



Update on Conflict and Diplomacy

16 MAY–15 AUGUST 2018

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This update is a summary of bilateral, multilateral, regional, and international events affecting the Palestinians and Israel. More than 100 print, wire, television, and online sources providing U.S., Israeli, Arab, and international independent and government coverage of unfolding events are surveyed to compile the quarterly Update. The most relevant sources are cited in JPS's Chronology section, which tracks events day by day. JPS Chronologies are archived on the JPS website at www.palestine-studies.org.

Highlights of the Quarter: With U.S. president Donald Trump's peace initiative at a standstill, tensions between Hamas and Israel nearly escalate into the fourth major armed conflict since the formal Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005. Egyptian and UN mediation efforts produce a series of cease-fires, but tensions do not subside. The Ramallah-based Palestinian leadership resists Egyptian efforts to incorporate a new Palestinian reconciliation agreement into ongoing, back-channel talks between Israel and Hamas over a possible long-term cease-fire agreement. Meanwhile, attendance gradually declines at the weekly mass protests along Gaza's border that began in 3/2018 under the Great March of Return banner. Palestinian youths in Gaza instead turn to a new form of resistance: lashing incendiary devices to kites or balloons and flying these across the border fence into southern Israel.

THE PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI CONFLICT

Although attendance at the mass protests known as the Great March of Return fell off as the quarter advanced (see *JPS* 47 [4]), tensions continued to rise in Gaza. Palestinians' use of incendiary devices lashed to kites and balloons, which were then released across the border fence to spark small fires in southern Israel, resulted in Israeli military strikes that brought Gaza to the brink of war for the first time since Israel's summer 2014 assault. Meanwhile, U.S.

president Donald Trump's yet-to-be fully unveiled peace initiative made no significant progress, leaving the Ramallah-based Palestinian leadership free to pursue alternative diplomatic avenues. In Washington, Trump and his close advisors zeroed in on Gaza, simultaneously condemning Hamas and attempting to raise money for humanitarian projects rather than rebuilding relations with the Palestinian leadership or making clear the contents of their long-awaited plan for Palestinian-Israeli peace.

THE SO-CALLED TRUMP INITIATIVE

The Palestinians had all but severed relations with the Trump administration after the U.S. president's announcement in December 2017 that the U.S. would be moving its embassy to Jerusalem in recognition of the city's status as the "capital of Israel" and slashing aid to the Palestinian Authority (PA). Following the formal inauguration of the new U.S. embassy in Jerusalem (5/14) and the Israeli army's deadly crackdown on the corollary mass protests in Gaza (see *JPS* 47 [3] and [4]), relations with the U.S. deteriorated even further. Two days later, PA foreign minister Riyad al-Maliki stated (5/16) that the Palestinians were considering taking action in international fora, including at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). He also called (5/17) on Arab states to recall their ambassadors from Washington in protest. "There is no harm in Arab states collectively recalling their ambassadors . . . for consultations," he said, reminding them that the Arab League had previously agreed to sever diplomatic ties with any country that moved its embassy to Jerusalem. The Palestinians submitted (5/22) a formal request to the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate Israel's settlement policies in the West Bank and East Jerusalem; filed instruments of accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention (5/17) and the UN Conference on Trade and Development (5/24); and signed (6/6) documents of accession for the State of Palestine to join seven other international treaties and conventions, including the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which aims to abolish the death penalty.

Meanwhile, the so-called Trump peace initiative remained stalled, with elements of the

administration reportedly advocating additional punitive steps against the Palestinians. In response to the Palestinians' latest referral to the ICC, a U.S. National Security Council spokesperson said (5/23), "We are reviewing this latest development to determine if it requires changes to the operating status of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) office in Washington, DC." Shortly afterward, U.S. secretary of state Rex Tillerson refused to certify that the Palestinians were complying with certain congressionally mandated conditions on U.S. aid enacted in 11/2017, triggering a punitive closure of the PLO office in Washington. While the Trump administration allowed the office to remain open, it stipulated that its operations be limited to activities directly related to the Trump administration's peace initiative. Likewise, the administration ultimately allowed the office to remain open after the Palestinians' ICC referral on 5/22.

Other elements of the Trump administration pursued the long-awaited peace plan. According to U.S. officials, the plan's architects—senior advisor and Trump son-in-law Jared Kushner and Special Representative for International Negotiations Jason Greenblatt—had already begun briefing select allies and partners on aspects of the plan (*Associated Press*, 5/19). U.S. ambassador to Israel David Friedman, another key member of the Trump peace team, said (5/23) that "a lot of finalizing" was happening and that the plan would likely be released within the next few months, depending on circumstances. "Ultimately, [Trump]'s looking for that win-win, where everyone says 'we're better off,'" Friedman added.

Although the scope and details of the plan remained unclear, its outlines began to emerge. According to Yair Lapid, chair of Israel's Yesh Atid Party (5/21), the plan was for Abu Dis, a West Bank village on the outskirts of Jerusalem,

to serve as the capital of a future Palestinian state. In response to this and other rumored elements of the plan, a senior PLO official accused (5/27) Trump of attempting to “liquidat[e]” Palestinian rights.

U.S.-Palestinian relations deteriorated further after Greenblatt published (6/10) an op-ed in *Haaretz* calling for the ouster of PLO secretary-general Saeb Erakat, the longtime Palestinian chief negotiator. “We have heard your voice for decades and it has not achieved anything close to Palestinian aspirations or anything close to a comprehensive peace agreement,” Greenblatt wrote. “Other Palestinian perspectives might help us finally achieve a comprehensive peace agreement where Palestinian and Israeli lives can be better.” Erakat responded the next day, dismissing the Trump administration’s peace efforts as “nothing less than dictating illegal policies and further violations of international law.”

Amid a wave of press speculation about the plan, the Trump administration’s peace team embarked on a trip to the Middle East. According to a White House official, Kushner and Greenblatt intended to “get some ideas from players in the region about some remaining questions” (*Haaretz*, 6/17). However, as their trip progressed, it became clear that they were pursuing a new, related goal: raising \$1 billion from the Gulf States to fund Israeli- and Egyptian-administered humanitarian projects in Gaza.

Kushner and Greenblatt met with senior officials in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, and Israel over the course of a week in mid-6/2018. The Palestinians maintained their boycott of the Trump administration, while their allies passed along details of the talks. On 6/17, PA president Mahmoud Abbas rejected the new U.S. strategy, describing it as an attempt to split Gaza from the West Bank.

“The Palestinian leadership warns the countries of the region against cooperating with a move whose goal is to perpetuate the separation between Gaza and the West Bank and [will] lead to concessions on Jerusalem and the holy sites,” he said. Erakat also accused (6/23) Kushner and Greenblatt of attempting to sideline Palestinian refugees. “They want to terminate the role of UNRWA [United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East] by proposing direct aid to the countries hosting the Palestinian refugees and sideline the UN agency,” he said. “On top of this, they are planning financial aid to the Gaza Strip worth [\$1 billion] for projects, also separate from UNRWA and under the guise of solving a humanitarian crisis.”

Kushner capped off the trip by giving a rare interview to the Palestinian newspaper *al-Quds* on 6/24. He said he was ready to work with Abbas, but questioned the PA president’s commitment and ability to reach a peace agreement with Israel. “He has his talking points, which have not changed in the last 25 years,” Kushner said. “There has been no peace deal achieved in that time. To make a deal both sides will have to take a leap and meet somewhere between their stated positions. I am not sure [Abbas] has the ability to do that.” The interview was widely seen as an attempt to sidestep the Palestinian leadership and speak directly to the Palestinian people.

The Ramallah-based Palestinian leadership was not alone in rejecting the Trump initiative. While Kushner and Greenblatt were in the Middle East, a delegation of Hamas officials visited Moscow. “Our position is that the United States, in particular the current administration, cannot behave like the exclusive player in the region, essentially implementing Israel’s policy,” a Hamas official said (6/25). The same day, Erakat indicated that the

Jordanians rejected Kushner's offer of aid equal to the sum that UNRWA spends to support Palestinian refugees in Jordan. "The [Trump] administration is facing a crisis after failing to market its peace plan to the Palestinians and Arabs," a member of the PLO Executive Committee said (6/26). "This administration is living under an illusion if it thinks that it would be able to find Arab or Palestinian support for its suspicious plan." In addition, Kushner and Greenblatt's efforts to raise money for Gaza were reportedly unsuccessful, partly because of Abbas's refusal to participate. According to the *Times of Israel* on 6/29, Kushner and Greenblatt had, as a result, been forced to cancel a planned donor summit in Cairo.

The U.S. pivot toward Gaza came amid rising tensions between Israel and Hamas, and was quickly overshadowed by reports of deadly Israeli air strikes in Gaza and by Egyptian- and UN-led talks on a possible long-term cease-fire. While the Trump administration continued to pursue its own initiative, and even began hiring staff to help manage its impending rollout, there were no further major developments this quarter.

International Support for Trump's Jerusalem Policy

While the international community was nearly unanimous in opposing the Trump administration's decision to break with the decades-old consensus and move the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, a few countries decided to follow the U.S.'s lead. Guatemala and Paraguay opened their new embassies in Jerusalem on 5/16 and 5/21, respectively. On 6/24, Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu announced that Bulgaria planned to open an "honorary consulate" in Jerusalem as a "first step" toward moving its embassy to Jerusalem.

And on 7/3, Slovakian officials said their country was going to open a cultural center in Jerusalem, bolstering their diplomatic presence in the city.

In a related development, FM al-Maliki announced (8/8) that Colombia had decided to recognize the State of Palestine. Until then, Colombia had been the only South American country not to have done so.

Targeting the Palestinian Martyrs' Fund

After the United States passed a new law last quarter conditioning aid to the West Bank and Gaza on the PA ending the distribution of stipends to Palestinians imprisoned, injured, or killed as a result of confrontations with Israeli soldiers or civilians (see *JPS* 47 [4]), the Israeli Knesset followed suit this quarter. On 7/2, 87 members of the Knesset voted in favor of legislation requiring the government to withhold from its monthly transfers of tax revenues to the PA an amount equal to 1/12th of the sum that the PA paid out to what the bill described as "terrorists" in the previous year. "The PA has transformed itself into an enterprise that employs murderers," said MK Avi Dichter (Likud), explaining his support for the bill. "It is very easy to be accepted into this business. All you have to do is murder Israelis, get arrested or be killed, and you've been accepted for the job."

The Palestinian backlash was swift and unanimous. On 7/3, a PA spokesperson said the new law crossed a "red line" and constituted a "declaration of war against the Palestinian people, their fighters, prisoners, and martyrs." Erakat added (7/3) that the PA was considering a reduction in political, economic, and security relations with Israel in response.

Simultaneously, the PA was under increasing pressure from the international community to end the stipends program. On 7/2, Australian

FM Julie Bishop announced the suspension of Australian aid, citing concerns that the money was being used for programs that “Australia would never support.” As a result, 10 million Australian dollars (approximately \$7.4 million) were redirected to the UN’s Humanitarian Fund for the Palestinian Territories. “Any assistance provided . . . to those convicted of politically motivated violence is an affront to Australian values, and undermines the prospect of meaningful peace between Israel and the Palestinians,” Bishop said (7/2). Later that same week, the Israeli newspaper *Israel Hayom* reported (7/5) that the EU had initiated discussions with the PA about the stipends program. The newspaper quoted an EU statement as saying, “The payment system for Palestinian prisoners, former prisoners, and their families is part of the EU’s political dialogue with the PA being carried out at the highest levels.”

Despite the aid cuts and mounting pressure, Abbas reiterated throughout the quarter that he had no plans to end the stipends program. “We will not allow anyone to interfere with the money that Israel is against us paying to the families of martyrs and prisoners,” he told a group of Fatah leaders on 7/8.

