner."⁶⁰

In the same sense, Israeli researchers and commentators have said that their government has provided important security support for al-Sisi regime to fight Islamic extremists in Sinai. They consider the stability of the Egyptian regime an Israeli strategic interest according to Ehud Eilam, researcher in Israeli national security affairs. Moreover, Channel 2 military analyst Ronnie Daniel said that Israel had provided the Egyptian Army with the aid it needed, and with intelligence information to help it face Jihadists.⁶¹

2. Jordan

a. Impact of Arab Changes on the Palestinian Issue

Despite the surrounding crises, Jordan, of the "ring countries," was the most stable internally and with regard to its foreign policies and alliances. This stability, in addition to historic, geographic and demographic conditions, allowed Jordan to be the most interactive arena with Palestinian official and popular developments

⁵⁷ Haaretz newspaper, 12/10/2014, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.620434>

⁵⁸ Arabs 48, 18/10/2014.

⁵⁹ *El-Shaab*, Egypt, 15/6/2014.

⁶⁰ *Assafir*, 9/6/2015.

⁶¹ Arabi21, 4/7/2015.

in 2014 and 2015. Thus, although the Egyptian changes were among the most influential factors regarding the Palestinian issue, Egypt was mainly concerned with GS and Sinai's security, considering them internal Egyptian issues, while its interest in other Palestinian issues witnessed significant deterioration.

Jordan focused on the developments in Jerusalem and *al-Aqsa* Mosque, whose custodianship is held by Jordan, as per the agreements signed with the Israeli side. Notably, official action on this issue was influenced by Jordanian popular pressure as well as the impact of the popular uprising in Jerusalem.

There were Jordanian security concerns regarding tensions on its northern and eastern borders and the expansion of IS towards its territories, which consolidated the Jordanian-US alliance and resulted in a boost to security coordination with the latter and Israel.

At the same time, Iran's aspirations and its alliance with the Iraqi government, as well as with the Syrian regime and Hizbullah, have increased Jordan's fears of what King 'Abdullah has called the "Shiite crescent" and encouraged it to balance its relations with utmost care. Thus, Jordan seems more intent than ever to enhance its relations with the Gulf countries and the stability of its western borders.

In light of these determinants, the strategic position of Jordan makes it a safety valve for the region, which encourages Israel to balance its relations with the Kingdom with care and pursue its interests while avoiding an explosion of the situation. Ultimately, this would provide methods of pressure that could be utilized to serve the Palestinian issue, should policy be orientated that way.

b. Jordanian-Palestinian Relations

Jordan maintained its strong relations with the PA as demonstrated in the repeated meetings between King 'Abdullah and 'Abbas in 2014 and 2015, which focused on coordination in the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations file and the Israeli aggression on *al-Aqsa* Mosque.

Contrarily, relations with Hamas became cold, after they had witnessed relative improvement in late 2012 and early 2013 with mediation from then Crown Prince of Qatar Tamim bin Hamad, and the three visits of Khalid Mish'al with a Hamas delegation in one year to meet Jordanian officials, most notably King 'Abdullah in January 2013.⁶² Since that visit, however, no significant development or official

⁶² Aljazeera.net, 28/1/2013.



meeting was recorded between the two sides, part of what can be seen as a negative attitude towards the MB movement (since July 2013 in concurrence with the military coup in Egypt) in a number of Arab countries. Jordan's king accused the MB movement of hijacking the Arab Spring.⁶³ Mish'al visited Jordan in late January 2016; however, this was a family visit meant to check on his mother who lives in 'Amman, and no meetings with any Jordanian official were conducted during the visit.⁶⁴

A case, dubbed by the media as the " Hamas case," implied that conditions for the resumption of relations had deteriorated. Jordanian authorities did not accuse Hamas officially with the case, in which 16 persons were tried most of whom were members of the Jordanian MB movement and Jordan Engineers Association, and including a Jordanian ex-prisoner. Nonetheless, the indictment pointed to the "participation of most suspects in military training in the Gaza Strip" and added that "a number of defendants were trained to use Kalashnikov, manufacture of explosive materials and recruiting members to execute military operations in the West Bank."⁶⁵ Jordan State Security Court issued verdicts against 12 persons, including eight detainees who were sentenced between a year and five while four were sentenced in absentia to 15 years in prison and four were acquitted for lack of evidence. However, the MB refuted the accusations against its members and said they were "fabricated."⁶⁶

Remarkably, this trial was held based on categorizing the accusations as "terror acts" which fell within the competence of State Security Court. In fact, the new law of the Court which was approved by the parliament in April 2014 had stirred controversy before it was adopted based on the refusal to add a provision stipulating the exclusion of any act against the Israeli occupation from trial before the court, and from the definition of "terror."⁶⁷ This brings to mind the "weapons case" in which State Security Court tried three Jordanians for stockpiling weapons for the benefit of Hamas after they had been arrested in April 2006 on the eve of a visit scheduled for then Palestinian Foreign Minister and Hamas official Mahmud al-Zahhar to Jordan. At that time, Hamas denied the accusations stressing the case was political and was meant to prevent the visit, which was canceled by the Jordanian government after the arrest.⁶⁸

⁶³ Aljazeera.net, 7/12/2014.

⁶⁴ Site of Felesteen Online, 31/1/2016.

⁶⁵ Aljazeera.net, 28/7/2015.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ See *Addustour* newspaper, Amman, 12/12/2013; and Aljazeera.net, 17/4/2014.

⁶⁸ Aljazeera.net, 13/6/2008.

c. The Stance on the Peace Settlement and the Relationship with Israel

Jordan continued to push forward Palestinian-Israeli negotiations conducted under American auspices. King ‘Abdullah received Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu on 16/1/2014, a few days after a meeting with President ‘Abbas in ‘Amman and another with US Secretary of State John Kerry.⁶⁹ Jordan reiterated its dedication to its supreme interests regarding final status issues while stressing its refusal to recognize the “Jewishness of Israel” and denying the idea of the alternative homeland which was described by King ‘Abdullah as a political illusion with no existence on the ground.⁷⁰ In addition, Jordan emphasized maintaining the right to be directly responsible for negotiations regarding Palestinian refugees who are Jordanian citizens, and to reject any formula that contradicts its interests.⁷¹ However, as the round of talks reached their usual dead end, Jordan was urged to support Palestinian recourse to the UN to present a draft resolution on ending the occupation to the Security Council, where Jordan represented the Arab Group in 2014 and 2015.

The relationship between Jordan and Israel was influenced by a group of contradictory factors; some of which caused tension while others enhanced it. However, it was noted that the Kingdom was keen to balance these factors with precision to maintain the highest possible level of stability. The outcome was a compound form of relations, as political tension led to a crisis between the two, and the continuation of a “cold peace.” Economic and security factors led to growth of commercial exchange and economic agreements as well as an increase in security coordination. In addition, Israeli measures in *al-Aqsa* Mosque, attempts to impose temporal and spatial division, and the attempts to end Jordanian custodianship, were the most remarkable points of contention between ‘Amman and Tel Aviv, which had increased over the years and reached a climax in 2014 and 2015.

This was a result of the increased popular Jordanian reaction to Israeli aggression against *al-Aqsa* Mosque and Jerusalem in concurrence with the escalation of the popular uprising in Jerusalem. That prompted the Jordanian government to act more vigorously, especially after this file became a point of conflict with the Parliament, whose members repeatedly demanded the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador in Amman.

⁶⁹ The official website of His Majesty King Abdullah II Ibn Al Hussein, 16/1/2014, http://kingabdullah.jo/index.php/en_US/news/view/id/11357/videoDisplay/1.html

⁷⁰ *Al-Hayat*, 24/2/2014.

⁷¹ *Al-Hayat*, 3/2/2014.



