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This update is a summary of bilateral, multilateral, regional, and international events affecting the Palestinians and the future of the peace process. 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: U.S. pres. Donald Trump launches a new regional initiative in an effort to restart Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. The Israeli govt. announces a new policy to guide settlement growth in the West Bank, and the Ramallah-based Palestinian leadership struggles to consolidate its position. Palestinians in the West Bank elect new local leaders, although the elections are compromised by disagreements among the major political parties. Approximately 1,500 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails go on hunger strike, drawing support from across the political spectrum and burnishing the reputation of their leader, senior Fatah official Marwan Barghouti. Meanwhile, the right-wing Israeli govt. continues its campaign to undermine and delegitimize its opponents, including the Israeli Left, the Palestinian minority in Israel, and the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

THE PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI CONFLICT

U.S. pres. Donald Trump, mired in domestic policy issues, sought a foreign policy achievement during this quarter. Both the Israelis and the Palestinians positioned themselves for yet another major U.S.-backed effort to advance the peace process. Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu established an understanding on limiting settlement growth to appease Trump without antagonizing his ultranationalist political rivals, while the Ramallah-based Palestinian leadership struggled to consolidate power.

Netanyahu and his right-wing govt. continued their campaign against the Palestinian minority in Israel and other opponents, including supporters of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. The Palestinians continued their efforts to obtain justice via international institutions. In addition to Palestinian Authority (PA) campaigns at various UN bodies (see “United Nations” below), Palestinian Football
Association (PFA) chair Jibril Rajoub endeavored to have Israel censured by FIFA. Although a final decision on his proposal was ultimately delayed, Rajoub’s efforts galvanized the Palestinian public.

THE TRUMP INITIATIVE

In the early weeks of Trump’s presidency, the new U.S. admin. struggled to articulate a clear and unified position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict beyond a general desire for peace and friendlier relations with Israel. Trump’s position on the 2-state solution, the consistent policy goal of his most recent predecessors, was not clear. Various stakeholders in the conflict sought to fill the void in the post-Obama era, advancing new ideas or, in Israel’s case, approving more than 5,000 new settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt). (See JPS 46 [3]). Following Trump’s 2/15 meeting with Netanyahu in Washington, the new admin. lurched into action on a new peace initiative, clarifying its positions along the way.

As the quarter opened, the international community was concerned by Trump’s 2/15 debonair comments on the 2-state solution: “I am looking at 2 states or 1 state, and I like the one that both parties like,” he said in a joint press conference with Netanyahu after their meeting. U.S. support for a 2-state solution has been a cornerstone of international peace efforts since the Oslo Accords; Trump’s ambivalence presented a challenge to the post-Oslo diplomatic infrastructure. Many world leaders found the new U.S. stance “confusing and worrying.” French FM Ayrault said as much after a meeting with U.S. secy. of state Rex Tillerson on 2/16. In an effort to downplay confusion, U.S. amb. to the UN Nikki Haley said (2/16) that while the Trump admin. supported a 2-state solution, “We are thinking outside the box as well.” A week later, Trump himself stated (2/23) that he “like[d] this 2-state solution,” but uncertainty persisted as he added, “I’m satisfied with whatever both parties agree with.”

While world leaders grappled with the new U.S. approach, it became clear that Trump did have a preference on 1 substantial issue relating to the conflict. He told Netanyahu on 2/15 that he would like to see him “hold back on settlement for a little bit.” U.S. VP Mike Pence reportedly discussed a mechanism for limiting settlement growth with Netanyahu on 2/16. Under pressure from ultranationalist mbrs. of his coalition to build more settlements, abandon the 2-state solution, and/or annex parts of the West Bank, Netanyahu boasted of his “excellent” meeting with Trump upon returning to Israel on 2/16 and told (2/19) the security cabinet that the Trump admin. shared their views on regional threats to Israel. However, he also reportedly said (2/19) that they might have to find a new housing solution for the 40-odd families evacuated from the illegal Amona settlement outpost in early 2/2017 (see JPS 46 [3]). Officials in the PM’s office later denied (2/20) that he was planning on breaking his promise to build a new settlement for the Amona evacuees while Netanyahu himself attempted (2/19) to draw attention away from the issue, saying “with all due respect to Amona, we need to focus now on coordinating with Trump on the issue of Iran.” DM Avigdor Lieberman reinforced (2/20) the PM’s precarious new position: “For 8 years, there was tension and friction with the Obama admin. If we now start to fight with the Trump admin. . . . and the Republican-majority Congress, people will really start to think that the leadership in the State of Israel is a bunch of nutcases.”