PERSECUTING THE PALESTINIAN MINORITY AND OTHER OPPONENTS

Letting the Trump administration’s peace efforts run their course, Netanyahu and his right-wing government advanced a years-long campaign to undermine the Palestinian minority in Israel as well as other political rivals, including the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

A significant advance in that campaign happened on 7/19 when the Knesset passed the Nation-State Bill into law, codifying the right of self-determination in Israel as “unique to the

Jewish people.” The law also enshrined the notion of unlimited settlement and expansionism, declaring “the development of Jewish settlement” a national value, which the state would “encourage and promote.” It downgraded Arabic from an official language to one with a “special status,” and encouraged the development of Jewish-only communities (previous drafts of the bill mandated such development), effectively relegating Palestinian citizens of Israel to second-class status as a matter of constitutional law. Netanyahu hailed the Nation-State Law as “a defining moment in the annals of Zionism and the history of the state of Israel. . . . [One hundred twenty-two] years after Theodor Herzl, the father of modern political Zionism, published his vision, we’ve enshrined into the law the basic principle of our existence” (7/19). During final debates before the vote, Palestinian and other non-Zionist MKs criticized the proposal, prompting speaker Yuli Edelstein to have them removed from the plenum. PLO Executive Committee member Hanan Ashrawi described (7/19) the new law as giving “license to apartheid, discrimination, ethnic cleansing, and sectarianism.” Public protests continued throughout the quarter, particularly on 7/30, when thousands of Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel attended a mass Arabic language lesson in the streets of Tel Aviv.

However, the most significant challenge to the new Nation-State Law came from Israel’s Druze community. Comprising approximately 2 percent of Israel’s population, the Druze viewed the new law as an affront to their decades of loyalty and contributions to Israeli security. (According to a Pew Research Center study in 2015, approximately 60 percent of male Druze citizens of Israel said they were serving or had served in the Israeli army.) “Israel is the best country in the world for the

Druze. It's best to be Druze here, but the [Nation-State] Law turns us into second-class citizens," said former MK Shachiv Shnaan (*al-Monitor*, 7/29).

The Druze community's negative response to the new law surprised at least one senior cabinet member, Education Minister Naftali Bennett (*Jewish Home*), who said (7/25) that he only realized the potential offense to the Druze community after the bill had passed into law. Responding to Druze protestations, Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon said (7/26) that the law had been approved "hastily" and needed to be fixed. Netanyahu met with leaders of the Druze community on 7/26 and established a committee to address their concerns. After the committee put forth (8/1) an initial proposal for follow-up legislation codifying the status of Israel's Druze community, tens of thousands of Druze and Jewish Israelis gathered in Tel Aviv for another major protest. Netanyahu convened the committee again on 8/6. "We worked on the Nation-State Law for eight years," he told them. "I'm not saying that we'll work on this for eight years, but it won't be eight days either." Another mass protest took place in Tel Aviv a few days later (8/11), as numerous legal challenges were filed against the Nation-State Law, but there were no further major developments by the close of the quarter.

The Nation-State Law was not the only discriminatory legislation passed this quarter. With 43 votes in favor and 24 against, the Knesset also passed the so-called Breaking the Silence Law on 7/16, allowing Bennett to block nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), notably the anti-occupation group Breaking the Silence, from presenting lectures and organizing activities in Israeli schools. It also required NGOs receiving more than half their funding from foreign sources to disclose that fact publicly.

Also this quarter, the Jerusalem District Court blocked (5/23) the deportation of Omar Shakir, director of Human Rights Watch's Israel/Palestine office, and the Israeli authorities denied a slew of other high-profile activists from entering the country, several of them U.S. citizens (see *Chronology*). According to an 8/15 report by the Israeli public broadcasting corporation, Kan, the Shin Bet denied 250 people entry in the first eight months of 2018. The majority of them were "Muslims, or were in the process of becoming Muslims," claimed Kan, and therefore deemed security risks. In a related development, Israeli border security forces detained and interrogated U.S. journalist Peter Beinart during a security screening at Ben Gurion Airport. "Israel, like America, is getting uglier," the liberal Zionist author wrote (8/13) in a widely shared account of the incident. With Beinart's case drawing the Israeli public's attention to the issue, Netanyahu weighed in personally, claiming that Beinart's detention had been an "administrative mistake."

THE BRINK OF WAR

After years of suffering ever-deteriorating living conditions, the Palestinians in Gaza rose up last quarter in a mass protest movement they named the Great March of Return (see *JPS* 47 [4]). The protests along Gaza's border fence aimed to secure Palestinian refugees' right of return to their homes in historic Palestine. The protests gathered momentum as the quarter advanced, culminating in a mass demonstration on 5/14 that captured the world's attention. Throughout the quarter, the Israeli army violently dispersed the demonstrators using sharpshooters (snipers) to kill or maim protesters; by the end of the quarter, some 106 unarmed protesters (58 on 5/14 alone) had been killed, including paramedics, local journalists, women, and

children, and thousands more were injured, many of them severely (see *JPS* interview with on-the-ground surgeon, Dr. Ghassan Abu Sitta, *JPS* 47 [4]). As tensions mounted, with Israel and Hamas exchanging accusations, several exchanges of cross-border fire brought the two closer to sustained armed conflict than at any time since Israel's assault on Gaza in the summer of 2014 (see *JPS* 44 [1] and [2]).

As the quarter opened on 5/16, new regional and international diplomatic efforts to restore calm were also under way. *Haaretz* reported (5/16) that Egyptian and Qatari officials had made overtures to both Israel and Hamas in an effort to defuse the violence. The Egyptians, who had worked to broker a cease-fire last quarter, were reportedly willing to make significant concessions this quarter in order to see that aim accomplished. The *Haaretz* report indicated that the Egyptian authorities had offered to keep the Rafah border crossing open for 10 days per month, a significant increase over the 2 to 3 days per month during the first half of 2018 (see "Movement and Access" below). According to further reports on 5/16 and 5/18, Hamas agreed to curtail the size of the protests along Gaza's border fence on 5/18 in exchange for certain blockade-easing measures, including more frequent openings of the Rafah border crossing. "That doesn't mean we won't use armed resistance," Yahya Sinwar, Hamas's top official in Gaza, said (5/16). "If Israel goes overboard and spills lots of blood, we will be forced to respond accordingly."

Meanwhile, the Egyptians, Qataris, and an undisclosed Western country had their sights set on a loftier goal: a long-term cease-fire agreement that would address issues beyond the cross-border violence, including returning the remains of 2 Israeli soldiers held by Hamas, along with Israeli civilians allegedly being held in Gaza. According to Israeli diplomatic

sources, the Egyptians were also hoping to advance the stalled Palestinian reconciliation process, organize economic relief measures, and dismantle Hamas's military wing. The Qataris, for their part, were reportedly interested in bringing international organizations into the process. Those same sources indicated that UN special coordinator Nickolay Mladenov hoped to organize a new regional forum to administer long-term aid programs for Gaza (*Haaretz*, 5/18).

It was unclear in the first week of the quarter exactly how close the two sides were to reaching an agreement, nor were the specifics of their discussions known. Israel was reportedly demanding an end to all Palestinian rocket fire and tunnel construction, cessation of allegedly threatening advances on the border fence, and the return of all Israelis being held in Gaza, living and dead, while Hamas was angling for a years-long cease-fire, an end to the blockade of Gaza, and major infrastructure projects to help rebuild the Gazan economy. On 5/17, Hamas issued a statement claiming that Israel had rejected an offer for a possible prisoner swap. "All of our efforts have been rejected by the Israeli occupation and its leadership is not ready to conclude a deal," the statement read. The Israeli "coordinator for the return of Israelis," former Shabak official Yaron Blum, denied (5/17) this claim. The *Times of Israel* quoted him as saying, "Hamas is invited to immediately turn to the mediator known to it in order to get the process moving."

With the talks at an impasse, tensions along the border increased. After a group of Palestinians crossed the border fence and rolled a flaming tire toward a military patrol on 5/26, Israeli forces bombed Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestine (PIJ) sites across Gaza on 5/26 and 5/27, killing 3 Palestinians and causing major damage. When 2 more Palestinians

crossed the border fence reportedly armed with knives, bolt cutters, and flammable materials on 5/28, Israeli forces struck again, targeting Hamas sites in Bayt Lahiya; 1 Palestinian was killed. The armed groups in Gaza then launched 28 rockets and other projectiles into Israel on 5/29 in the biggest barrage since Israel's assault on Gaza in the summer of 2014. With images circulating on Israeli social media of rocket damage in the yard of an Israeli kindergarten in Eshkol, the Israeli Air Force (IAF) conducted another wave of air strikes across Gaza, causing major damage. When the armed groups in Gaza responded again, 1 Israeli civilian was injured and the IAF significantly expanded the scope of its attacks, targeting at least 30 Hamas and PIJ sites across Gaza, destroying a tunnel that stretched approximately 900 meters into Israeli territory, and causing dozens of injuries. "Today at midday, we massively and powerfully attacked terrorist infrastructure, including an additional tunnel, across the Gaza Strip," Israeli DM Avigdor Lieberman said of the attack (5/29). "Hamas and [PIJ] have already paid a heavy price."

The First Cease-Fire

The rocket fire and air strikes continued until around midnight on 5/29 (see Chronology), when Egyptian diplomats reportedly brokered a limited cease-fire. "The factions [will] commit to the agreement as long as Israel does," said senior Hamas official Khalil al-Hayya. Israeli officials indicated that their government was not party to any agreement, but that they would follow Hamas's lead on a cease-fire. "I believe there are indirect understandings with Hamas to end this current round," said Minister of Energy Yuval Steinitz on the morning of 5/30. "There is an intention to close this round." Israel's security cabinet convened to discuss the

escalation later in the day, and reportedly supported Netanyahu and Lieberman's handling of the exchange, despite calls from right-wing ministers for Israel to re-occupy Gaza.

The Israeli army, which was already pushing for the government to loosen restrictions on Gaza, again urged the cabinet to take steps to avert further escalation. "The [Israeli] political leadership has to decide with whom to make such arrangements, but in terms of Hamas' situation in the Gaza Strip, now is definitely a good time to try to reach agreements that will enable [Gazans] to have a better life and bring a long period of quiet," said one senior officer on 5/31. Intermittent exchanges of low-level cross-border violence and reports of progress in the indirect talks on a long-term cease-fire continued over the next two weeks as the Israeli government deliberated over possible humanitarian measures. The cabinet convened on 6/6 and reportedly discussed an option for a new Gaza reconstruction plan put forth by Mladenov. They met again on 6/10 to discuss proposals to permit more Gazans to work in Israel and increase imports and exports from Gaza. Lieberman reportedly supported some of the proposals, but before the 6/10 meeting he told the press that he was not persuaded by the argument that humanitarian aid in Gaza would undermine Hamas. On 6/12, he stated that he would only support aid programs in Gaza if Hamas was "kick[ed] out" and the remains of the 2 Israeli soldiers and civilians were returned. "In recent days people have been talking about humanitarian steps," Bennett added after the security cabinet meeting on 6/10. "We need to remember that our sons, both bodies of soldiers and Israeli citizens, are held there."

In the absence of new Israeli humanitarian efforts or progress on the diplomatic track,

cross-border violence intensified throughout 6/2018, when a new Palestinian tactic began to shift the cross-border dynamics. Rocket and other projectile attacks had, for years, been the main form of resistance employed by the various armed groups in Gaza. Most were Qassam rockets, made from steel tubes fueled with sugar and potassium nitrate, incapable of precision targeting and prone to malfunction. Early in 2018, Palestinians in Gaza started launching a new type of projectile into Israel: kites and balloons carrying incendiary devices capable of sparking small fires. As the Great March of Return ramped up throughout 3–5/2018, protesters increasingly used these devices in their demonstrations. By 6/2018, Gazans were flying them into southern Israel on a near-daily basis, causing minor fires and in some cases destroying or damaging Israeli crops.