In February 2014, the crisis returned when the Knesset prepared to discuss a draft law calling for ending Jordanian custodianship of the Islamic and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem, stipulated in the 1994 Wadi Araba Treaty. Ultimately, the Jordanian Parliament voted consensually on the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador and recalling of Jordanian ambassador from Tel Aviv. Also, it threatened to call a vote of confidence should the government refuse to comply with the demand, while some members of parliament demanded a draft law to cancel Wadi Araba Treaty.⁷² Despite these moves, the government did not pursue any step regarding the ambassadors.

The killing of a Jordanian judge on King Hussein Bridge by Israeli soldiers on 10/3/2014 exacerbated tensions at that time, and the parliament gave the government one week to expel the Israeli ambassador before submitting a vote of confidence. The parliament granted the government confidence when the deadline elapsed,⁷³ although the latter did not comply with its demand, because the parliament had been told by “supreme sides” in Jordan of their rejection of toppling the government or expelling the ambassador.⁷⁴ In a later development, the Jordanian Foreign Ministry summoned the Israeli ambassador to object to the restrictions imposed on the employees of the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs and Holy Places upon their entry to the Mosque, and the aggression against those employees as well as against worshippers.⁷⁵

Jerusalem was present in the speech of King ‘Abdullah at UN General Assembly 68th session. He said, “as Hashemite custodian of Jerusalem’s Muslim and Christian Holy Sites, I will continue to oppose any violation of *al-Aqsa* Mosque’s sanctity.”⁷⁶ But the Israeli escalation against the Mosque continued through break-ins by settlers and officials as well as restrictions on Muslims’ and Awqaf employees’ access to the Mosque in concurrence with attempts to draft a law on dividing the Mosque temporally and spatially between Muslims and Jews. Such Israeli measures reached a climax at the end of October 2014 as it closed the

⁷² *Al-Hayat*, 27/2/2014.

⁷³ *Alghad*, 19/3/2014.

⁷⁴ Aljazeera.net, 18/3/2014.

⁷⁵ *Assabeel* newspaper, Amman, 22/4/2014.

⁷⁶ Remarks by His Majesty King Abdullah II, At the Plenary Session of the 69th United Nations General Assembly, New York, US, The official website of His Majesty King Abdullah II Ibn Al Hussein, 24/9/2014, http://kingabdullah.jo/index.php/en_US/speeches/view/id/546/videoDisplay/0.html

Mosque completely after the assassination attempt on extremist Rabbi Yehuda Glick, which fueled tension in Jerusalem.

This escalation led the Jordanian government to recall the Jordanian ambassador to Israel, on 5/11/2014, and lodge a formal complaint with the UN Security Council.⁷⁷ The government also demanded an American mediation to calm the situation leading to a tripartite meeting on 13/11/2014 which brought together the King ‘Abdullah II, Prime Minister Netanyahu and US Secretary of State John Kerry. ‘Abdullah said that Israeli measures might thwart efforts to fight “terrorism” in the region, in reference to the international coalition battling IS and in which Jordan is a member alongside Washington.⁷⁸ The meeting ended with an agreement on measures to mitigate tension in Jerusalem, where Israel declared its commitment to the status quo in *al-Aqsa* Mosque and the Hashemite role in protecting and safeguarding holy sites in the city.⁷⁹ The next day, Israel allowed worshippers of all ages to enter the Mosque.⁸⁰

The crisis had yet to subside when the Jordanian Foreign Ministry summoned Israeli ambassador to Amman to protest his remarks criticizing the Jordanian Parliament, while Tel Aviv sent complaints to Jordan objecting to parliamentary and governmental stances regarding the escalation of resistance operations in Jerusalem.⁸¹

Despite the return of the Jordanian ambassador to Tel Aviv on 3/2/2015, attempts by the settlers and the Israeli authorities to increase the Jewish presence in *al-Aqsa* Mosque and ensure Israeli sovereignty over it continued. Remarkable in this context was the demand of Knesset Member Uri Ariel of the Jewish Home that the Israeli government prevent restoration works by the Awqaf in *al-Aqsa* Mosque,⁸² and his participation at a later time in breaking into it.⁸³ In addition to the continued and escalated break-ins, there was talk again about dividing the Mosque between Muslims and Jews. Ultimately, King ‘Abdullah warned that such provocations might impact the relationship between Jordan and Israel where he said:

⁷⁷ *Al-Hayat*, 6/11/2014.

⁷⁸ *Annahar* newspaper, Beirut, 14/11/2014; and *Al-Hayat*, 15/11/2014.

⁷⁹ *Annahar*, 14/11/2014

⁸⁰ *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 14/11/2014.

⁸¹ *Alrai* newspaper, Amman, 26/11/2014; and *al-Hayat*, 24/2/2014.

⁸² *Alghad*, 16/4/2015.

⁸³ *Aljazeera.net*, 13/9/2015.



We in Jordan have been very concerned and angered with the recent escalations in Jerusalem, specifically in *al-Aqsa* Mosque. We have gotten reassurances from the Israeli government that this would not happen. Unfortunately, these are reassurances we have heard in the past. So, I would like to state, in your presence that if this continues to happen, ...any more provocations in Jerusalem, will affect the relationship between Jordan and Israel; and Jordan will have no choice, but to take action, unfortunately.⁸⁴

As these developments unfolded, the Jerusalem *Intifadah* broke out on 1/10/2015 and once again, John Kerry returned to mediate between the Jordanian and Israeli sides. He met King ‘Abdullah and the Palestinian President in ‘Amman and then announced a new agreement after the Israeli Prime Minister stated, “Israel has no intention to divide the Temple Mount [*al-Aqsa* Mosque], and we completely reject any attempt to suggest otherwise.” He added, “We respect the importance of the special role of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, as reflected in the 1994 peace treaty between Jordan and Israel, and the historical role of King Abdullah II.”⁸⁵ Yet, despite this agreement, the orientations by the Israeli government and the increased attempts by the Right to change the status quo make it probable that the crisis will emerge again.

In contrast to political tension between Jordan and Israel, economic and security relations developed in 2014 and 2015, thus showing the extent to which bilateral relations had become complicated and tangled. Trade volumes increased by 39.7% between 2013 and 2015.⁸⁶ Also, an agreement was signed by the National Electric Power Company to buy Israeli gas for 15 years in a \$14 billion deal,⁸⁷ while two similar agreements were signed by the Arab Potash Company and its affiliate the Jordan Bromine Company in a deal estimated to be worth around \$771 million.⁸⁸

In February 2015, Jordan and Israel signed an agreement to start Phase I of the Red Sea-Dead Sea Water Conveyance Project, which stipulates the establishment of a conduit for transporting water from the Red Sea to the Dead Sea, through

⁸⁴ News Release, Media & Communication Directorate, Royal Hashemite Court (Jordan), The official website of His Majesty King Abdullah II Ibn Al Hussein, 14/9/2015, http://kingabdullah.jo/index.php/en_US/news/view/id/12589/videoDisplay/1.html

⁸⁵ *The Jerusalem Post* newspaper, 25/10/2015, <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Netanyahu-Muslims-pray-on-the-Temple-Mount-non-Muslims-visit-429973>

⁸⁶ Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), 20/1/2016, http://www1.cbs.gov.il/hodaot2016n/16_16_013t1.pdf

⁸⁷ Reuters, 3/9/2014.