Israel’s ultranationalists, however, had plans of their own. Education Min. Naftali Bennett expressed certainty (2/20) that Netanyahu
would “keep his word” and approve a new settlement for the former residents of Amona as mbrs. of his Jewish Home Party began mapping out legislation to force the PM’s hand. Pushback also came from inside Netanyahu’s own party. During a reportedly heated debate on 2/27, a group of Likud members of the Knesset (MKs) vigorously argued for Israel to annex at least part of the West Bank. According to unnamed participants in the meeting, Netanyahu acknowledged that Trump’s election represented a “historic” opportunity for Israel, but added, “We should know what the limits of this opportunity are.”

A few days later, the Israeli press reported (3/1) that Likud and Jewish Home MKs were working together to test those limits. Likud MK Yoav Kisch and Jewish Home MK Bezalel Smotrich reportedly drafted a bill annexing the Ma’ale Adumim settlement bloc intended to go to the Ministerial Comm. for Legislation on 3/5. Amid a flurry of backroom horse trading, Netanyahu postponed (3/3) the Comm.’s hearing on the proposal by 1 week. “Imposing Israeli sovereignty [on the West Bank] would mean an immediate crisis with the [Trump] admin.,” Lieberman told (3/6) the Knesset’s Comm. on Foreign Affairs and Defense.

While the Israelis debated the limits of their settlement enterprise, the Trump admin. began laying the groundwork for resuming some kind of peace effort. At a meeting of the Republican Jewish Coalition in Las Vegas (2/24), Pence said that, while Trump was expecting Israel to make some compromises as part of any final agreement, he would not expect the Israeli leadership to compromise on Israel’s security. He also said that Trump was still “assessing” his campaign pledge to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (the Israeli govt. was officially in favor of the move, despite warnings from its security establishment that it would instigate a wave of violence in the oPt (see “The Ownership of the U.S. Embassy Site in Jerusalem” in JPS 29 [4] for more on this issue). A congressional delegation led by Rep. Ron DeSantis (R-FL) visited (3/4) Israel the following week to explore the feasibility of the embassy move. DeSantis said (3/5) that he thought the move would happen. “Knowing the president,” he said, “I don’t think that he’s going to [delay it].”

Meanwhile, the Trump admin. was also reviewing the U.S. relationship with the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Dep. Asst. Secy. of State Erin Barclay said (3/1) that Trump hoped to end the UNHRC’s “obsession with Israel” and that “in order for this council to have any credibility, let alone success, it must move away from its unbalanced and unproductive positions,” bringing the admin.’s position on the UNHRC in line with Netanyahu’s (the U.S. later boycotted the UNHRC’s discussion of Israel on 3/20 and pledged to oppose all res. deriving therefrom; see “United Nations” below). Around the same time, Haley met (3/7) with Palestinian UN envoy Riyad Mansour, and called on the Palestinians to “meet with Israel in direct negotiations rather than looking to the UN to deliver results.”

The U.S. admin. put the wheels in motion in mid-3/2017, starting with Trump’s 1st official contact with PA pres. Mahmoud Abbas. In a call on 3/10, Trump invited the Palestinian leader to come to the White House soon to “re launch the peace process,” according to a PA spokesperson. Although it was unclear what he was hoping to achieve, White House sources said (3/10) that Trump would be willing to participate in a regional peace conference in Egypt or Jordan, giving credence to unconfirmed reports from last quarter that he favored an “outside-in”
approach to Israeli-Palestinian peace (see JPS 46 [3]). A couple of days after the call, Abbas said that Trump “promised his full commitment to peace and to the 2-state solution.” The PA pres. and his advisors were reportedly pleased with the call and how Trump spoke about the new peace effort.