Dramatic images of minor fire damage spread on Israeli social media, and on 6/3, the Israeli government started rolling out a response. Netanyahu ordered (6/3) his deputies to withhold an amount equal to that needed to compensate farmers whose crops were affected from the monthly transfers of tax revenues to the PA (according to Israel's Tax Authority, the fires had caused approximately \$1.4 million in damage since 3/2018). "We should be clear that we are not prepared to accept the kites becoming normality," Lieberman said at a meeting of his Yisrael Beytenu Party on 6/4. Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan upped (6/5) the ante, arguing that the Israeli army should assassinate any Hamas official who condones the kite and balloon attacks. "In light of the fact that Hamas is the one allowing the shooting and the sending of the kites, we need to return to preventative assassinations."

Israel's reaction galvanized those in Gaza who saw the kite and balloon attacks as a means

of achieving their goals. A new armed group calling themselves the Sons of Zouari pledged (6/14) to fly 5,000 incendiary devices into southern Israel on 6/15, to mark the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Fitr. They claimed that their attacks would be able to reach as far as 40 kilometers beyond Gaza's border fence.

The attacks on 6/15 were ultimately far less damaging than the Sons of Zouari promised. However, the perceived threat from the incendiary devices prompted the Israeli army to significantly ratchet up the violence. Although the army claimed to be refraining from directly targeting individual perpetrators, Israeli forces increasingly fired warning shots and targeted property belonging to kite launchers in mid-6/2018. For four straight days (6/13–17), Israeli drones dropped bombs on alleged Palestinian sites of kite and balloon assembly. The strikes caused major damage, destroyed 1 vehicle entirely, and moderately injured 2 Palestinians. With criticism mounting from the Israeli opposition and the public, Israel's security cabinet was divided on how to proceed. In a meeting on 6/17, Erdan and Bennett reportedly pushed for the army to target perpetrators directly, while Lieberman and Netanyahu, wary of an escalation, backed the current course of action.

The situation escalated further in the wake of the security cabinet's meeting. In response to the serial launch of incendiary kites and balloons on 6/17, the IAF conducted air strikes on 9 Hamas sites across Gaza on 6/18. Armed groups then launched 3 rockets toward Israel (1 fell short of the border fence, the other 2 landed in open areas). The IAF conducted another 3 waves of air strikes on Hamas sites on 6/19, causing major damage. Hamas and other armed groups then escalated their response, firing approximately 45 rockets and other projectiles into Israel overnight on 6/20.

“We are committed to a formula of a strike for every strike,” read a joint Hamas and PIJ statement on the morning of 6/20. “We will not allow the enemy to dictate a new formula.” As the cross-border attacks continued, Erdan said there was a “good chance” that the Israeli army would launch an “operation” in Gaza to “create durable deterrence,” referring to the possibility of a major Israeli assault on Gaza on the scale of Operation Cast Lead in 2008–9 and Operation Protective Edge in 2014.

With cross-border violence increasing in frequency and severity in late 6/2018 and early 7/2018, a spate of reports emerged on progress being made in the indirect Hamas-Israel talks. On 6/21, *al-Akhabar* reported that Hamas was prepared to make a “comprehensive” deal that would include the return of the remains of the 2 Israeli soldiers and the Israeli civilians allegedly being held in Gaza in exchange for the establishment of a seaport and airport in Gaza. A week later, *Asharq Al Awsat* reported (6/30) the opposite, stating that Hamas was rejecting any proposal that would trade aid or infrastructure projects for the return of Israeli civilians and soldiers’ remains. Instead, Hamas was reportedly interested in a prisoner swap. Israel, for its part, was conditioning any large-scale humanitarian relief projects on the return of the civilians and soldiers’ remains. “As long as Hamas continues to run Gaza as it does with only one purpose—the destruction of the State of Israel and attacking its citizens—and holds the bodies of our soldiers who didn’t return from battle, Gaza won’t be rehabilitated,” Israeli president Reuven Rivlin said (7/2).

The Israelis then took a step in the other direction. “We will crack down immediately on the Hamas regime in the Gaza Strip,” Netanyahu announced in a meeting with Likud leaders on 7/9. “In a significant move, we will today shut down the Kerem Shalom [border]

crossing.” Netanyahu explained that food, medicine, and other specially approved humanitarian goods would still be allowed to cross into Gaza, but all other imports and exports would be barred. He also announced a reduction in the fishing zone off Gaza’s coast, from nine to six nautical miles. Both Netanyahu and Lieberman framed the new restrictions as explicit responses to the incendiary kites and balloons, and alluded to possible additional restrictions if such “attacks” continued. A Hamas spokesperson called (7/9) the restrictions a “new crime against humanity,” and a PIJ spokesperson called (7/9) them a “declaration of war.” Two days later, the Ministry of Agriculture in Gaza announced a ban on fruit imports from Israel in an effort to pressure Israel into reopening Kerem Shalom (fruit imports from Israel totaled approximately 200 tons per day prior to this decision, according to a 7/11 report from Ma’an News Agency).

Israel’s new restrictions did nothing to deter armed groups in Gaza. Incendiary kites and balloons continued being launched throughout the week of 7/9, and attendance spiked at the Great March of Return protests that particular Friday (7/13), drawing the Israeli army’s typical response; 1 Palestinian was killed and more than 200 were injured. Amid the crackdown, a small explosive was thrown at Israeli soldiers, lightly injuring an officer. The Israeli army then retaliated with strikes on 2 Hamas tunnels and a training site, causing extensive damage and kicking off a deadly exchange of violence that lasted through the night and into the evening on 7/14; 2 Palestinians were killed and at least 15 were injured. “We knew this day, the events of the last 24 hours, would come in recent weeks, and we prepared for it accordingly,” an Israeli army spokesperson said (7/14). “We’ll increase the force of the

attack for as long as it takes, and we will use other tools when necessary.”

The Second Cease-Fire

Before the violence could escalate further, the Egyptians again brokered a cease-fire, although there were some disagreements about what it entailed. Some Israeli sources said (7/15) it stipulated that Hamas and PIJ would curb the incendiary kite and balloon launches. Hamas officials stated (7/15) that the agreement only covered rockets and mortars, not the kites and balloons. Later, Netanyahu clarified (7/15), “I heard it being said that Israel has agreed to a cease-fire that would allow the continuation of terrorism by incendiary kites and balloons; this is incorrect. We are not prepared to accept any attacks against us and we will respond appropriately.” Gaza was on the “brink of war,” according to Mladenov (7/15). “We are one step away from another confrontation. Everybody needs to take a step back,” he added.

But low-level violence on Gaza’s border continued, and Lieberman stoked tensions further by announcing (7/16) a suspension of fuel and gas exports to power-starved Gaza and a further reduction of the fishing zone off the coast to three nautical miles. “Israel’s vindictive steps reflect the magnitude of the injustice and of the crimes being committed in the Gaza Strip,” Hamas responded (7/16). “There will be severe consequences and Israel will have to take responsibility.”

Further complicating matters, the Egyptian authorities announced a temporary closure of the Rafah border crossing on 7/16, citing a technical malfunction. The next day, the Israeli press reported that the Egyptians had recently called on Hamas to end the launch of incendiary kites and balloons, prompting speculation about the veracity of the technical malfunction story. According to Egyptian and

Palestinian sources on 7/17, Hamas was ready to accept a cease-fire agreement that included an end to the kite and balloon attacks in exchange for Israel lifting the new restrictions on the Kerem Shalom crossing.

The Israeli government had no interest in such a deal, however, and reportedly conveyed an ultimatum to Hamas via intermediaries: either end the kite and balloon attacks by 7/20 or the Israeli army will invade. While Hamas was willing to act to curb the attacks, according to reports on 7/18, they were not in a position to put a stop to all of them. “We receive orders from no one and our peaceful resistance will continue until our demands are met and the siege over Gaza is lifted,” the Sons of Zouari said in a 7/18 statement. “The worse the siege becomes, the larger the number of fires, and the greater the distances [spanned].”

Violence escalated again on 7/19. After reports of incendiary kites landing in southern Israel in the morning, an Israeli drone bombed a site near Rafah, killing 1 Hamas fighter and injuring 3 other Palestinians. The next day, amid Great March of Return protests, Hamas snipers shot and killed an Israeli soldier from across the border fence. Israeli forces then carried out extensive air strikes and artillery shelling on 68 targets across Gaza, killing 4 more Palestinians. The strikes “eliminated about 60 buildings and infrastructures and revoked significant military and command and control capabilities,” according to an Israeli army spokesperson.

The Third Cease-Fire

For the third time in as many months, the Egyptians brokered a limited cease-fire late at night on 7/20, this time with Mladenov’s help. Again, there were disputes about what the agreement covered. A senior Hamas official said (7/20) that it provided for a “cessation of all

forms of military escalation,” except the incendiary kites and balloons. While no Israeli official confirmed that the Israeli government was party to an agreement, an Israeli official said (7/21) that Hamas had offered to stop the “fire terror” and the “terror at the fence” in exchange for an end to the air strikes. “Hamas suffered a serious blow yesterday, and requested a cease-fire via Egypt, while promising to stop the arson terror and terror at the border fence,” the official said. “If Hamas violates the truce they will pay an even heavier price.”

After a period of relative calm, the Israeli authorities partially reopened (7/24) the Kerem Shalom crossing to allow fuel and gas to enter Gaza, lifting the additional restriction Lieberman had announced on 7/16. Israel’s Defense Ministry released a statement explaining that some restrictions were being kept in place because Hamas “has not put a complete end to terrorism, but is trying to maintain a low level of incendiary balloon launches and friction on the border fence.” Rocket, mortar, kite, and balloon attacks, as well as retaliatory Israeli strikes, continued at a low level over the next two weeks, however, and Lieberman again issued (8/2) an order blocking the entry of fuel and gas into Gaza.

Late 7/2018 and early 8/2018 saw another flurry of reports of progress in indirect talks on a possible long-term cease-fire deal. “Egypt and the UN are putting immense pressure on all sides,” a senior Israeli diplomat said. “This is an unprecedented initiative, but it is still too early to say whether it will succeed. A lot is at stake.” Sufficient progress was apparently made that Netanyahu cancelled (8/2) a planned trip to Colombia. The next day, *al-Akhbar* reported details of the framework under discussion for the first time. The product of two weeks of indirect talks in Cairo, the deal reportedly comprised three stages: First, Israel would ease

restrictions on the Kerem Shalom crossing and Egypt would commit to permanently opening the Rafah border crossing in exchange for a full cease-fire, including a halt to the launch of incendiary kites and balloons by Palestinians. Second, Israel would increase the electricity supply and lift additional restrictions on the export of certain goods to Gaza. Third, the UN would implement a package of humanitarian projects in Gaza, including the establishment of a seaport and airport in northeast Egypt to serve Palestinians in nearby Gaza. According to reports on 8/3 and 8/6, Hamas’s leaders agreed to at least the first stage of the deal. The Israeli security cabinet made no decision one way or the other in its meeting on 8/5. The ministers reportedly gave little credence to the proposed three-stage plan beyond an initial cease-fire.