⁸⁸ Aljazeera.net, 20/2/2014.

desalination stations to increase the water reserve in both countries, while limiting the decrease in the Dead Sea water level with the possibility of generating electricity by using hydropower.⁸⁹

On the security level, there were several indicators showing an increase in security cooperation between Jordan and Israel to face the “common danger” on Jordan’s northern and eastern borders mainly represented by ISIS. This followed increased Jordanian and Israeli concerns from the spillover of the security situation in Syria and Iraq and the increased possibilities of infiltration across Jordan’s borders by militiamen who might execute attacks against Jordan or Israel. The warning by King ‘Abdullah mentioned earlier regarding the impact of Israeli violations against *al-Aqsa* Mosque on the war on “terror” has implied coordination between Jordan and Israel in this respect. The main indicators included Israel’s provision of “retired US-supplied [16 AH-1] Cobra combat helicopters to Jordan to help the Hashemite kingdom fend off insurgent threats on the Syrian and Iraqi borders, a US official with knowledge of the deal said.”⁹⁰ This was in addition to news published in Haaretz newspaper stating that Jordan was seeking aid from Israeli jets to increase surveillance on the Jordan borders with Syria.⁹¹ Another indicator of the cooperation between Jordan and Israel was the participation by both sides in the “Red Flag” exercise held annually in the US, which focused on dealing with the Middle East based on Jordanian-Israeli cooperation. “The Israeli contingent also provided the Jordanian fighters with mid-air refueling en route.”⁹²

3. Syria

a. The Impact of Internal Developments on the Palestinian Issue

The ongoing Syrian crisis had a great impact on the Palestinian issue, due to the changes in the surrounding strategic environment, which could be summarized in the following:

1. The position change of the Arab-Israeli conflict on the regional agenda: The Syrian crisis changed from an internal crisis to a regional and international war for domination of the Middle East, and an arena of conflict to reshape the geopolitical map of the region starting from Syria. Thus, it topped the agendas of regional

⁸⁹ *Addustour*, 27/2/2015.

⁹⁰ Reuters, 23/7/2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-israel-jordan-idUSL8N0ZO15120150723>

⁹¹ *Assabeel*, 24/4/2014.

⁹² *Haaretz*, 3/9/2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.674425>



countries (Arab countries, Turkey and Iran) and international forces, which have interests and influence in the region (Russia, the USA and European countries).

Consequently, Arab and international concern over the Palestinian issue deteriorated in 2014 and 2015; the region was busy with several crises and the Palestinian issue was at stalemate over the peace process and the resistance.

More dangerous was the deviation of concern from the central conflict with the Zionist project, which is an intruder to the region, to conflict among indigenous regional forces, depleting their resources and allowing Israel to establish more facts on the ground.

2. Strategically weakening the northern front facing Israel: The continued crisis in Syria meant further exhaustion of the military, economic and human resources of the country, in addition to shattering the social fabric in a way that impedes the establishment of a unified entity within the same geographic borders. For Israel, this means, among other things, that any political entity established on its northern borders, whether or not Syria remained unified, will be busy for several years with repairing war damage, while the threat remains from armed organizations rather than from the country as a whole.

At the same time, the Syrian crisis has exhausted the “Refusal Front” which lost its Palestinian dimension after Hamas left it, and after the criterion for defining what “Refusal” means had become the position towards Syria rather than towards the Resistance in Palestine. Notably, Hizbullah’s particular involvement in the Syrian crisis contributes to the depletion of the main security threats for Israel on its northern border.

Like Syrians, as a result of the continued and intensified fighting, Palestinian refugees in Syria suffered an increased humanitarian crisis. Consequently, the crisis led to the displacement of 390 thousand out of 560 thousand Palestinian refugees registered with United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in Syria, of whom 280 thousand were displaced within their original place of residence in Syria. 110 thousand refugees left to other countries, mainly Lebanon (42 thousand), Jordan (18 thousand) and Europe, which has become a haven for increasing numbers of refugees, especially as countries surrounding Syria closed their borders to refugees.⁹³ Meanwhile, the

⁹³ Site of United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), 2016 Syria Regional Crisis Emergency Appeal, http://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/2016_syria_emergency_appeal.pdf

other Palestinian refugees (estimated at 450 thousand) live in Syria, and 95% of them are in need of sustained humanitarian assistance. This includes tens of thousands of Palestinians who are trapped in areas of active conflict, with severely constrained access to humanitarian assistance.⁹⁴

As of March 2016, 3,180 Palestinians have died in Syria because of the crisis, while detainees were estimated at 1,083 persons and the disappeared at 282.⁹⁵ Yarmouk Refugee Camp (RC) was among the areas affected, as a result of the siege imposed in July 2013 in addition to water and electricity outages, which led to the death of 185 persons under the siege.⁹⁶ The control of ISIS group over Yarmouk RC, on 1/4/2015, led to the failure of talks that were underway to neutralize it.⁹⁷ Thus, it was again targeted by the regime's barrel bombs, which led to the destruction of the Red Crescent's Palestine Hospital, the only hospital in the RC.⁹⁸

b. Syrian-Palestinian Relations

The Syrian crisis limited Syrian-Palestinian relations within the scope of stances of different Palestinian forces towards the crisis and its repercussions on Palestinian refugees in Syria.

The rift between the Syrian regime and Hamas continued based on the latter's refusal to support the regime's military response to the Syrian revolution and choosing to withdraw its leadership from Damascus. In contrast, the relationship between the regime and Fatah witnessed further development as shown in the Syrian decision, on 14/8/2015, to reopen the office of Fatah in Damascus 33 years after its closure and to authorize Samir Rifa'i as representative of the Movement in Syria.⁹⁹ A move complementary to the improvement that started in 2013, when President Bashar al-Assad received 'Abbas Zaki, Fatah Central Committee member, in his capacity as the personal envoy of Palestinian President Mahmud 'Abbas.¹⁰⁰ It seemed, thus, that the Syrian regime had chosen a similar position to the traditional, official Arab positions, which perceive the leadership of the PLO and the PA as the gateway to relations with the Palestinians. This was further confirmed in the

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Site of Action Group for Palestinians of Syria, Statistic Tables of Victims, Detainees and Missing people, <http://bit.ly/1OCW3Zg> (in Arabic)

⁹⁶ Action Group for Palestinians of Syria, 1/3/2016.

⁹⁷ *Al-Hayat*, 8/4/2015.

⁹⁸ *Almustaqbal* newspaper, Beirut, 10/4/2015.

⁹⁹ Palestine News and Information Agency (Wafa), 14/8/2015.

¹⁰⁰ See Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), 8/10/2013, <http://sana.sy/>



meeting of Syrian Interior Minister Muhammad Sha‘ar in May 2014 with a delegate from the PLO Executive Committee chaired by Zakariya al-Agha at the Interior Ministry headquarters in Damascus to discuss Yarmouk RC crisis.¹⁰¹

In parallel, Damascus maintained its relation with the loyal Palestinian factions, whose leadership is basically headquartered in the Syrian capital, mainly the PFLP-GC and Fatah al-Intifadah. These factions, however, were criticized over the participation of their members in battles to the benefit of Syrian regime regular forces, which was perceived as involving Palestinians in Syria’s internal crisis.

Contrary to issues directly related to this crisis, no official Syrian action was noted concerning the Palestinian issue or the internal Palestinian conflict.

c. Relations with Israel

No change was noted, in 2014 and 2015, in the position of the Syrian regime towards Israel, as it continued to accuse the latter of supporting the “terrorist groups” and of being a party to the “conspiracy” targeting Syria and the “Refusal Front.” Yet, it maintained its policy of non-escalation or military retaliation against any Israeli aggression, and on maintaining calm on the Golan Heights.

As for the Syrian opposition forces, they did not show any rapprochement with Israel, except for the position by Syrian opponent Kamal Labwani who called for an alliance with Israel to bring down the regime in Syria. The Syrian National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, the main political opponent group and of which Labwani was a member, expressed its rejection of Labwani’s orientations, while reiterating commitment to the principles adopted by the Syrian people for decades regarding the relationship with Israel. The Coalition also repudiated Labwani’s visit to Israel in September 2014 to participate in a conference on “fighting terrorism.”¹⁰²

Labwani again visited Israel in February 2016, where he was hosted by the Knesset and met also Deputy Minister of Regional Cooperation Ayoob Kara and expressed his gratitude for Israel’s “humanitarian efforts” towards the Syrian people, calling on Israel to establish a secure zone in south Syria and provide Syrians with field facilitations.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ WAFA, 8/5/2014.

¹⁰² Aljazeera.net, 13/9/2014.

¹⁰³ *Al-Akhbar*, 15/2/2016.

At the same time, the two sides to the conflict condemned the Israeli aggression on GS in summer 2014 and expressed solidarity with the Palestinian people in a rare, or only, point of intersection between the two sides.