Next, Trump’s special rep. for international negotiations, Jason Greenblatt, visited Israel and the oPt in the 2d week of 3/2017. The visit, touted as a listening tour rather than shuttle diplomacy, coincided with a key Knesset vote on the ultranationalists’ Ma’ale Adumim proposal, and produced immediate results. Shortly after Greenblatt met (3/14) with Netanyahu for 5 hours in Jerusalem, the head of Israel’s ruling coalition, David Bitan, requested that the Ministerial Comm. for Legislation again delay its vote on the annexation bill. Bennett agreed, reportedly in an effort not to interfere with Greenblatt’s trip. According to a joint statement, Netanyahu and Greenblatt discussed the broader settlement issue “in the hope of working out an approach that is consistent with the goal of advancing peace and security.” Before his 2d meeting with Greenblatt later that week, Netanyahu said (3/16), “We are in the midst of a process of dialogue with the White House and our intention is to reach an agreed-upon policy regarding settlement construction.” An Israeli official said (3/15) that Netanyahu believed that it was possible to reach such an understanding without compromising his ruling coalition. “We are looking for the common denominator with the Americans that will allow construction on the one hand,
and on the other promote diplomatic moves in many areas with the Trump administration,” the official added.

Although the admin.’s focus was clearly on Israel and the settlements, Greenblatt also met (3/14) with Abbas in Ramallah and reaffirmed Trump’s commitment to achieving peace. Abbas appeared optimistic about the process, stating that “under Pres. Trump’s leadership, a historic peace deal is possible,” and reportedly committing to preventing “inflammatory rhetoric” and “anti-Israeli incitement” in the context of a push for renewed talks.

Trump’s team wasted no time, hosting an Israeli delegation for 4 more days of talks (3/19–23) the following week to discuss “concrete, near-term measures to improve the overall climate to advance the prospects for a genuine and lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians,” according to a 3/23 joint statement. The measures included steps Israel could take to improve the economic situation in the oPt, as well as delivering needed humanitarian relief to Gaza. The Israeli govt. agreed to take the Trump admin.’s concerns about settlement activity “into consideration.” There was no broader agreement to limit settlement growth, however, and Netanyahu denied (3/26) all rumors to the contrary. But, on 3/30, he told his security cabinet that Israel would, in fact, be adopting new regulations on settlement growth: Construction would continue in previously developed areas, when permissible, and adjacent areas, when not permissible; construction would be allowed on the closest land possible to developed areas when neither adjacent nor permissible land was available; and new settlement outposts would be barred outright.

One minister present at the meeting insisted that there were “no understandings with the [U.S.] and this wasn’t agreed on with the [Trump admin.], but rather, these are restrictions that Israel is taking upon itself in response to the pres.’s request.” Another minister commented that “the Americans said that they don’t agree with construction in the settlements in any case, but that they can live with it and there won’t be an international crisis over every new home that’s built.” Israel’s new settlement policy reportedly stemmed from Netanyahu’s desire that Israel not be blamed in the event that the Trump peace initiative failed. To that end, he told the cabinet that he intended to acquiesce to the Trump admin.’s requests for goodwill gestures to help the Palestinian economy (see “Occupation Data and Trends” below).

At the same security cabinet meeting, however, Israeli leaders unanimously approved the creation of a new Israeli settlement n. of Ramallah to house the former residents of Amona. Netanyahu also announced (3/30) that 900 dunams (approx. 222 acres from the Nablus-area villages of al-Sawiya, al-Lubban al-Sharqiyya and Qaryut) nr. the Eli settlement had been declared state land, and that final approval had been given to market 2,000 new homes in existing settlements (these 2,000 were among the 5,700 advanced in the 3 weeks following Trump’s inauguration on 1/20; see JPS 46 [3]). While the rest of the international community condemned these moves, a senior U.S. official said (3/30) that Trump accepted Netanyahu’s rationale for approving the new settlement, and a White House spokesperson said (3/31) that the Trump admin. welcomed the Israeli govt.’s intention to adopt a settlement policy that took Trump’s concerns into consideration. Meanwhile, the response of Netanyahu’s ultranationalist rivals was mixed. Although Bennett said (4/2) that “the arrangement is a fitting one,” he was also
critical of Netanyahu’s failure to “put a decisive Israeli initiative on the table.” Oded Revivi, the chief foreign envoy for the Yesha Council, a settler umbrella group, said (4/2) that “you need to understand that people built up an expectation that there would be a new president, the old era would end, and we’d be able to do whatever we want. All of a sudden, reality doesn’t look like our expectations.”