As Egyptian, Qatari, UN, Israeli, and Hamas officials worked through the details of a possible agreement, Israeli artillery shelled (8/7) a Hamas facility near Jabaliya refugee camp, killing 2 Hamas fighters and injuring 6 more. The Israeli army initially claimed that one of their posts along the border fence had come under fire from Gaza, but later admitted that they mistook a military drill for an attack. Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh appeared optimistic about the prospects of a deal as a Hamas delegation departed Cairo earlier that day, but after the deadly Israeli attack at the border fence, Hamas put out a statement saying that “resistance forces” could not agree to the deal Israel was seeking to dictate and that Israel should expect retaliation.

Over the next 48 hours, the IAF conducted air strikes on at least 150 sites across Gaza, killing 3 Palestinians, including a pregnant mother, and injuring at least 12. Armed groups in Gaza launched approximately 200 rockets and other projectiles into southern Israel;

9 Israelis and 1 Thai worker were injured. Despite the calls for calm from the international community, the violence escalated until the late afternoon on 8/9. Around noon, a coalition of Palestinian factions in Gaza unilaterally declared that they considered the latest escalation over. However, after unidentified persons fired a rocket into Israel two hours later, the IAF bombed and completely destroyed the five-story Said al-Mishal Cultural Center in Gaza City, injuring 18 Palestinians.

The Fourth Cease-Fire

Following the destruction of the cultural center in Gaza City, the Egyptians brokered yet another cease-fire, and tentative calm returned. The Israelis again denied committing to any agreement, but an Israeli official said (8/10) that “quiet will be met with quiet.” Amid reports that Egyptian authorities had warned Hamas’s leaders that the Israelis were seriously considering targeted assassinations if the violence in Gaza did not abate, the Israeli army deployed (8/9) reinforcements and positioned additional Iron Dome missile defense batteries along the border fence. “We are [taking stock] after another night of escalation, and at this stage, we don’t see it ending,” an Israeli army officer said (8/9). Furthermore, both Netanyahu (8/12) and Lieberman (8/13) alluded to the possibility of a wide-scale assault on Gaza. “As of now, we have destroyed hundreds of Hamas military targets, and in each round the IDF exacts an additional heavy price,” Netanyahu told the weekly cabinet meeting on 8/12. “I will not reveal here our operational plans, [but] they are ready.”

A period of relative calm, punctuated by the launch of a couple of incendiary kites and balloons, followed the 8/9 cease-fire. Then, on 8/14, Lieberman announced that all the

recently imposed restrictions on the Kerem Shalom crossing would be lifted on 8/15, barring any unexpected escalation. After a quiet night, the Israeli authorities reopened the crossing, allowing 700 trucks carrying food, building supplies, animal feed, fuel, gas, hygiene products, and more into Gaza on 8/15. They also expanded the fishing zone off the coast to six or nine nautical miles, depending on the area. Israel’s security cabinet convened on the afternoon of 8/15 to discuss the details of a long-term cease-fire deal as well. It was later reported that they had agreed to one in principle in a meeting on 8/12, and that it had gone into effect after the 8/15 meeting. Based on the same principles as the agreement that put an end to Israel’s 2014 Operation Protective Edge assault on Gaza, the agreement was identical to the first stage of the three-stage deal *al-Akhbar* reported on 8/3: Israel would lift restrictions on the Kerem Shalom crossing and expand the fishing zone in exchange for a cessation of all hostilities.

As the quarter came to a close, questions remained about the durability of the cease-fire agreement. For one, the issue of the Israeli soldiers’ remains and the Israeli civilians allegedly being held in Gaza remained unresolved. “There will be no real arrangement with Hamas without the return of our sons and citizens home and the promise of long-term quiet,” one Israeli political source told *Haaretz* on 5/15. Furthermore, both Bennett and his fellow Jewish Home party member Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked publicly opposed the agreement, presenting a major challenge from inside Netanyahu’s right-wing ruling coalition. Finally, Abbas remained opposed to the entire concept of a long-term cease-fire agreement between Israel and Hamas and resistant to Egyptian efforts to involve him. “Any agreement that excludes the PA from the

decision-making mechanism will be very fragile, because it won't gain the PA's cooperation, and that is liable to thwart any progress," said a Hamas official (*Haaretz*, 8/15).

OCCUPATION DATA AND TRENDS

The Israeli crackdown on the Great March of Return and the ensuing escalation in cross-border violence in Gaza caused a large number of Palestinian casualties this quarter. That notwithstanding, the overall number of Palestinians killed as a result of Israeli actions decreased compared to last quarter, when the mass protests were at their peak: 66 Palestinians were killed, down from 140 the previous quarter. The comprehensive death toll since the beginning of the Second Intifada in 9/2000 reached 11,213 Palestinians by quarter's end (including 65 Palestinian citizens of Israel and 19 cross-border "infiltrators"); 1,280 Israelis (including at least 253 settlers and 444 IDF soldiers and other security personnel); and 73 foreign nationals (including 2 British suicide bombers). These numbers include individuals who died in non-combat-related incidents if their death directly resulted from Israel's occupation or the ongoing conflict (for example: ailing Palestinians who died because they were denied access to medical care and Palestinians killed in smuggling tunnel accidents).

OVERVIEW OF THE VIOLENCE

With the vast majority of the violence occurring in Gaza, the number of Palestinians killed as a result of Israeli actions in the **West Bank** and **East Jerusalem** was down for a second quarter in a row. Six Palestinians were killed in the West Bank and Jerusalem this quarter: 4 succumbed to injuries inflicted by

the Israeli army during arrest raids or clashes (5/23, 6/7, 7/8, and 7/23), and 2 were killed after allegedly ramming vehicles into or stabbing Israelis (6/2 and 7/6). The number of Palestinians injured as a result of Israeli actions in the West Bank and East Jerusalem decreased considerably as well. According to the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 291 Palestinians were injured between 5/22 and 8/13, down from 2,572 last quarter.

Attendance at the weekly Great March of Return protests in the **Gaza Strip** dropped throughout the quarter, leading to relatively fewer casualties from the Great March of Return protests. Israeli soldiers killed 59 Palestinians in Gaza, down from 132 last quarter: 37 were fatally injured when the Israeli army opened fire on unarmed protesters during the weekly demonstrations, bringing the death toll stemming from the Great March of Return to 145; 16 were killed in Israeli air strikes or shelling during the IAF escalation in the second half of the quarter; 5 were killed allegedly attempting to cross the border fence into Israel (5/28, 6/4 [2], 6/18, and 7/2); and 1 died at the Erez border crossing after the Israeli authorities repeatedly denied him a permit to travel to Jerusalem for medical treatment (6/19). The number of Palestinians injured in Gaza also dropped substantially. According to OCHA, 3,702 Palestinians were injured between 5/22 and 8/13, down from 10,403 last quarter.

The Israeli authorities punitively limited the expanse of the fishing zone off Gaza's coast from 7/9 to 8/15, and the number of instances of Israeli naval forces harassing Palestinian fishermen decreased. They opened fire on or otherwise confronted fishermen on 55 separate occasions, down from 65 last quarter.

Over the course of these incidents, 10 fishermen were arrested (5/23 [2], 6/23 [3], and 8/12 [5]). In a related development this quarter, Palestinian activists in Gaza organized three separate flotillas to sail from ports in Gaza in a symbolic challenge to the Israeli blockade (5/29, 7/10, and 8/11). The organizers called on the Israeli authorities to allow the ships through so that dozens of ailing Gazans on board could access medical care unavailable in the territory. “We want the world to see the reality of the blockade and the suffering of the people of Gaza,” the organizers explained in a statement on 8/11, framing their efforts in the context of the ongoing Great March of Return. “We will not accept anything less than lifting the blockade once and for all.” Each time they set sail, Israeli naval forces intercepted the ships and ferried them to the port of Ashdod. Other than their similar goals, these flotillas were unrelated to the so-called freedom flotillas that international solidarity activists have attempted to sail to Gaza in recent years (see 7/22, 7/29, and 8/4 in Chronology for details on the most recent attempt).

MOVEMENT AND ACCESS

The punitive restrictions the Israeli authorities imposed on imports to and exports from the **Gaza Strip** this quarter had a devastating effect on the approximately two million people living in the territory.

According to reports, the restrictions at the Kerem Shalom border crossing, which were imposed on 7/9 and lifted on 8/15, blocked 3,500 trucks from delivering goods to Gaza, reportedly causing \$100 million in damage to a local economy already suffering amid a severe electricity crisis, widespread infrastructure failures, and other blockade-related shortages. According to the Israeli NGO Gisha, the number of truckloads

entering Gaza had averaged over 8,000 per month between 8/2015 and 5/2018 before plummeting below 6,000 per month this quarter (see Figure 1).

The situation at the Rafah border crossing was the complete opposite. After Egypt opened the crossing for five days around Nakba Day on 5/15 (5/13–17), President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi announced (5/17) that Rafah would remain open for the entire month of Ramadan, marking the first weeks-long opening of the crossing since 2013. On 6/19, Egyptian sources said that al-Sisi had decided to keep the crossing open for at least another two months, through Eid al-Adha. With a few minor interruptions, including the alleged technical malfunction on 7/16 (see “The Second Cease-Fire” above), the Egyptian authorities kept their word for the entire quarter, allowing 12,736 Palestinians to return to Gaza (up from 2,921) and 27,218 to exit (up from 5,818) between 5/22 and 8/13, according to OCHA.

Palestinian movement and access in the **West Bank** and **East Jerusalem** remained relatively unchanged. Near-daily reports of mobile checkpoints and Israeli army patrols across the region continued throughout the quarter. At the same time, however, the number of Israeli army arrest raids and house searches decreased significantly. According to OCHA, there were 783 search and arrest operations between 5/22 and 8/13 (down from 1,537 and 1,126 in the previous two quarters). Furthermore, the Israeli authorities expanded (6/6) the operating hours at the Allenby Bridge border crossing, allowing more people to cross between the West Bank and Jordan, and they also released (8/14) 10 tons of letters and packages addressed to Palestinians in the West Bank that they had been holding, in some cases, since 2010 (see the Photos section in this issue of the *Journal*). According to Palestinian

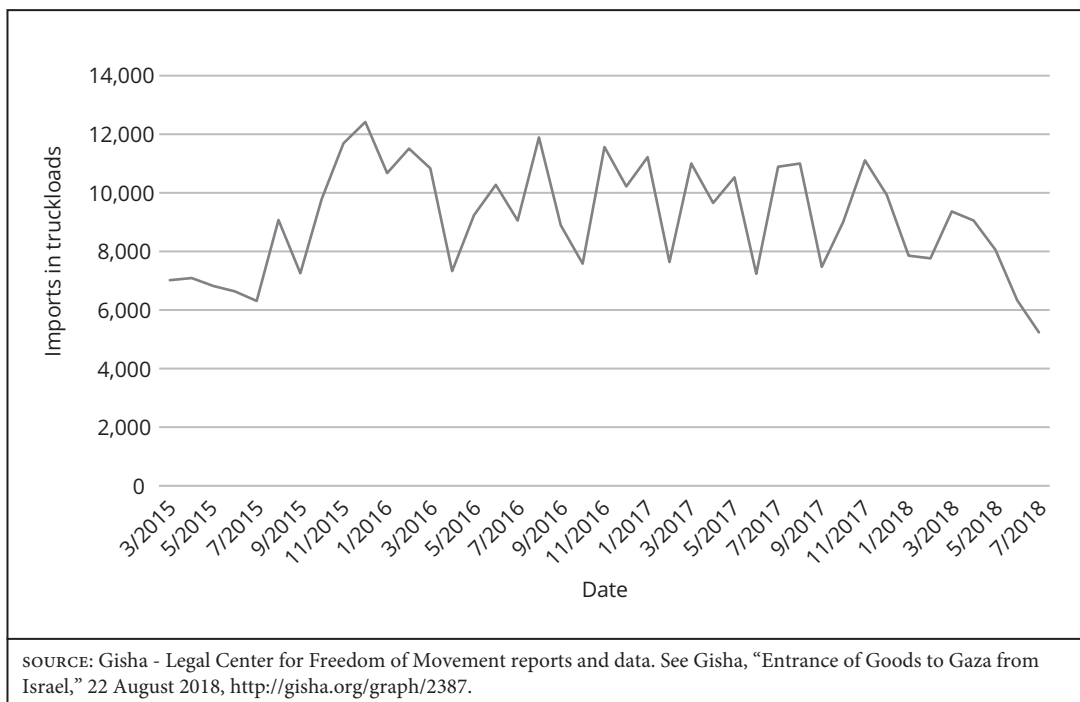


Figure 1. Imports to Gaza. The punitive Israeli restrictions on imports and exports at the Kerem Shalom border crossing led to a significant decrease in the amount of goods entering Gaza.

officials, the move was a one-off confidence-building measure the Israelis had agreed to in 2017.