Nonetheless, the indicators of the development of the relationship of one party to the conflict with Israel appeared from the Syrian north, from the Kurdish National Council (KNC) in Syria. Its chairman Sherko Abbas welcomed Israel's support for the Kurdish state saying, "We have never had any hatred for the Israelis" and that "Kurds are the engine of democracy in the Middle East, and they need to be supported."¹⁰⁴

For its part, Israel's interference in Syria remained limited. Direct gains were when Syrian refugees were treated in Israeli hospitals, and when dealing limited strikes on specific "threatening" targets in Syria. But in general, Israel considered its strategic interests to be in the prolongation of the war. Thus, neither intervening to bring down the regime, which has for a long time maintained calm on the Golan Front, nor helping it gain victory, which would end the conflict and the exhaustion of Syria as a whole.

In the context of Israel's playing on contradictions, Israeli media outlets focused on the provision of treatment to wounded Syrians and the visit by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to a field hospital providing treatment to the wounded in the occupied Golan in February 2014. This was described by the opposition National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces as a "show," they accused Netanyahu of an attempt to imply the presence of a relationship between the Syrian revolution and Israel.¹⁰⁵

In parallel, Israel sought to benefit from the weak Syrian military capacities to launch limited strikes on several occasions that went without any Syrian retaliation. Regime military bases in south Syria were hit on 21–22/6/2014 by Israeli warplanes and tank shells, killing four and injuring nine, in addition to the damage caused in the sites and equipment.¹⁰⁶ Also, Battalion 90 in al-Qunaitra received aerial strikes on 15/7/2014¹⁰⁷ and 4/9/2014,¹⁰⁸ which led to the deaths of

¹⁰⁴ Site of Ekurd Daily online newspaper, 5/7/2014,
<http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2014/7/syriakurd1261.htm>

¹⁰⁵ *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 21/2/2014.

¹⁰⁶ *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 24/6/2014.

¹⁰⁷ *Al Bayan* newspaper, Dubai, 16/7/2014.

¹⁰⁸ *Asharq Alawsat*, 5/9/2014.



regime troops. In addition, Israeli jets launched two strikes on two sites in Rif Dimashq on 7/12/2014 without human losses recorded.¹⁰⁹

These strikes continued in 2015 targeting military sites of the Syrian Air Defense Forces near Homs on 26/3/2015;¹¹⁰ and in April 2015, several strikes targeted sites of regime forces and Hizbullah in al-Qalamoun.¹¹¹ An Israeli strike on 18/1/2015 targeting al-Qunaitra led to the assassination of Hizbullah leader Muhammad ‘Issa and five Party members,¹¹² and on 19/12/2015 another Israeli strike targeted a residential building in Jaramana, south of Damascus, leading to the assassination of Samir Kuntar.¹¹³

President al-Assad said the strikes were in support of the opposition forces and that Israel represented the “aerial force” of those groups. However, the limited scope of the strike targets, and Israeli declarations about preferring al-Assad regime to remain in power, as it has maintained the calm on that front for around 40 years, indicated that the strikes were meant to strategically weaken Syria rather than disrupt the balance of opposing forces. This analysis is supported by the fact that Israel supported the international coalition against ISIS group, as it imposed a threat to Israel. It warned that al-Assad’s remaining in power was preferable to the rise of “Sunni” Jihadi forces that would be difficult to control on the borders, and would thus generate an experience similar to Hamas in GS.

Noteworthy in this respect were declarations by Lieutenant General Dan Halutz, former Chief of Staff, who said that the issue did not need much explanation as al-Assad regime has maintained calm on the borders with Israel for 40 years, but the situation changed once the stability of the regime was in danger. In the same sense, former Israeli Minister of Defense, Yitzhak Mordechai, said that despite the strong relation between the Syrian regime and both Iran and Hizbullah, its danger remains less than that posed by Sunni Jihadist movements.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ *Al-Hayat*, 8/12/2014.

¹¹⁰ *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 3/4/2015.

¹¹¹ *Almustaqbal*, 27/4/2015.

¹¹² *Aljazeera.net*, 19/1/2015.

¹¹³ *Aljazeera.net*, 20/12/2015.

¹¹⁴ *Arabi21*, 11/2/2015.

4. Lebanon

a. Impact of Internal Changes on the Palestinian Issue

In 2014 and 2015 Lebanon continued to be seriously affected by the crisis in Syria, especially in light of Hizbullah's involvement there, and the ongoing flow of refugees into the country. These formed an additional pressure on the political, economic and living conditions in a country suffering collapse in its political system as well as in its infrastructure and network of basic services.

The main repercussions of this file on the Palestinian issue were the depletion of military and human resources of Hizbullah, the main force of resistance on Israel's northern front, the transformation of war in Syria into a main confrontation front for the Party, and the increased tension between Hizbullah and most regional Arab countries.

Hizbullah insisted that its defense of the regime in Syria was a defense of the "Refusal Front" and necessarily supported the Palestinian issue and the confrontation with the Zionist project. However, this did not prevent its loss of a major part of popular support it has enjoyed for its resistance against Israel, whether internally or in the Arab world. This was a result of change in the perception of Hizbullah; from a resistance movement to a militia defending a regime suppressing a popular revolution, or to an Iranian arm in the region. For in each case, the party commented on its events or took sides, it would have an overlapping sectarian and political dimensions, such as the crisis in Bahrain and Yemen, in addition to the crisis in Syria.

Besides losing Arab popular support, Hizbullah's intervention in Syria has deepened the rift between the Party and its political opponents in Lebanon while increasing polarization and popular frustration between the Party's supporters and allies on one hand and its rivals' public on the other hand. Consequently, the perception of the Party as an internal armed threat increased while its intervention was considered a factor in importing a foreign threat into Lebanon.

The increased tension between Hizbullah and the Arab regimes opposed to al-Assad regime, especially KSA, led to the labeling of the Party as a terrorist organization by the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) and LAS in March 2016.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Aljazeera.net, 11/3/2016.



At the same time, negative positions towards Hizbullah in the region made things complicated for the Palestinian Resistance. For its supporters condemned the relationship with Hizbullah, even when it was restricted to the confrontation with Israel, without adopting any of the party's stances towards the crises in the region. Notably, the relation between Hizbullah and Hamas improved in 2014 and 2015 as implied by Hizbullah Secretary General Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah who said that the relationship was being reconstructed aside from the Syrian file the discussion of which had led nowhere.¹¹⁶

Ultimately, these changes meant the formation of an environment hostile to Hizbullah within its strategic environment and on its internal front, without increasing any threat to Israel's strategic environment. In fact, since the main threat sources to Israel, on its northern front, are preoccupied with confrontations with other internal (or external) sides, Israel considers it a self-exhaustion of all those sides. Hence, it didn't mind the continuation of the war as long as that would prevent the establishment of any stable entity, which would form a threat on the northern front.

b. Lebanese-Palestinian Relations

The continued crises in Lebanon on the political, economic and services level diminished the opportunities for improving Lebanese-Palestinian relations. No president was elected or parliamentary elections held despite being overdue by two years, in addition to continued differences between Lebanese constituents, which caused disruption in government work, even when talking about the simplest basic needs.

Thus, not only did these crises impede its foreign diplomatic relations, but they also prevented the government from dealing with any file related to the rights of refugees in Lebanon and improving their living and economic conditions. It failed to deal with the problems of its citizens in the first place, and the file of Syrian refugees was prioritized over that of Palestinians in Lebanon.

This was despite that fact that the Palestinian factions presented a unified initiative to protect the Palestinian presence in Lebanon and enhance Lebanese-Palestinian relations. The initiative was blessed by the PA and Hamas leadership, thus forming a rare case of national consensus that overcame one of the most remarkable obstacles, which the Lebanese government and political forces demanded the Palestinians resolve.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Site of al-Mayadeen Channel, 15/1/2015, <http://www.almayadeen.net/>

¹¹⁷ Aljazeera.net, 30/3/2014.