After the Israeli govt. and the Trump admin. arrived at this new understanding, however, unofficial, diplomatic attention shifted to the Palestinians, who were busy coordinating a response to Trump’s initiative with their regional allies. Abbas met with Egyptian pres. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi on 3/20 in Cairo to discuss Trump’s efforts, inter alia. He then addressed the 28th Arab League Summit in Jordan on 3/29, calling for the Arab Peace Initiative to be implemented “as it was first approved” (see Doc. B1 in JPS 31 [4]). As Abbas met with Jordan’s King Abdullah and al-Sisi again on the sidelines of the summit, rumors circulated that the Palestinians were preparing to present a new peace plan of their own.

After both al-Sisi (4/3) and Abdullah (4/5) flew to Washington for one-on-one meetings with Trump, the Palestinians began laying out their new position. “There will be no return to the negotiations table until there is a complete settlement freeze in the Palestinian territories that were occupied in 1967,” said senior PA official Nabil Shaath on 4/6. Abbas, meanwhile, stopped mentioning any of the recent Palestinian conditions for a possible resumption of direct peace talks (e.g., the release of the prisoners who were supposed to be set free in connection with the last round of peace talks in 3–4/2014; see JPS 43 [3, 4]). The Israelis quickly embraced the apparent change. “It has always been our position to engage in direct negotiations anytime, anywhere, with no preconditions,” Netanyahu’s spokesperson said (4/20). “For years, Abbas has avoided negotiations, and we would welcome a change in his position.”

After meeting again with al-Sisi (4/29) and Abdullah (4/30), Abbas flew to Washington for his 1st face-to-face meeting with Trump. A PA spokesperson said (5/1) that Abbas intended to highlight the need for a “just and comprehensive peace based on the 2-state solution and the Arab Peace Initiative,” but speculation grew that he was planning a larger gesture. At the White House, Trump and Abbas jointly committed (5/3) to a new peace effort, and Trump said he was ready to do “whatever is necessary” to achieve peace. The public statements remained vague and it was unclear which specific issues were under discussion. However, a source in Abbas’s office later said (5/9) that the Palestinians put forward an ambitious proposal. The PA pres. reportedly urged Trump to resume peace talks on the basis of the proposal former Israeli PM Ehud Olmert had made to Abbas in 2008 (see JPS 37 [2]). Abbas’s staff reportedly showed Trump documents and maps from the 2008 talks, and explained that the Olmert plan had called for withdrawal from all but 6.3% of the West Bank in order to maintain control of certain settlement blocs and to compensate the Palestinians with an equivalent 5.8% of the West Bank in Israeli territory. “If we achieve accords on the borders, we can bridge all the other gaps,” the PA official said. “But if the conversation starts at Netanyahu’s opening position, that he isn’t prepared to say what Israel’s borders are, we won’t get anywhere.” (The Palestinians did not respond to the Olmert proposal in 2008, citing the then PM’s ongoing legal troubles; see JPS 37 [3].)

Both the Trump admin. and the Palestinians were optimistic in the aftermath of the meeting,
except for 1 lingering issue: the PA’s payments to Palestinian prisoners convicted of serious crimes against Israelis and their families. In the lead-up to the meeting, Israel’s leaders repeatedly brought up the issue as a potential sticking point in any negotiations. Lieberman named the Palestinian National Fund, primarily used to process the prisoners’ payments, a terrorist organization on 3/16, and Netanyahu called on Abbas to cancel the payments on 5/1. “How can you talk about peace and fund terrorism?” he said. Trump reportedly raised the issue with Abbas on 5/3, prompting Shaath to respond in public on 5/4. “The demand that Ramallah stop payments to the families of security prisoners is mad,” he said. “Such a requirement is designed to destroy any chance for a peace process between Israel and the Palestinians.” Still, Shaath noted (5/8) that Trump was “very warm, very respectful” and he “gave equal treatment to our president as he’s given to other heads of state he’s met.”