SETTLEMENT GROWTH

Wary of provoking U.S. president Trump, Israeli PM Netanyahu imposed a few minor restraints on the expansion of Israel’s illegal settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem this quarter. He allowed the court-ordered evacuation and demolition of the “unauthorized” Netiv Ha’avot settlement outpost to proceed on 6/12, despite calls from the settlers and their leaders for him to stay the order (see Chronology). He also decided (6/19) to postpone indefinitely the planned evacuation and demolition of 7 buildings in the Palestinian village of Susiya near Hebron. It was the third delay in two years, and came one

month after 74 Democrats in the U.S. House of Representatives called on Netanyahu to halt the demolition. As a result, one settler leader accused (6/19) Netanyahu of giving into international pressure, saying, “The Israeli government’s folly is indescribable.”

Despite settler complaints about delays, overall settlement growth continued apace throughout the quarter in both the West Bank and East Jerusalem. On 5/30, the Higher Planning Committee of Israel’s Civil Administration advanced plans for 1,958 new housing units in West Bank settlements. They also approved the retroactive authorization of 2 unauthorized settlement outposts. The next day, Israel’s Housing Ministry published (5/31) tenders for the construction of 1,162 additional housing units across the West Bank. Rounding out the quarter’s West Bank

settlement announcements, the Defense Ministry filed for public review a previously approved plan for 325 new housing units in the E1 corridor near Jerusalem. The Israeli authorities also approved the construction of 270 units in settlements near Bethlehem on 7/24 and an NIS 10 million (approximately \$2.74 million) expansion of an industrial zone in the Kiryat Arba settlement near Hebron. Finally, DM Lieberman pledged (7/27) to expedite the construction of 400 previously planned housing units in the Adam settlement near Ramallah, explicitly framing his pledge as a punitive response to the Palestinian who allegedly stabbed 3 settlers in Adam on 7/26 (one of the settlers succumbed to his injuries that day). The “best response to terrorism is increased settlement,” Lieberman tweeted.

In East Jerusalem, the Israeli government filed for public review in mid-6/2018 six plans for 1,064 new housing units built in Pisgat Ze’ev, extending the settlement further into Bayt Hanina. The Israel Land Authority (ILA) published (8/15) tenders for the construction of 603 new housing units in Ramat Shlomo, part of a broader plan dating back to 2010. That same day, the ILA reached an NIS 1.4 billion (approximately \$380 million) agreement with the Jerusalem Municipality for a series of development projects across the city. While the bulk of the projects were set for West Jerusalem, a number were slated for the East Jerusalem settlements of Pisgat Ze’ev, French Hill, and Atarot. The Jerusalem City Council was expected to approve the agreement in late-8/2018.

Pro-settlement MKs presented a number of measures to strengthen the overall settlement enterprise and, in some cases, to advance their goal of extending Israeli sovereignty over the West Bank—that is, annexation. Only two of those measures passed into law: The first,

which passed on 6/18, allowed settlement-based chicken farmers to sell their eggs to farmers inside Israel, who have smaller egg-production quotas. The second, which passed on 7/17, transferred jurisdiction over certain petitions filed by Palestinians in the West Bank from the High Court of Justice to the Administrative Affairs Court in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem court was given the authority to rule specifically on cases relating to freedom of information, planning and construction, entries and exits, and “restriction and supervision directives,” according to a 7/18 statement from the Knesset’s press office. “The festivities surrounding the petitions to the High Court of Justice submitted by Palestinians and radical left organizations against settlement in Judea and Samaria end today,” said Justice Minister Shaked (Jewish Home) on 7/17. Other right-wing MKs and ministers celebrated the fact that the High Court of Justice, long seen as a bastion of the Israeli Left, would no longer be hearing as many cases related to the occupied West Bank.

JUDAIZATION OF JERUSALEM

As Israeli settlements expanded across East Jerusalem, Netanyahu concurrently lifted his ban on Israeli officials visiting Haram al-Sharif on 7/3. He had temporarily lifted the ban in early 2017 after imposing it amid the *habba* (the surge of Palestinian resistance, random attacks, and protests that began in Jerusalem in 9/2015) across the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) in 10/2015 (see *JPS* 45 [2]). In a letter to Knesset speaker Edelstein, Netanyahu explained (7/3) that MKs and ministers would be allowed to visit the sanctuary once every three months, as long as they coordinated with the Israeli police in advance. Temple Mount activists, who would prefer sole Israeli control over the

sanctuary, celebrated the move and called for more. “I congratulate the PM for ending the illegal and unreasonable ban,” said MK Yehuda Glick (Likud), “and I call on him to make a real change and allow MKs to go to [Haram al-Sharif] whenever they want.” Glick’s provocative visits to the compound were in part responsible for the initial ban. A PA spokesperson called Netanyahu’s decision to lift the ban a “blatant and serious provocation” that “encourag[es] harm to one of Islam’s holiest sites.”

Israeli elected officials visited the sanctuary on a handful of occasions in the weeks following Netanyahu’s decision, leading to a period of heightened tensions in East Jerusalem (see Chronology). On 7/27, Israeli forces stormed the compound in the early afternoon and forcibly cleared Muslim worshippers out of the sanctuary with sound bombs, tear gas, and other crowd control techniques; 7 Palestinians and 4 Israeli police were injured in the ensuing clashes. The Israeli authorities justified the incursion, saying that Palestinian minors were throwing firecrackers at the police. Afterward, the police shut down the entrances to the sanctuary for four hours, during which time the Islamic Waqf organized a mass sit-in protest in the streets of the Old City. There was a sense that the tensions could escalate into a sustained conflict similar to that witnessed over Israel’s plan to install new security infrastructure at the sanctuary in 7/2017 (*JPS* 47 [1]), but by the end of the quarter a relative calm had returned to Haram al-Sharif.

PALESTINIAN PRISONERS

The number of Palestinians in Israeli prisons has been steadily declining in 2018, down from over 6,000 in 2017. According to the Israeli human rights NGO B’Tselem, 5,667 Palestinians were imprisoned in 6/2018,

down from 5,951 in 1/2018. Detention conditions, however, remained grim. Israel’s Public Security Minister Erdan barred (5/27) Hamas-affiliated prisoners from watching any of the World Cup games on television in 6/2018. The Israeli authorities also cancelled all family visits from Gaza to Hamas-affiliated prisoners on 7/30, allegedly for technical reasons. Finally, 1 Palestinian prisoner died on 5/20, reportedly of complications related to a heart attack and severe hemorrhage caused by a beating at the hands of Israeli prison guards at Eshel Prison in Beersheba on 5/2.

There were rumblings throughout the quarter about a possible mass hunger strike, similar to those of 2015 and 2016. Earlier in the year, a group of prisoners started (2/13) a boycott of Israel’s military courts to protest the use of administrative detention, which enables Israel to imprison Palestinians without trial for periods of six months, which can then be renewed indefinitely. After the Israeli authorities cracked down on the group and threatened to punish their lawyers, the group decided to ramp up their protest and collectively stopped accepting health care on 5/15. Only five of the prisoners ultimately went (7/6) on hunger strike. The Israeli authorities cracked down immediately, placing the five men in solitary confinement in an attempt to stop the protest from spreading.

SETTLER-RELATED VIOLENCE

Settler-related violence was on the rise for a third quarter in a row. According to OCHA, there were 74 incidents of settlers attacking Palestinians or their property in the West Bank and East Jerusalem between 5/11 and 8/13. Thirty-two of these led to Palestinian injuries (up from 21 last quarter), and 42 to the destruction of Palestinian property (down from 47; see Figure 2 and Chronology).

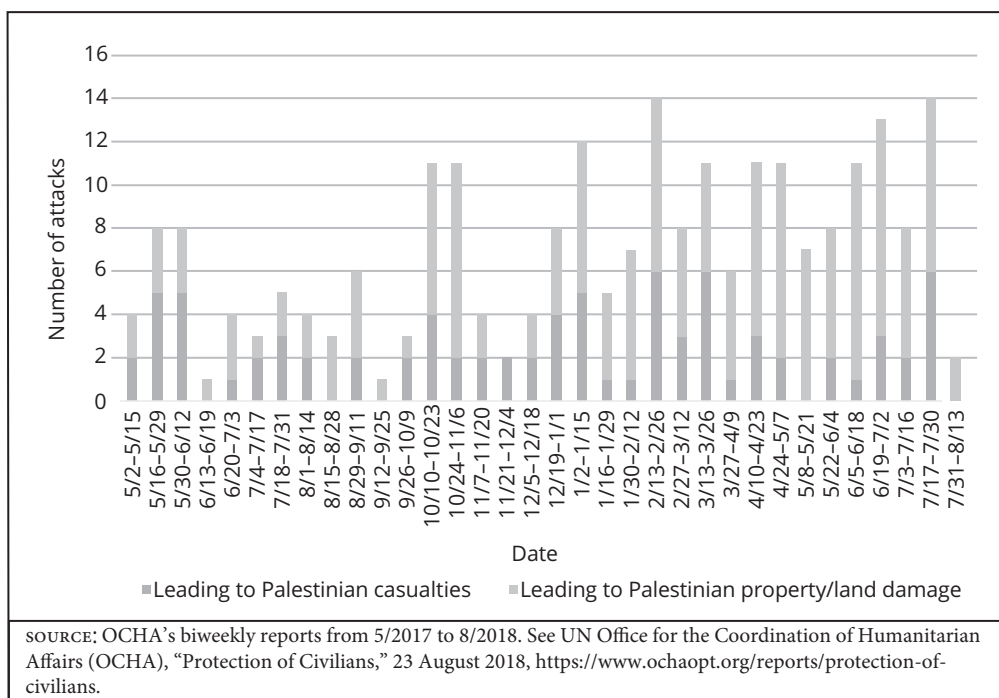


Figure 2. Israeli settler attacks. Settler-related violence has increased considerably in 2018, with no sign of abating in the final third of the year.

DEMOLITIONS AND DISPLACEMENT

According to OCHA, Israeli forces demolished 90 Palestinian structures in the West Bank (42) and East Jerusalem (48) this quarter, marking a 25 percent drop from last quarter's 121. These demolitions displaced 122 Palestinians (up from 103 last quarter): 85 in the West Bank and 37 in East Jerusalem.