The initiative aimed at protecting the Palestinian refugee camps, supporting Lebanon's security and stability, and enhancing Lebanese-Palestinian relations. It confirmed Palestinians' neutrality and non-intervention in Lebanese internal affairs. Also, the initiative called on not allowing refugee camps to be used as a springboard for any acts that would compromise Lebanon's security, while refusing to receive or house any person involved in security acts.¹¹⁸

However, since there was a Lebanese political discord, the initiative was not embraced. Lebanese Interior Minister Nuhad Mashnuq who said that Palestinian weapons inside and outside refugee camps were not justified, considered that their withdrawal needed political agreement that was not available, which undermined the Lebanese government's ability to finish this mission. When asked about adopting social and economic rights for the Palestinians, Machnouk said that these rights were included in the Labor Code, but the Palestinians did not know how to interpret the law and the Lebanese did not know how to apply it.¹¹⁹

As evidence of the failure of the initiative to prompt any actual change, the security issue in refugee camps remained the major issue in discussions about the Palestinian presence in Lebanon on the political and media levels. This was clear when talking about security incidents inside the camps or accusing members living there of involvement in schemes or acts that infringe on Lebanese security.

In April 2015, the Lebanese Marwan 'Issa, a Hizbullah member, was assassinated in 'Ein al-Hilweh RC. Following this assassination, there were warnings to Palestinians to not import Syria's Yarmouk RC's experience in to Ein al-Hilweh as expressed in declarations by Lebanese Military Intelligence Director in the South General Ali Chahrour,¹²⁰ and Deputy Head of Hizbullah Executive Council Nabil Qaouk.¹²¹ The killing of Mujahid Bal'us, the Palestinian recruit in the Hizbullah affiliated Lebanese Resistance Brigades, shortly after the first incident exacerbated the situation as the Palestinian Joint Security Force failed to arrest the person accused of killing the two men.¹²²

¹¹⁸ The Palestinian Initiative for Protecting the Palestinian Presence in Lebanon, Palestinian Refugees News network in Lebanon (Laji net), <http://laji-net.net/arabic/default.asp?ContentID=30817&menuID=21>

¹¹⁹ *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 23/4/2014.

¹²⁰ *Assafir*, 14/4/2015.

¹²¹ *Al-Akhbar*, 14/4/2015.

¹²² *Assafir*, 6/5/2015.



On a different level, the visit by the Maronite Patriarch Boutros al-Rahi to the WB and the 1948 occupied territories in May 2014 was one of the important developments in Lebanese-Palestinian relations. President ‘Abbas awarded the Patriarch the Star of Jerusalem, the highest Palestinian Order, upon his visit to Bethlehem where al-Rahi perceived the award as an honor for the Church and the Lebanese people.¹²³ However, al-Rahi visited Israel and met with former members of the South Lebanon Army (Lahad militia) despite Arab and Lebanese criticism. He refused to consider the militiamen traitors or collaborators and discussed their return to Lebanon.¹²⁴

c. Lebanon and Israel

The general prevalence of calm on the Lebanese front with Israel in 2014 and 2015 was interrupted with limited escalations, which appeared to have been carefully carried out by both sides to avoid a large scale confrontation that would work against their interests at that stage. The continued hostility between Israel and Lebanon, especially with Hizbullah, was clear from field developments and as political statements.

Israel escalated the situation on several occasions, most remarkably detonating a spying device in the southern Lebanese town of Adloun on 5/9/2014, after it had been detected by a Hizbullah member who was killed by the explosion. Hizbullah retaliated with an operation against an Israeli military patrol in Shab‘a Farms on 7/10/2014 after which Israel struck two Hizbullah sites in the South.¹²⁵ Israel also assassinated Hizbullah leaders and members whom it labeled as a direct threat, including the assassination of leader Muhammad ‘Issa and five other members among whom was Jihad ‘Imad Mughnieh, on 18/1/2015, and the assassination of the dean of liberated detainees from Israeli prisons Samir Kuntar on 19/12/2015. Haaretz newspaper’s military commentator Amos Harel mentioned, around a month before the assassination, Israeli intelligence assessments talking about Hizbullah’s formation of a military network in the Golan Heights led by both Mughnieh and Kuntar.¹²⁶

¹²³ *Al-Hayat al-Jadida*, 26/5/2014.

¹²⁴ *Raialyoum*, 31/5/2014.

¹²⁵ *Almustaqbal*, 8/10/2014; and *Haaretz*, 6/9/2014, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.614343>

¹²⁶ *Arabs* 48, 24/12/2014.

As for political stances and declarations, the Hizbullah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah stressed that fighting in Syria has not weakened the Party or its combat readiness to counter any Israeli aggression. Nasrallah said that Party members had the capacity to shift the field battle into the northern borders of occupied Palestine, reiterating the development of Hizbullah's missile power. He also confirmed that Palestine was still the central issue and main concern for the Party.¹²⁷

In addition, Nasrallah stressed his support for the Palestinian Resistance in the GS during the Israeli aggression in summer 2014. However, his declarations came more than two weeks after the attack began, while negative mood spread among Hizbullah's support towards Hamas during this time, which urged Nasrallah to call for putting aside all differences and sensitivities regarding other issues.¹²⁸

5. KSA and the Gulf Countries

a. Impact of Internal and Regional Changes on the Palestinian Issue

The interaction of Gulf countries with different developments in the Arab world in 2014 and 2015 showed further distraction from the Palestinian issue since the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011, which led to the reshaping of the geopolitical regional map. Thus, the political conduct of the Gulf countries in general, and KSA in particular, prioritized the conflict with Iran and its allies for regional influence, and the danger of "terrorism" represented currently in ISIS, over the Arab-Israeli conflict. This granted priority to the crises in Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Lebanon.

An alliance of ten Arab countries led by KSA launched Operation Decisive Storm in March 2015 to strike the Houthis in Yemen after their gaining control over the capital San'a. Hizbullah was labelled a "terrorist organization" by the GCC in March 2016. These were the main indicators of the priority given by the KSA and other Gulf countries to facing Iran and its allies in the region.

Qatar was again the Gulf country which made more effort than the other Gulf countries to strike a balance between its concern with the Palestinian issue and its other regional preoccupations, particularly in terms of supporting GS and its relationship with the PA and Hamas.

¹²⁷ Al-Mayadeen Channel, 15/1/2015.

¹²⁸ Al-Akhbar, 26/7/2014.



b. The Position Towards the Palestinian Internal Conflict

The GCC countries maintained their relations with the Palestinians along the same lines, which is generally closer to the stance of the PA leadership and Fatah Movement, whether regarding the Palestinian internal conflict or the peace process with Israel. However, Qatar maintained a special relationship with Hamas alongside its relationship with the Ramallah based PA.

The Gulf countries welcomed, through their Ministerial Council, the Palestinian reconciliation agreement signed in GS in April 2014 as well as the formation of the unity government.¹²⁹ Qatar again showed highest interaction with this file and prior to signing the agreement it had expressed its readiness to host an Arab summit to cement the reconciliation;¹³⁰ however, Egypt's persistence to maintain control of this file prevented Qatar from having a direct or decisive role. Nonetheless, Emir of the State of Qatar Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad received President 'Abbas and Khalid Mish'al, head of Hamas political bureau, in a joint meeting to congratulate them for signing the agreement.¹³¹

The most remarkable development in the relations between the Gulf countries and the Palestinians was the improvement in relation between KSA and Hamas after King Salman bin 'Abdulaziz Al Saud assumed power in January 2015. Apparently, he sought to mitigate tension between KSA and Hamas and the MB movement, in the context of containing differences with the "Sunni" sides to prepare for escalating the confrontation with Iran.