The Israeli government's decades-long campaign to clear the roughly 25 Bedouin communities from the E1 corridor area of the West Bank adjacent to Jerusalem was again in the spotlight, with the high-profile case of Khan al-Ahmar sparking protests across the West Bank and drawing criticism from the international community. By evacuating and demolishing the village, the Israeli government would have more space to expand the Ma'ale Adumim and Kefar Adumim settlements,

potentially connecting them to Jerusalem. The government cleared the final legal hurdle preventing demolition on 5/24, when Israel's High Court of Justice rejected two petitions challenging the government's proposal. The Israeli authorities then declared the village a closed military zone on 7/3 and prepared for demolitions to begin. Palestinians and solidarity activists flooded the village on 7/4, clashing with Israeli troops and obstructing demolition crews; 2 activists and 11 Palestinians were arrested, and at least 35 were injured. After a second day of clashes on 7/5, the High Court issued a temporary freeze on the demolition orders following a last-minute appeal from lawyers for Khan al-Ahmar. The High Court then issued (7/9) an injunction staying the demolition and gave (7/12) the government until 7/16 to respond to the appeal, which

argued that the government neglected to properly address the residents' plan to regulate construction in the village. (Lack of proper authorization was the official justification for the demolitions—such authorization being impossible for Palestinians to obtain from the Israeli authorities.) After a week of legal back and forth, the High Court put an extended hold on the demolition plan until at least 8/15 and called a hearing on 8/1. At that hearing, the judges largely agreed that the demolition could not be avoided, but they also called on both sides' lawyers to reach a compromise on an alternative relocation site. The residents of Khan al-Ahmar had rejected the initial proposal, which would have seen them living near a garbage dump outside Abu Dis. The government submitted another proposal on 8/7, but the residents rejected (8/8) it, leaving the fate of Khan al-Ahmar and its residents in question at the end of the quarter.

INTRA-PALESTINIAN DYNAMICS

RECONCILIATION TROUBLES

With PA president Abbas's health in decline and the Palestinian political arena dominated by talk of the Great March of Return and the escalation of violence around Gaza, the Palestinian reconciliation process remained at a standstill for a second quarter in a row. Despite Egyptian mediators' renewed efforts, Hamas and Fatah officials failed to agree on a new path forward, leaving both the immediate future of reconciliation and the long-term status of key Palestinian institutions, including the PA and PLO, in question.

Soon after the quarter began, Abbas was hospitalized on 5/20, with doctors and PA officials close to him providing conflicting reports on the nature of his ailment. Some said

he was suffering from complications related to a recent ear surgery, while others alluded to unspecified "medical tests." What was initially described as a brief visit stretched into an eight-day stay at Istishari Hospital in Ramallah. "I leave hospital today in good health," Abbas told reporters on 5/28, pledging to "resume [his] work tomorrow." However, questions about Abbas's health lingered throughout the quarter, prompting renewed speculation about succession arrangements and reconciliation prospects.

In a possible effort to consolidate power ahead of a succession struggle, Abbas took a number of steps to marginalize dissenting voices and to secure his allies' positions upon leaving the hospital. After approximately 2,000 people gathered in Ramallah on 6/10 to protest the PA's recent sanctions on Gaza (see *JPS* 47 [1] and [2]), Abbas ordered a temporary suspension of permits for public protests (6/13). "In order to facilitate citizens' normal life in this period, it is prohibited to grant permits to organize marches or to establish gatherings that would disrupt the movement of citizens and disturb them," a PA statement read (6/13). Following the ban, PA security forces violently dispersed (6/13) Palestinian protesters in central Ramallah who were demonstrating against the PA's sanctions on Gaza. A few weeks later, *Asharq Al Awsat* reported (7/2) that Abbas was working to assemble a new Palestinian unity government, purportedly to prevent the Trump administration from creating an administrative entity in Gaza. Abbas went so far as to meet with former PA PM and rival Salam Fayyad, an unpopular technocratic figure who resigned from office in 2013, to discuss the proposal (*Asharq Al Awsat*, 7/2). According to PLO secretary-general Erakat, Abbas also wanted to convene a national committee to make recommendations for resolving the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

Abbas's efforts were quickly overshadowed by a new Egyptian initiative to advance the reconciliation process through the ongoing backchannel talks between Hamas and Israel on a possible long-term cease-fire. After a Hamas delegation returned from a round of talks in Cairo in mid-7/2018, Hamas leader Haniyeh called (7/19) the head of Egypt's General Intelligence Directorate, Abbas Kamel, the official in charge of the talks, and accepted the most recent Egyptian proposal. "This proposal was the fruit of a thorough dialogue," read a Hamas statement issued the same day. Palestinian sources said that the proposal called for the PA to lift all sanctions imposed on Gaza since the beginning of 2017, resume administrative duties there, and hire an unspecified number of the civil servants in the employ of the Hamas-run government since 2007. Additionally, Hamas would remain in charge of collecting taxes and tariffs, which it would use to pay its own employees, including some security personnel. According to a senior Fatah official (7/21), the proposal was based on the most recent reconciliation agreement between the two factions signed on 10/12/2017 (see *JPS* 47 [2]). "[It is] a draft proposal for mechanisms to implement the previous reconciliation agreements and not a final document," Haniyeh said.

A Fatah delegation departed for Cairo on 7/29 for a round of talks on the proposal, but problems quickly arose. Despite the statement by delegation head Azzam al-Ahmad saying (7/29) that Fatah was leaning toward supporting the proposal, the delegation delivered Fatah's official rejection on 7/30. Fatah officials indicated (7/29) that the party leadership had not wanted to appear to obstruct the proposal in order to remain involved in the broader Egyptian mediation of a Hamas-Israel cease-fire.

As the talks on a long-term cease-fire advanced (see "The Brink of War" above), Abbas increasingly disengaged from the process, however. According to reports on 8/5, Fatah officials repeatedly conveyed concerns to both Hamas and the Egyptian mediators that a Hamas-Israel agreement that excluded Abbas would compromise Palestinian national unity. The Egyptians reportedly preferred a process that involved Abbas, fearing the long-term durability of the alternative, and pushed Hamas to call a meeting of the various Palestinian factions on 8/5. Fatah opted not to attend, however, and each faction took to the press to accuse the other of ducking the most pressing issues. A Fatah spokesperson described (8/5) Hamas as participating in "shameful" talks with Israel that aimed to "separate Gaza from the homeland and establish a rump state that would be the death knell of our national project." The next day, a Hamas official indicated that Palestinian reconciliation was not likely to be included in the cease-fire talks going forward. "Gaza is on the verge of total collapse, [in part] because of the sanctions the PA has placed on the Strip," he said. "Hamas wouldn't think twice before accepting a proposal that would alleviate the population's suffering . . . even if there was a political price to pay," he added.

By the end of the quarter, none of the key issues had been resolved, and progress on a new reconciliation agreement appeared out of reach. At the 29th meeting of the Palestinian Central Council in Ramallah on 8/15, Abbas was sharply critical of Hamas, which he alleged was ill intentioned with regard to reconciliation. In a speech kicking off two days of meetings, the Palestinian president said he was keen to "talk about how we are going to make the reconciliation a success for our people and the unity of

their land under one government, one law, and one legal weapon without militias running here and there.”

PALESTINIAN OPINION

The following data came from a poll conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR) between 6/25–7/13/2018. The results are based on a survey of 2,150 Palestinians from the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip. The complete poll, the 68th in a series, can be found at www.pcpsr.org. (The survey questions have been edited for grammar/syntax.)

1. International reports indicate that economic and humanitarian conditions in the Gaza Strip are worsening by the day and that the Strip is on the verge of collapse. Who, in your view, is the side (party) that is the most responsible for the worsening of conditions in the Gaza Strip?

	Total	West Bank	Gaza Strip
1) PA president Mahmoud Abbas	25.7%	19.4%	36.1%
2) Fatah/Hamas	3.9%	5.4%	1.5%
3) Hamas	19.9%	17.2%	24.4%
4) Israel	34.2%	38.1%	27.7%
5) U.S.	1.6%	0.5%	3.5%
6) Egypt/Arab countries	5.7%	7.1%	3.4%
7) Palestinian division	1.5%	1.5%	1.5%
8) Blockade	0.7%	1.1%	0.0%
9) Others	4.2%	5.5%	1.9%
10) Don't know/Not applicable	2.6%	4.2%	0.0%

2. When . . . Abbas was admitted to hospital for treatment in Ramallah, there was much speculation and discussion regarding succession and how it would eventually be decided upon, and whether it would proceed in accordance with the State of Palestine’s Basic Law, . . . meaning that the speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council Aziz Dweik (Hamas) would become interim president for two months during which preparations would be made for presidential elections. Are you in favor of such arrangement in the case of a succession?

	Total	West Bank	Gaza Strip
1) In favor	60.3%	59.0%	62.6%
2) Not in favor	28.6%	27.8%	29.9%
3) Don't know/Not applicable	11.0%	13.2%	7.5%

3. If Hamas agreed to allow the election of a parliamentary speaker who is not a member of Hamas or Fatah, for example someone like Salam Fayyad or Mustafa Barghouti, or someone else from among the members of the Palestinian Legislative Council, would you be in favor or against such an arrangement?

	Total	West Bank	Gaza Strip
1) In favor	61.5%	60.8%	62.6%
2) Not in favor	29.0%	27.7%	31.1%
3) Don't know/Not applicable	9.5%	11.5%	6.4%

4. Are you worried that internal Palestinian conditions will deteriorate further and hit rock bottom in case of a presidential void amid the lack of clarity or internal agreement as to the succession?

	Total	West Bank	Gaza Strip
1) Worried	63.8%	66.9%	58.7%
2) Not worried	32.3%	28.4%	38.7%
3) Don't know/Not applicable	3.9%	4.6%	2.6%

5. In the case of the president's resignation or incapacitation, do you think the Palestinian political factions will be able to reach an agreement on the holding of elections in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to elect his successor?

	Total	West Bank	Gaza Strip
1) Yes	48.4%	48.6%	48.1%
2) No	41.1%	41.6%	40.4%
3) Don't know/Not applicable	5.3%	7.3%	1.6%

FRONTLINE STATES

SYRIA

Following a series of increasingly deadly skirmishes between Iranian-backed forces and Israeli troops in southwest Syria last quarter (see *JPS* 47 [4]), the Iranian role in the ongoing Syrian civil war took center stage. As low-level cross-border violence continued, the Israelis embarked on an inconclusive diplomatic initiative to convince Iran's allies in Russia to secure the removal of all Iranian forces from Syria.

Israel's position had always been that "there is no room for any Iranian military presence in any part of Syria," Israeli PM Netanyahu told the Knesset on 5/28. Initially, the Russians had remained neutral on the issue, but in a major reversal, Russian FM Sergey Lavrov responded on the same day saying that (5/28)

Syrian forces alone should have a presence on the border with Israel. "All non-Syrian forces should be withdrawn on a reciprocal basis," he added. Israeli security and diplomatic sources attributed the Russian reversal to the particularly deadly Israeli attack in Syria on 5/10 (*Haaretz*, 5/28).

After Israeli DM Lieberman flew to Moscow for a meeting with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Shoigu, on 5/31, there were reports that the two had found common ground. According to *Asharq Al Awsat*, Shoigu gave Israel the "green light" to operate in Syria as long as the Israeli army did not target Syrian army positions (6/1). He reportedly also pledged that Iranian and Hezbollah troops would pull back at least 20 kilometers from Syria's border with Israel, with the ultimate goal being to retreat at least 70 kilometers. The next day, Russia's permanent representative to the UN, Vasily Nebenzya, confirmed that Russia and Israel had reached some form of understanding. "At this point, I cannot answer if it is being realized, but as far as I understand, the parties that were involved in reaching an agreement are satisfied with what they have achieved," he said.

In 6/2018 and early 7/2018, the Syrian army was in the final stages of a campaign to retake control of southwestern Syria from a variety of rebel groups. The Israeli army carried out air strikes on anti-regime Iranian and Hezbollah positions on at least five occasions (6/17, 6/25, 7/6, 7/8, and 7/11; see Chronology).

With tensions rising along the Israel-Syria border, Netanyahu met with Russian president Vladimir Putin in Moscow on 7/11, marking their ninth meeting since Russia's direct military involvement in Syria in 9/2015. Netanyahu claimed (7/12) that Putin had committed to pulling Iranian, Hezbollah, and allied forces "tens of kilometers" away from

the Syria-Israel border. Netanyahu added that he had made it clear to Putin that Israel did “not object” to Syrian pres. Bashar al-Asad retaking control of Syria, a top Russian priority in the region. “The heart of the matter is preserving our freedom of action against anyone who acts against us,” Netanyahu said (7/12). One senior Israeli official said that the Netanyahu-Putin meeting created a “realistic opportunity” to “push Iran out of Syria.”

When Netanyahu met (7/23) with Lavrov in Jerusalem a week later, an ancillary issue came up. In addition to ground forces, the Israelis wanted Russia to secure the removal of all Iranian weapons. “The removal of Iran must include the removal of long-range weapons, halting the production of precision weapons as well as the air defenses that protect the missiles, and the closure of border crossings that permit smuggling of this weaponry to Lebanon and to Syria,” a senior Israeli official said (7/23). The Russians, he added, definitely had the ability to do this, saying, “They are a significant factor in Syria.”

Finally, two days after the Syrian army successfully regained control of southwestern Syria, including the region adjacent to the Syria-Israel border, Putin’s Special Envoy to Syria Alexander Lavrentiev said (8/1) that the bulk of the Iranian forces and all heavy weapons had withdrawn to at least 85 kilometers from the Israel-Syria border. He indicated that Iranian military advisors remained embedded with Syrian troops in the area, “but there are no units of heavy equipment and weapons that could pose a threat to Israel at a distance of 85 kilometers from the line of demarcation.”

The Israelis were apparently dissatisfied with the new arrangement, and low-level skirmishes continued through the end of the quarter (see Chronology). “What we have laid down as a red line is military intervention and

entrenchment by Iran in Syria, and not necessarily on our border,” said Israel’s Regional Cooperation Minister Tzachi Hanegbi (Reuters, 8/1). “There’ll be no compromises nor concessions on this matter.”

Devastation in Yarmouk

In the context of the Syrian army’s campaign to regain control of southwestern Syria, government troops mounted a final assault against the Damascus suburb of Yarmouk, once home to the largest population of Palestinian refugees in Syria, on 5/21. The intensive bombardment that began on 4/19 (see *JPS* 47 [4]), coming after seven years of siege, left the camp in ruins, “with hardly a house untouched by the conflict,” according to UNRWA spokesperson Chris Gunness on 5/21. “The public health system, water, electricity, [and] basic services [necessary] for life are severely damaged. The debris of this pitiless conflict is everywhere. In that environment, it is hard to see how people can go back,” he added.

REGIONAL AFFAIRS

IRAN

After U.S. president Trump announced (5/8) that he was pulling the U.S. out of the 7/14/2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, attention shifted to its three European signatories—the UK, France, and Germany. The remaining two signatories—Russia and China—were expected to maintain their post-agreement trade ties with Iran, but the Europeans were in a more difficult position. It was unclear if the U.S. planned to impose secondary sanctions on European companies doing business with Iran, thereby rendering continued European adherence to the agreement costly, or if the Europeans were

willing to accept sanctions in exchange for continued Iranian adherence. The head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, Ali Akbar Salehi, put it differently after meeting with EU energy commissioner Miguel Arias Cañete in Tehran on 5/19: "The ball is in the court of the EU."

Several European companies, however, were not willing to wait for the politicians to sort matters out, and a number of them, including France's Total and the Dutch shipping firm Maersk, stated that they would likely pull out of Iran if the U.S. imposed sanctions. Access to the Iranian market, where inflation and unemployment were growing, was not worth risking in light of the much larger and more lucrative U.S. market, analysts explained. "For sure there are clear difficulties with sanctions," Cañete said after meeting with Salehi on 5/19. "We will have to ask [the U.S.] for waivers, for carve-outs for the companies that make investments [in Iran]." The Iranian government was still in favor of maintaining the agreement, but according to FM Mohammad Javad Zarif (5/20), "European political support for the [agreement] is not sufficient."

As the Trump administration was preparing to reimpose sanctions on Iran, the remaining signatories of the 7/14/2015 JCPOA convened at Iran's request in Vienna on 5/25. "We are negotiating . . . to see if they can provide us with a package which can give Iran the benefits of sanctions lifting," said Iran's Deputy FM Abbas Araghchi (5/25). "The next step is to find guarantees for that package." After that first round of talks, France, Germany, the UK, and the EU sent (6/6) a formal request to the U.S. requesting that European companies be exempted from any new sanctions. "As allies, we expect that the U.S. will refrain from taking action to harm Europe's security interests," the request read.

The Trump administration had other plans, however. According to a 6/18 report in *Haaretz*, the U.S. and Israel had formed a joint task force to help oversee and enforce sanctions on Iran. On 6/26, a senior U.S. State Department official said that the Trump administration expected global imports of Iranian oil to cease when the U.S. reimposed sanctions on Iran's energy sector, set to go into effect on 11/4/2018. Although most of the rhetoric from the Trump administration was consistent with that position, another senior State Department official speculated (7/2) that some exceptions might be made. "We are prepared to work with countries that are reducing their imports on a case-by-case basis," the official said (7/2), reportedly in an effort to ease fluctuations in the international oil market. "Our policy is to get to zero [imports of Iranian oil] as soon as possible."

Following several days of talks in Vienna, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani deemed (7/5) the latest European offer of economic incentives insufficient. The world's third-largest shipping company, CMA CGM, then announced (7/7) that it was halting service to Iran in direct response to the threat of U.S. sanctions, and U.S. president Trump saw an opening to reengage. "I know they're having a lot of problems and their economy is collapsing," Trump said at a press conference in Brussels on 7/12. "But I will tell you this—at a certain point they're going to call me and they're going to say, 'let's make a deal.' And we'll make a deal." Rouhani then called (7/22) on Trump to adopt less aggressive policies toward Iran and alluded to the possibility of armed conflict. In response, Trump tweeted (7/22), "NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE U.S. AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE."

As Trump and other U.S. officials vacillated between threats and offers to negotiate, the U.S. reimposed (8/7) sanctions on Iran, excluding the energy sector. The move worsened relations between the U.S. and its European allies and increased the pressure on negotiators at the European-Iranian talks in Vienna. “These are the most biting sanctions ever imposed,” Trump tweeted (8/7). “In [11/2018] they ratchet up to yet another level. Anyone doing business with Iran will NOT be doing business with the U.S. I am asking for WORLD PEACE, nothing less!” EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini, along with the FMs of the UK, France, and Germany, issued a statement (8/7) expressing “deep” regret over the reimposition of sanctions. “The remaining parties to the JCPOA have committed to work on, inter alia, the preservation and maintenance of effective financial channels with Iran, and the continuation of Iran’s export of oil and gas,” their statement read. “These efforts will be intensified and reviewed at ministerial level in the coming weeks.” Mogherini also encouraged European companies to continue doing business with Iran, despite the sanctions. “We are doing our best to keep Iran in the deal, to keep Iran benefiting from the economic benefits that the agreement brings to the people of Iran because we believe this is in the security interests of not only our region, but also of the world,” she said (8/7).

SAUDI ARABIA

After Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman visited the U.S. last quarter and made statements about the growing confluence of interests between Israel and Saudi Arabia, the Saudi relationship with the Palestinians, the Saudi role in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict’s place in the political dynamics of the Middle East all came

to the fore this quarter. King Salman had attempted to ease Palestinian concerns on 4/3 when he said that Riyadh remained “steadfast” in its dedication to “the Palestinian issue and the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people.” He went a step further this quarter. After months of intermittent reports that the Saudis would likely accept whatever peace plan the Trump administration came up with, Salman reportedly informed U.S. officials that he would not be able to support the plan if it did not provide for a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem (Reuters, 7/29).

INTERNATIONAL

UNITED STATES

Facilitating the Slaughter in Gaza

While the Israeli army was launching near-daily air strikes across Gaza (see “The Brink of War” above), the Trump administration’s Middle East team—Trump senior advisor and son-in-law Kushner, Special Representative for International Negotiations Greenblatt, and Ambassador to Israel Friedman—jointly penned (7/19) an op-ed for the *Washington Post*, titled “Help Is at Hand for Palestinians. It’s All Up to Hamas.” Making no mention of the Israeli blockade of Gaza, they described their efforts to raise money for humanitarian aid (see “The So-Called Trump Initiative” above), expressed sympathy for the Palestinian people, and blamed Hamas for the ongoing crisis. “International donors are conflicted,” they wrote. “Should they try to help the people directly, at the certain risk of enriching terrorists, or withhold funding to Hamas and watch the people it is supposed to govern suffer?” Amid widespread Palestinian, and some international indignation, a Hamas spokesperson described the editorial as

“adopting the Israeli narrative” and displaying the “contempt of the American government.”

Legislative Crackdown on BDS

Louisiana governor John Bel Edwards signed (5/22) an executive order barring the state from contracting with entities that participate in a boycott of Israel or “Israeli-controlled territories.” As a result, Louisiana has become the 25th state with legislation or executive orders targeting the BDS movement. “The U.S., and by affiliation, Louisiana, have benefited in innumerable ways from our deep friendship with Israel,” Edwards said (5/22), adding that “any effort to boycott Israel is an affront to this longstanding relationship.” In a related move, South Carolina governor Henry McMaster signed into law a new definition of anti-Semitism on 7/6, requiring state universities to account for anti-Semitism when reviewing allegations of discrimination or bias. Palestine solidarity activists criticized the move because the new definition conflated criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism, and therefore impinged on students’ free speech rights. Finally, after lawmakers in Kansas amended the anti-BDS law they passed in early 2017, the ACLU withdrew (6/29) its lawsuit challenging the legislation. The lawmakers adjusted the law, which required potential state contractors to certify that they do not participate in boycotts of Israel such that it would no longer apply to individuals or contractors who conduct less than \$100,000 worth of business in the state. They also altered the required certification enabling potential contractors to assert only that they are “not engaged in a boycott of goods or services from Israel that constitute an integral part of business conducted or sought to be conducted with the state.”

Aid to the Palestinians

Seven months after Trump slashed U.S. aid to UNRWA and ordered a review of all aid to the Palestinians, National Public Radio (NPR) reported (8/2) that the Trump administration was releasing as much as \$61 million in aid to the PA (some sources said the sum was closer to \$35 million). One State Department official said (8/2) that the money was intended to support ongoing coordination between PA security forces and the Israeli army in the West Bank. “This decision does not in any way prejudge the outcome of our review of other funding streams and programs,” one official explained (8/2). “It is simply the first decision to emerge from the review, which is ongoing.”

EUROPEAN UNION

With the EU scrambling to preserve the JCPOA and pushing for Israel to cancel its plans to evacuate and demolish the Bedouin village of Khan al-Ahmar (see “Iran” and “Demolitions and Displacement” above), European-Israeli relations deteriorated this quarter. After EU foreign policy chief Mogherini cancelled (6/8) her planned appearance at a conference in Jerusalem on 6/10, citing undisclosed “agenda reasons,” the Israeli press reported that the real reason was that PM Netanyahu had refused her request for a meeting. “She was invited by the American Jewish Committee for their conference, and not by Israel,” one senior Israeli diplomatic official explained (6/8). “Her positions are very hostile to Israel.”