After this development, Hamas announced its support for Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen in a declaration that was balanced to prevent renewed deterioration in its relations with Iran.¹³²

Also, a Hamas delegation headed by Mish'al visited KSA in July 2015 and met with the Saudi King, the Crown Prince and the Head of Intelligence.¹³³ Following this meeting, the Saudi authorities released a number of Hamas members held in its prisons since December 2014 (the last days of King 'Abdullah) in financial cases related to raising money and sending it to support the Palestinian people in occupied Palestine and the Resistance without official permit. Yet, the Saudi

¹²⁹ Saudi Press Agency (SPA), 2/6/2014, <http://www.spa.gov.sa/>

¹³⁰ Qatar News Agency (QNA), 25/3/2014, <http://www.qna.org.qa/>

¹³¹ *Al-Sharq* newspaper, Doha, 7/5/2014.

¹³² Aljazeera.net, 28/3/2015.

¹³³ Aljazeera.net, 17/7/2015.

media's lack of interest in the visit¹³⁴ and the declarations by the Saudi Foreign Minister, 'Adel al-Jubeir, that the visit was intended for *Umrah* (minor pilgrimage)¹³⁵ showed Riyadh's reluctance to afford the visit important political dimensions.

c. The Stance on the Peace Process

The Gulf countries maintained their position towards the peace process in 2014 and 2015, as they clung to the Arab Peace Initiative launched by KSA at the Arab Summit in Beirut in 2002. At the same time, they supported the actions of the PA leader in the UN and Security Council to challenge Israel in light of the stalemate in the peace process.

Notably, most of these positions were issued by the LAS, while the GCC countries did not provide any special initiatives outside this context, whether on collective or individual levels. Stances issued by the GCC leaders and their joint meetings remained within the traditional line, supporting Palestinian rights and condemning Israeli violations against the Palestinian people and its Judaization measures in Jerusalem and *al-Aqsa* mosque.

d. Financial Support

Financial support remains one of the fields for GCC countries interaction with the Palestinian issue. They supported the PA budget, the GS reconstruction projects, and the UNRWA, in addition to funding charitable projects supporting Palestinians in the WB, GS and countries of refuge.

However, despite the LAS decisions to provide a financial security net for the PA budget at \$100 million per month, reports by the Palestinian Finance Ministry regarding the income from foreign aid show that KSA was almost the only country that regularly fulfilled this commitment in 2014 and 2015. It paid around \$439 million in both years. For its part, Qatar provided \$146 million in 2014 and no aid in 2015 while Oman paid around \$36 million.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 22/7/2015.

¹³⁵ *Asharq Alawsat*, 24/7/2015.

¹³⁶ Monthly Fiscal Reports of 2015, Palestinian Authority, Ministry of Finance, <http://www.pmf.ps/documents/10180/586396/merged+dec+arb+report+2015.pdf/6e3777a4-815f-43d3-b102-fe0a0e-b0e61b>; and Monthly Fiscal Reports of 2014, Palestinian Authority, Ministry of Finance, <http://www.pmf.ps/documents/10180/332541/Dec.2014.Arb.pdf/6e566546-a35a-4aae-9f68-62a44bef46f6> (in Arabic)



Also, KSA was the largest source of Gulf support to the UNRWA budget where reports published by the Agency about governmental and non-governmental support for 2014 showed that KSA directly provided around \$103.5 million, and \$1.54 million through NGOs.¹³⁷

The UAE government provided \$16.8 million, but the largest part of Emirati aid was provided via different Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), especially the Emirates Red Crescent, with a total sum estimated at \$46.4 million. Kuwait, for its part, provided \$17 million in direct aid and \$70 million through Kuwait Red Crescent Society; Qatar provided \$2.1 million in the form of governmental aid and \$350 thousand through the Qatar Red Crescent; Oman participated with \$742 thousand; and Bahrain \$50 thousand in addition to \$5.76 million through the Royal Charity Organization.¹³⁸

Participation by the Gulf countries was the largest in the GS reconstruction conference, which was hosted by Egypt in Sharm el-Sheikh in October 2014. Total commitments reached \$5.4 billion, of which Qatar committed to provide \$1 billion, KSA \$500 million, while both UAE and Kuwait pledged to provide \$200 million each.¹³⁹

6. Other Arab Countries

The continuation of the crisis in a number of countries that are farther from Palestine had clear implications as to their interaction with the Palestinian issue in 2014 and 2015. This was clear in the case of Iraq, Yemen and Libya, which were consumed with their internal crises both on the official and popular levels.

As for the Arab Maghreb countries, their stances towards the Palestinian issue did not change and they maintained interaction with the Palestinian issue through the LAS. The aggression on GS was the most remarkable direct interaction, where political stances supported Palestinians in GS and aid and medical staff headed to the Strip through official and popular initiatives.

In Tunisia, however, the deterioration of the Palestinian issue in the official discourse was clear with the end of President Moncef Marzouki's term and the election of President Beji Caid Essebsi in 2014. In contrast to Marzouki, who was

¹³⁷ See UNRWA, "Pledges to UNRWA (Cash and In-kind) for 2014 - Overall Donor Ranking in USD," 31/12/2014, http://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/2014_overall_donor_ranking.pdf

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ *Asharq Alawsat*, 13/10/2014.

concerned with the Palestinian issue and always interacted with its developments and demonstrated clear support for the Palestinian Resistance, Essebsi was closer in his stances to the traditional Arab official positions.

Sudan did not witness any change in its position towards the Palestinian issue and maintained its relationship with Hamas, although Khartoum's positive relations with the MB movement put it in a position to be accused by a number of Gulf countries and its relations with them were threatened.

Sudan was again a target of strikes for which Israel was accused where a site in Omdurman in north Khartoum was hit by an air strike on 5/5/2015, which was suspected to have targeted a long-range missiles factory.¹⁴⁰

Notably, in October 2012 Sudan accused Israel of responsibility for a strike that led to the destruction of Yarmouk ammunition factory in south Khartoum,¹⁴¹ and while Israel refused to comment on the issue, Israeli websites claimed that the 13th Battalion of Israeli Air Force launched the raid claiming the factory provided Hamas with weapons and missiles.¹⁴²

In March 2014, Sudanese security apparatuses announced the arrest of an Israeli espionage network involved in the raids that targeted the east of the country in January 2009 and April 2011.¹⁴³

Third: Developments of Normalization

The setback of the Arab revolutions, particularly in Egypt, was the main transformation affecting Arab normalization with Israel in 2014 and 2015. This transformation re-allowed the gap between official and popular positions to exist, and made the popular anti-normalization stance a weak factor affecting the ruling powers' approach.

While no major breakthroughs were witnessed in Israeli-Arab relations, economic ties increased, especially when Israel became an energy exporting country. Most Arab-Israeli dealings in 2014 and 2015 were in this field, particularly with Egypt and Jordan.

¹⁴⁰ Aljazeera.net, 6/5/2015.

¹⁴¹ *Al-Hayat*, 25/10/2012.

¹⁴² *Al-Khaleej*, 25/10/2012.

¹⁴³ *Al-Khaleej*, 23/3/2014.



The participation by the Israeli Energy Minister in the Abu Dhabi International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) Fourth Assembly, in January 2014, was a part of this context and led at that time to Kuwait's announcement that it was boycotting the conference as a result.¹⁴⁴

In Egypt, official rejection of dealing with Israel dissipated in 2014 and 2015, having been on the rise after the 25/1/2011 uprising and under ousted President Muhammad Morsi. The change was a continuation of the course that started with the July 2013 coup, where the popular anti-normalization stance weakened. "Hatred against Israel has been moderated," said retired Director of Policy and Political-Military Affairs at the Israeli Ministry of Defense Major General Amos Gilad, who was assessing the map of strategic dangers facing Israel.¹⁴⁵

During the preparatory stage for the 2012 presidential elections, Egypt witnessed negative positions towards Israel, such as rejecting normalization and the determination to decrease the level of relations and "strangulate" Camp David or amend some of its provisions, or to maintain "cold peace."¹⁴⁶ Whereas, stressing the stability of the agreements with Israel was clearly present in the positions of the 2014 presidential candidate who became Egypt's president, 'Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, mentioned earlier in this chapter.