UNITED NATIONS

The U.S. tried and failed to stymie criticism of Israel’s assault on Gaza at the UN this quarter. After U.S. ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley failed (5/31) to gather enough support at the Security Council for a statement condemning

Hamas's rocket attacks, she vetoed (6/1) a Kuwaiti-backed resolution condemning Israel's use of force against Palestinian civilians. The UNGA then adopted (6/13) a similar, Palestinian-backed resolution condemning Israel's use of "excessive force" in quelling the ongoing protests in Gaza, with 120 votes in favor, 45 abstaining, and 8 opposed. Before the UNGA vote, Haley circulated an amendment to the draft resolution that would have condemned Hamas for its rocket fire and alleged diversion of humanitarian resources to its security apparatus, but again she failed to gather enough support.

UNHRC

On 5/18, the UNHRC convened to debate Israel's assault on protesters gathering along the border fence on 5/14. Despite objections from the U.S. and Australia, the UNHRC approved a Pakistani proposal to establish an independent commission of inquiry to look into Israel's use of deadly force to quell the protests, and to report back by 3/2019. Twenty-nine countries voted in favor of the proposal, which also condemned the "indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force," while 14 abstained and only the U.S. and Australia voted against it.

A month after the vote, at the 38th session of the UNHRC in Geneva, UK foreign secretary Boris Johnson announced (6/18) that, beginning in 2019, the UK planned to vote against all resolutions introduced under Agenda Item 7, the UNHRC's dedicated and permanent mandate for issues relating to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. "We share the view that a dedicated agenda item focused solely on Israel and the oPt is disproportionate and damaging to the cause of peace," Johnson said, aligning the UK with the Trump administration's position on the UNHRC. The day after Johnson's

comments, Haley announced (6/19) that the U.S. was going one step further and formally withdrawing from the UNHRC. "Earlier this year, as it has in previous years, the UNHRC passed five resolutions against Israel, more than it passed against North Korea, Iran, and Syria combined," she said (see *JPS* 47 [4] for a breakdown of those five resolutions). "This disproportionate focus and unending hostility toward Israel is clear proof that the [UNHRC] is motivated by political bias."

UNESCO

The UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) World Heritage Committee postponed, for a second time, a vote on two resolutions related to the old cities of Jerusalem and Hebron on 6/26, prompting Israel's ambassador to UNESCO, Carmel Shama-Hacohen, to suggest that the Israeli government reconsider its pledge to withdraw from UNESCO by the end of 2018. "I was the first to recommend leaving the organization after the U.S. announced its withdrawal [on 10/12/2017], but now Israel must not ignore the new spirit emanating from UNESCO, and we need to reevaluate, in full coordination with the U.S., the question of leaving," he said. Netanyahu then called UNESCO's Director-General Audrey Azoulay to thank her for the postponement and praise her for the fact that UNESCO had not passed any resolutions he deemed anti-Israel for a year. According to a senior Israeli diplomat (8/8), Azoulay invited Netanyahu to meet at some point in 9/2018 to discuss whether or not Israel would consider delaying or reversing its plan to withdraw from UNESCO. "Obviously, we welcome any constructive efforts in our foreign relations," Shama-Hacohen said of the invitation. "But the issue is complicated."

UNRWA

UNRWA was scrambling this quarter to address the massive budget shortfall caused by Trump's 1/16/2018 decision to slash U.S. support for the agency. By 6/2018, the U.S. had only disbursed \$60 million to UNRWA (compared with \$364 million in 2017), and the agency was "weeks away from painful cuts to its emergency assistance for Gaza and elsewhere in the region," according to UN special coordinator Mladenov. UNRWA commissioner general Pierre Krähenbühl attempted to raise the minimum \$250 million necessary to maintain basic services at the agency's annual donors conference in New York on 6/25, but he was unsuccessful. UNRWA then laid off (7/26) 145 employees in the West Bank and 113 in Gaza. Another 584 full-time employees were offered part-time positions. Without any major new donor support, UN officials said (8/15) that it was unlikely that UNRWA schools across the Middle East would be able to open on time in 9/2018. "We are running on empty," said (8/15) an UNRWA spokesperson. "We simply don't have enough money to pay 22,000 teachers who in 711 schools provide a daily education for over half a million children."

Although UNRWA was unable to secure enough new donor support to mitigate the \$250 million shortfall, the agency did announce a number of new donations throughout the quarter. Most significantly, Qatar agreed to pledge \$50 million to sustain UNRWA's education services across the Middle East on 5/16. "This agreement aims to ensure that the provision of basic services to Palestinian refugees is not interrupted," explained the director-general of the Qatar Fund for Development, Khalifa Bin Jassim Al-Kuwari. Separately, the Organization of Islamic

Cooperation decided to establish a "Waqf Fund" to ensure "consistent and sustainable funding" for UNRWA at its summit in Istanbul on 5/18. Islamic Relief USA contributed \$2.4 million to support 3,000 refugees in Gaza on 5/24. The Big Heart Foundation, a United Arab Emirates-based charity, gave \$100,000 for UNRWA to provide health services in Gaza on 7/2. Austria contributed (8/10) €1 million (approximately \$1.157 million) to support UNRWA's activities in the oPt. Finally, China and Germany pledged (8/8) \$2.35 million and €8.4 million (approximately \$9.84 million), respectively, in additional funds for UNRWA's food aid program in Gaza.

DONORS

Outside the context of UNRWA, there were a number of new aid announcements for the Palestinians this quarter. The crisis in Gaza, in particular, concerned European donors. The EU announced a €3 million grant (approximately \$3.57 million) to Palestinians in need of "critical assistance" in Gaza on 5/18 and €306,000 (approximately \$353,712) to the PA to support 81 farmers in Bayt Hanun on 6/12. On 5/29, the UK announced that it would be providing medical supplies and equipment to 11 hospitals and other medical centers in Gaza to help treat Palestinians injured during Israel's deadly crackdown on the Great March of Return. On 8/9, PA officials announced a \$13 million pledge from Germany to support reconstruction efforts in Gaza. Also, UN special coordinator Mladenov announced (7/25) that the World Bank had set aside \$90 million in aid to the Palestinians in 2018, up from \$55 million in 2017, "in response to "the alarming economic circumstances in the occupied Palestinian territories."

On top of these Gaza-specific donations, the World Bank transferred (5/22) \$10.5 million from Japan and France to the PA to cover urgent budget needs. The EU pledged (6/11) €15 million (approximately \$17.38 million) to the PA for social programs in the West Bank and Gaza and (8/3) another €10 million (approximately \$11.5 million) to help pay the salaries of current employees and pensioners. On 7/10, China's President, Xi Jinping, announced a new \$15 million pledge to support Palestinian economic development in the context of a broader aid package for the Middle East. Germany pledged (7/23) €10 million (approximately \$11.5 million) to fund a wastewater reuse project in Nablus. Finally, Japan pledged (6/12 and 7/26) €1.6 million (approximately \$1.84 million) to economic development projects in the Jericho Agro-Industrial Park.

The Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, the main policy-level coordination mechanism for development assistance to the Palestinians, did not meet this quarter.

BOYCOTT, DIVESTMENT, SANCTIONS

Over 170 Palestinian civil society groups launched the BDS movement in 2005. Its aim is to create an international campaign of boycotts, divestments, and sanctions against Israel "until it complies with international law and Palestinian rights."

In a major win for the BDS movement, Grammy-winning Brazilian musician Gilberto Gil cancelled a concert in Tel Aviv on 7/4 citing the "conflict in the Gaza Strip," according to a report in the Brazilian newspaper *O Globo* on 5/21. The Palestinian Campaign for the

Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) celebrated (5/21) his decision: "We thank Gil's fans in Brazil and across Latin America whose outrage over Israel's latest massacre in Gaza and support for Palestinian human rights seem to have played a decisive role in his decision." Joining Gil, Colombian singer Shakira cancelled (5/29) a planned concert in Tel Aviv following pleas from Palestinian solidarity activists around the world. Also on 5/29, four guests cancelled their planned appearances at the Tel Aviv International LGBT Film Fest (5/31–6/9). Linda Quebrada, star of the Brazilian documentary *Bixa Travesty*, explained (5/29) their decision on Facebook: "We decided to adhere to the boycott in disagreement with the Israeli government . . . and its occupation in the region."

Israeli singer Netta Barzilai won the Eurovision song contest in early 5/2018, garnering Israel the honor of hosting the competition in 2019. Soon after Barzilai's victory, BDS activists launched a Eurovision 2019 boycott campaign, which the Israeli government was angling to host in Jerusalem. As the campaign ramped up, Israel's Culture Minister Miri Regev stated, "If [Eurovision] can't be held in Jerusalem, [then Israel] shouldn't host it." Fearing the latter, the Israeli authorities backed off the Jerusalem demand, according to Israel's Kan public broadcasting corporation on 6/10. "This marks a striking failure in Israel's PR efforts to assert its illegal claim over the city," PACBI stated (6/27). "The BDS movement sees this as the first milestone in the campaign to boycott Eurovision 2019."

BDS activists also celebrated a major victory this quarter in the realm of sports. On 6/5, two months after BDS Argentina launched the #ArgentinaNoVayas campaign (see *JPS* 47 [4]),

the Argentina Football Association cancelled an upcoming friendly match between the Argentine and Israeli national soccer teams, which was planned as a warm-up before the World Cup in mid-6/2018. “It’s nothing against the Israeli community, it’s nothing against the Jewish community,” the association’s president, Claudio Tapia, said (6/5). “The last 72 hours led us to make the decision not to travel.” The Israeli Embassy in Argentina further stated (6/6) that unspecified “threats and provocations” precipitated the cancellation, and the local media in Argentina reported on a series of threats allegedly made against Argentine star player Lionel Messi and his wife. As Israeli officials were spinning the cancellation as a safety issue, Argentina’s FM Jorge Faurie said (6/7) that the root cause of the cancellation was the Israeli authorities’ decision to change the venue to Jerusalem. “The game was supposed to take place in Haifa,” he said. “The noise around the game was created because of the transfer to Jerusalem, and also because of its proximity to the transfer of the U.S. embassy in Israel to the city.”

The success of the #ArgentinaNoVayas campaign wasn’t the only soccer-related BDS development of the quarter. Culminating a years-long campaign, more than 16,000 people signed a petition calling on Adidas to end its sponsorship of the Israel Football Association (IFA) in 6/2018. The global sportswear company did just that in early 8/2018. “We have raised with FIFA the need for them to adjudicate on the question of the Israeli settlement teams, by following the tenets of international law and their human rights policy,” the company said in its response to the petition. After the announcement, BDS activists started a campaign calling on Puma,

the IFA’s new sponsor, to drop its contract with Israel as well.

There were many other boycott-related developments this quarter. On 6/1, the *Times of Israel* reported that a major chain of Japanese department stores, Daimaru, recently stopped working with an importer specializing in wines from the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights. A Daimaru spokesperson explained that the decision did not reflect the company’s political positions, but that BDS activists’ complaints about importing wines from an occupied territory were taken into account. On 6/9, the Students Federation of India, a group with approximately four million members, passed a resolution calling for a boycott of Hewlett Packard over the company’s complicity in the Israeli occupation. On 6/22, the General Assembly of Presbyterian Church (USA) adopted 11 resolutions opposing the Israeli occupation, including a number supporting various aspects of the BDS movement. On 7/11, the Irish Senate voted in favor of a bill that would block the import and sale of goods, services, and natural resources from Israeli settlements in the oPt. The bill still needed to pass the parliament’s lower house in order to become law, and the Irish government reportedly opposed the measure, favoring a unified EU approach instead. Finally, on 7/13, the U.S. Episcopal Church adopted a human rights investment resolution at its general convention in Austin, which called on the church’s Committee on Corporate Social Responsibility “to develop criteria for Israel and Palestine based on a human rights’ investment screen” like the one implemented by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 2016, according to Episcopal Peace Fellowship (see *JPS* 46 [1]).



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