Security coordination between Egypt and Israel in order to arm and increase the presence of the Egyptian Army in Sinai and coordinate its military operations to control the security situation in the Peninsula, increased. In June 2015, the Egyptian ambassador returned to Tel Aviv after a three year hiatus. These two were the most remarkable indicators of the return of the Egyptian-Israeli relation to its former status.

In Jordan, and despite the continued popular campaigns and parliamentary positions against normalization as well as the political tension between Amman and Tel Aviv, normalization continued on the official level focusing mainly on the economic and security fields. This was revealed in an earlier section in this chapter, which addressed the development of the relation between Jordan and Israel.

¹⁴⁴ *The Jerusalem Post*, 19/1/2014, <http://www.jpost.com/National-News/Kuwait-boycotts-Abu-Dhabi-energy-conference-attended-by-Zionist-regime-338624>

¹⁴⁵ See site of JerusalemOnline.com (JOL), 12/3/2014, <http://www.jerusalemonline.com/news/middle-east/israel-and-the-middle-east/major-general-amos-gilad-egypt-has-blocked-90-of-the-tunnels-into-gaza-4237>

¹⁴⁶ See Hasan Ibhais, "The Palestinian Issue and the Arab World," in Mohsen Mohammad Saleh (ed.), *The Palestinian Strategic Report 2012–2013* (Beirut: al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations, 2015).

As for economic relations between Israel and the Arab countries in general, there was an increase in the trade volume between Israel and its three most prominent Arab partners (Egypt, Jordan and Morocco) estimated at 20% in 2014 and 2015 (compared to the end of 2013) according to Israeli figures. The more remarkable growth was in 2014, with a 19% growth while the growth did not exceed 1% in 2015 (see table 1/3). This was in contrast to the track of exchange in 2012 and 2013 and which witnessed 28% deterioration as compared to 2011.¹⁴⁷

**Table 1/3: Volume of Trade Between Israel and Some Arab Countries
2012–2015 (\$ million)¹⁴⁸**

Country	2012	2013	2014	2015
Egypt	266.3	169.7	206.2	167.7
Jordan	359.5	365	485.9	510
Morocco	29	60.7	17.2	38.6
Total	654.8	595.4	709.3	716.3

This increase was basically a result of the increase in trade volume with Jordan, which amounted to 39.7% between 2013 and 2015. Jordan's share of the total trade volume among the three mentioned countries and Israel increased progressively from 55% to 71% during the period. This growth was mainly focused in import volume from Jordan which increased by 54% from \$266.5 in 2013 to \$410.5 million in 2015, while the Israeli export volume to Jordan remained within the same limits with a slight increase estimated at 1% (see table 2/3).¹⁴⁹

Over six years (2010–2015), the general trend of trade volume between Israel and Jordan served to enhance the importance of Israel as a market for Jordanian exports, with an annual growth average of 56%. Jordanian exports to Israel increased from \$94.1 million in 2010 to \$410.5 million in 2015. This was in

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ CBS, 20/1/2016, http://www1.cbs.gov.il/hodaot2016n/16_16_013t1.pdf

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.



concurrency with a reduction in the level of Israeli exports to Jordan in general where it decreased from \$185.6 in 2010 to \$99.5 million in 2015.¹⁵⁰

The Israeli trade volume with Egypt and Morocco deteriorated by the end of 2015 by 1.2% and 36.4% respectively compared to 2013.¹⁵¹

Regarding Egyptian trade, Israeli exports retreated from \$119.9 million in 2013 to \$113.1 in 2015, while Israeli imports from Egypt increased by 9.6% from \$49.8 million in 2013 to \$54.6 million in 2015.¹⁵²

In Morocco, the size of Israeli exports deteriorated by 57.8% where it decreased from \$54.5 million in 2013 to \$23 million in 2015, while Israeli imports from Morocco increased significantly by 151.6% from \$6.2 million in 2013 to \$15.6 million in 2015.¹⁵³

Table 2/3: Israeli Exports and Imports to/from Some Arab Countries

2012–2015 (\$ million)¹⁵⁴

Country	Israeli exports to				Israeli imports from			
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2012	2013	2014	2015
Egypt	206.5	119.9	147.9	113.1	59.8	49.8	58.3	54.6
Jordan	154	98.5	107.8	99.5	205.5	266.5	378.1	410.5
Morocco	23	54.5	10.6	23	6	6.2	6.6	15.6

¹⁵⁰ See CBS, 20/1/2014, http://www.cbs.gov.il/hodaot2014n/16_14_017t1.htm

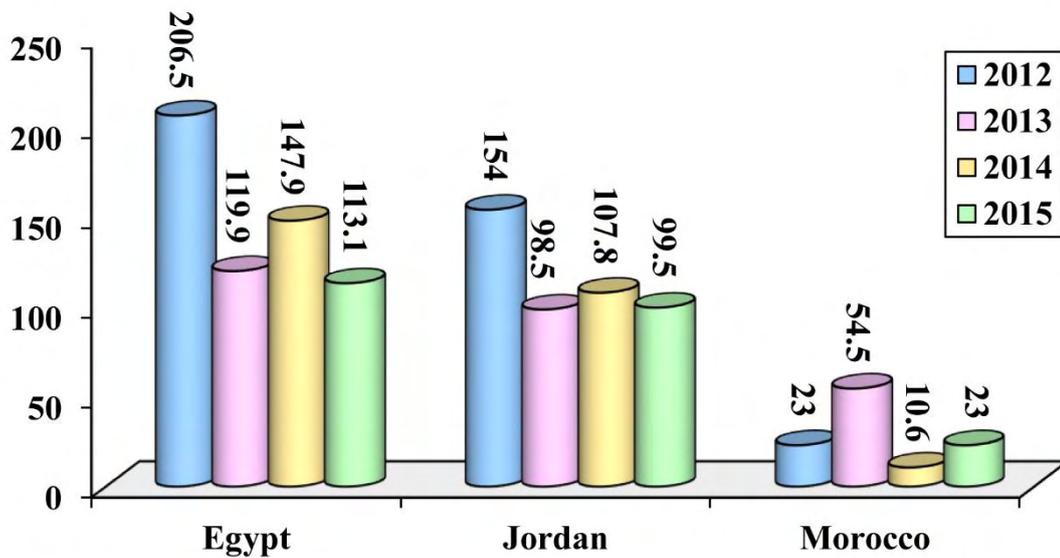
¹⁵¹ CBS, 20/1/2016, http://www1.cbs.gov.il/hodaot2016n/16_16_013t1.pdf

¹⁵² Ibid.

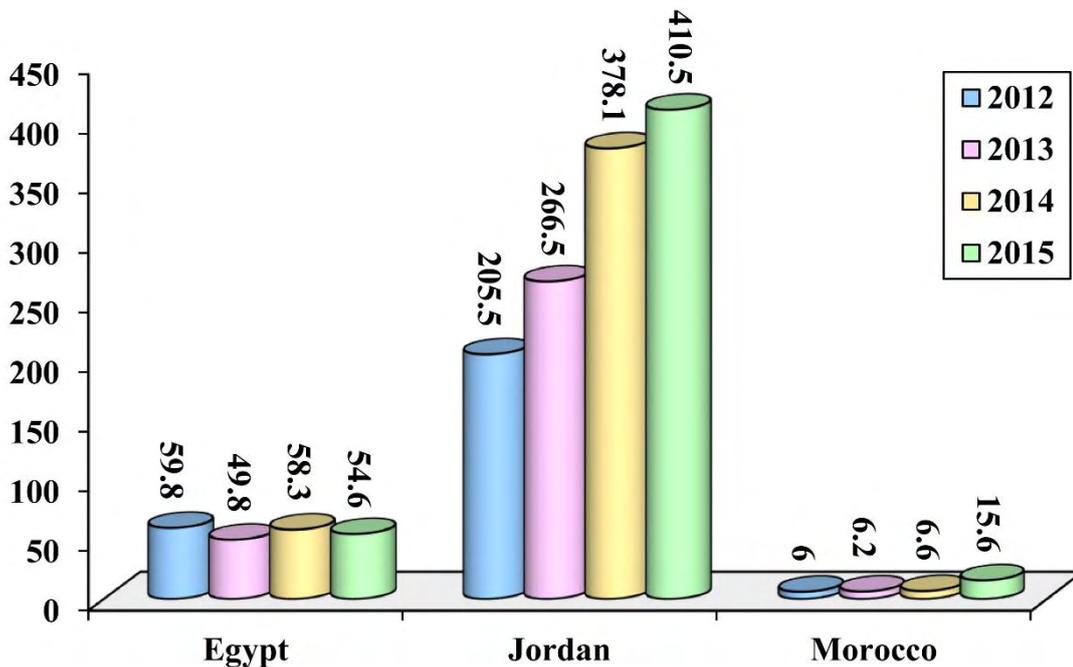
¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

Israeli Exports to Some Arab Countries 2012–2015 (\$ million)



Israeli Imports from Some Arab Countries 2012–2015 (\$ million)



However, the overall decrease in Israeli exports to Egypt and Jordan is likely to assume a completely contradictory trend if Israel starts exporting gas to them by virtue of preliminary agreements signed with five companies in both countries. Preliminary agreements were signed with three Jordanian companies in 2014 to import Israeli gas for 15 years, most importantly the National Electric Power Company (NEPCO) which signed a memorandum of understanding to import 45 billion cubic meters of gas at a



total of \$15 billion,¹⁵⁵ in addition to two agreements signed by the Arab Potash Company (APC) and its unit the Jordan Bromine Company (JBC) to import gas from Tamar field, in a \$771 million deal.¹⁵⁶

In Egypt, Spanish Union Fenosa Gas (UFG) and British Petroleum (BP) signed agreements, the largest of their kind on the Arab level, to import Israeli gas for their liquefying facilities in Egypt for 15 years. The first deal with UFG includes importing 67.5 billion cubic meters of gas from Tamar field at around \$20 billion¹⁵⁷ while the other deal stipulates for exporting 105 billion cubic meters of gas from Leviathan field at around \$30 billion.¹⁵⁸

In addition to expected Israeli revenues from the gas deals with Egypt and Jordan, its proximity to these two countries makes it a more suitable and a competitive economic choice for buying gas, especially with it establishing a network of gas pipelines.

Fourth: Arab Public's Position and its Directions

The political crises in a number of Arab countries continued to impact the grassroots activities in support of the Palestinian issue in 2014 and 2015. This was more so with the crises in two of the most influential countries on the strategic environment around Palestine: Egypt and Syria.

Comparing the track of popular action during these two years with that in 2012 and 2013 reveals that the position of the Palestinian issue among priorities had retreated compared to the prevalence of internal affairs in different Arab countries, although the Palestinian issue was still able to generate mobilization and support and attract Arab public opinion regarding critical developments. This change could be seen in the following:

1. The setback of the Arab Spring revolutions and their transformation into long-term crises have exhausted popular action, which lost its ability to interact with developments that are not related to people's daily needs. In addition, freedoms were reduced and a security approach adopted in facing popular

¹⁵⁵ Reuters, 3/9/2014.

¹⁵⁶ Aljazeera.net, 20/2/2014.

¹⁵⁷ *Almasry Alyoum*, 7/5/2014.

¹⁵⁸ Reuters, 29/6/2014.

demonstrations, where support for the Palestinian issue had overlapped with opposition to regime policies in these countries.

2. The Arab street actually interacted with major developments regarding the Palestinian, issue such as the Israeli offensive on GS in summer 2014, the Israeli attempts to divide *al-Aqsa* Mosque temporally and spatially, and the Jerusalem *Intifadah*, which broke out in October 2015. However, the size of interaction was generally less than that witnessed in 2012 and 2013.

3. Among the surrounding Arab countries, the most notable popular interaction with the Palestinian issue was the Jordanian street. Its reaction to the developments in Jerusalem and *al-Aqsa* Mosque urged the Jordanian decision maker to stand up to Israeli aggression, given that *al-Aqsa* Mosque is a direct Jordanian responsibility. Also, popular Jordanian solidarity was clear during the Israeli offensive on Gaza.

But in contrast, in Syria, internal preoccupation with the civil war led to an almost complete absence of popular interaction with the Palestinian issue. In Lebanon, the position regarding the Palestinian resistance, especially Hamas, given its stance towards the crisis in Syria, affected the level of popular protest against the Israeli aggression on GS. Also, the Egyptian stance towards Hamas and the security approach pursued towards the Strip have negatively affected the level of solidarity expressed regarding the Israeli blockade and offensive. The regime completely ended Arab partisan, syndicate and popular visits to GS which were significant in 2012.

4. The Arab Opinion Index of 2015, a periodic public opinion poll conducted by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) in 12 Arab countries in 2015, showed the decrease in Arab respondents who believed the Palestinian issue to be an Arab cause; decreasing from 84% in 2012/2013 poll to 75% in 2015 poll. Those who believe that the Palestinian issue is only for Palestinians increased from 8% to 18%. Notably, the results in each country support previous remarks that the prominent change was in the opinions of the Egyptian and Lebanese people, in addition to the Palestinians themselves in the WB and GS where around a quarter of the respondents said that the Palestinian



issue was only a Palestinian concern (25% in Egypt and Palestine and 28% in Lebanon).¹⁵⁹

However, this change in the perception of the Palestinian issue was not coupled with an improvement in the view of Israel, where 85% of respondents in 2015 expressed their rejection of their countries' recognition of Israel, and this is almost concurrent with the findings of the 2012/2013 poll (87%).¹⁶⁰

Conclusion

The last five years (2011–2015) were predominantly characterized by the conflict between the change and counter-change forces have shown that the Arab world can change the role and strategic position of Arab countries in their conflict with Israel. This was clear in the short-lived experience of governance, which was based on popular will in a number of countries during the rise of revolutions, particularly in Egypt.

However, the setbacks of the revolutions revealed the difficulty of completing the change course through nominal changes in the head of the political pyramid without deep changes in society and state apparatuses.

For the time being, regional conflicts contain both opportunities and dangers for the Palestinian issue, and they mostly make the Palestinians responsible for grasping the opportunities and avoiding the dangers in order to permeate the balance of regional powers.

A search for the largest possible area of agreement with the conflicts' parties is necessary, along with seeking to minimize the impact of areas of contention on the Palestinian issue through avoiding involvement in Arab internal crises. This issue is so far the main card the Palestinians could depend on where its strength could be enhanced as the Palestinian issue still maintains its position as the main important point of consensus between most of the conflicting forces in the region. It is even the best way to redirect the compass towards a unifying revival project, which returns the conflict with the Zionist project to the center of attention.

¹⁵⁹ Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, *Barnamij Qiyas al-Ra'i al-'Am al-'Arabi: al-Mu'ashshir al-'Arabi 2015* (Arab Public Opinion Program: The 2015 Arab Opinion Index 2015) (Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2015), pp. 289–292, <http://english.dohainstitute.org/file/Get/9dba8f9c-7fb3-447b-9d7c-fda63ec5927e>

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 297–299.

In light of the data, and the slim possibilities of attaining integrated solutions, whether on the Palestinian or the Arab level, it might be possible to recourse to common, albeit limited, areas of interest which can be later expanded and enhanced. This remains the most logical option at the current stage as its allows the Palestinians to overcome the stalemate in the peace process and resistance and allows them to accumulate steps on the ground.

As for the priorities, it seems that confronting Israel's measures in Jerusalem could be the most important point of consensus on the Arab, Islamic and Palestinian levels. Thus, seeking to prioritize this file for all parties might be the most likely area for common interest.

Also, there is the option of pursuing serious maintenance of the truce in GS, alleviating the GS blockade, and allowing the Gazans to improve their economic and living conditions without connecting this to any political exchange in the WB or to the stance towards the parties in the internal crisis in Egypt. This approach could be a boost for the resilience of the Gazans in the long run, while at the same time allowing a focus on Jerusalem at the current stage.



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