The White House wasted no time in plotting the next step, announcing (5/4) plans for Trump to visit Israel and the oPt on 5/22–23. Through the rest of the quarter, both the Palestinians and Israelis jockeyed for position on various issues related to the peace process, including the PA’s payments to prisoners, Trump’s campaign promise to move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, and settlements, but both sides appeared ready to follow Trump’s lead.

PAST PEACE EFFORTS COME TO LIGHT

Four days after Netanyahu stood (2/15) alongside Trump in Washington to discuss a new “regional approach,” Haaretz published (2/19) a major report detailing former pres. Barack Obama’s failure to push Netanyahu into a new round of peace talks in early 2016. Since the Obama admin. had pursued a regional framework much like the one Trump seemed to favor, the report offered a rough outline of the obstacles the new U.S. pres. could expect to face.

According to former senior U.S. officials, then secy of state John Kerry presented a regional peace plan to Netanyahu, al-Sisi, and Abdullah at a summit on 2/21/2016. (The 6 principles Kerry later outlined on 12/28/2016 reportedly comprised the backbone of the plan; see JPS 46 [3].) Netanyahu rejected the proposal, arguing that he would not be able to get his right-wing coalition behind it. However, 2 weeks later, Netanyahu opened negotiations with Israeli opposition leader Isaac Herzog on the basis of Kerry’s plan, with the idea of forming a new centrist coalition that could give him enough support to stay in power. According to former U.S. officials, it was this proposal that Herzog referenced when he said, on 5/15/2016, that a rare diplomatic opportunity was at hand (see JPS 46 [1]). The Netanyahu-Herzog negotiations broke down, however, and Netanyahu invited Lieberman and his Yisrael Beytenu party into the coalition in 5/2016.

Hours after the Haaretz report appeared, Netanyahu confirmed (2/19) that he had attended the 2/21 meeting. He also claimed to have initiated the regional effort. A senior Israeli diplomatic official then blamed (2/21) Obama for scuttling the initiative by trying to “dictate terms.” For his part, Herzog said (2/20) that he had “demanded” a full settlement freeze at the 3/2016 negotiations on his potential entry to the ruling coalition. In an effort to set himself apart from Netanyahu, he also published (2/23) an op-ed in Haaretz laying out his 10-point plan for peace in the Middle East and with the Palestinians, including a 10-year implementation period and the construction of a port off Gaza’s coast.
With the Israeli political establishment in turmoil over the report, *Haaretz* published (3/5) another story outlining the backroom dealings behind the subsequent 6 mos. of negotiations between the 2 sides. Citing an Israeli source and a former senior U.S. diplomat, *Haaretz* reported that Netanyahu and Herzog had negotiated a series of understandings in early 9/2016 as the basis for a regional peace initiative and an Israeli unity govt., including a pledge to “implement” settlement “activities” in the oPt “in a manner that would facilitate a regional dialogue for peace.” They reportedly planned to present the compromise at a regional summit in Cairo or Sharm al-Shaykh in early 10/2016 before returning to Israel to complete talks on bringing Herzog’s Zionist Union into the ruling coalition. Kerry, meanwhile, had secured the support of Saudi Arabia and other Arab states, which pledged to normalize relations with Israel if they saw Israeli-Palestinian peace talks making sufficient progress. The process had broken down after former Israeli pres. Shimon Peres’s death on 9/28. Netanyahu was under increased pressure from the ultranationalist elements of his coalition, particularly concerning the illegal Amona settlement outpost (see *JPS* 46 [2]), and he stopped negotiating the details with Herzog. “Netanyahu began to gradually withdraw,” according to a Zionist Union source close to the talks. “Little by little, he tried to back down from what had already been agreed on and tried to postpone it all because of Amona and pressure by [the Jewish Home Party].”

Netanyahu’s office denied (3/5) the contents of the report. “The description concerning the possible regional process that wasn’t realized is false from the ground up. The matter has nothing to do with Amona. PM Netanyahu is interested in advancing a regional initiative. Whoever is giving you this information isn’t knowledgeable of the details, or is falsifying them.” The Israeli PM told (3/5) his cabinet that the leak likely stemmed from disagreements within Herzog’s Labor Party, the Zionist Union’s senior partner that was gearing up for a leadership contest in 7/2017.

**SETTLEMENT GROWTH IN THE TRUMP ERA**

Before and after Netanyahu announced (3/30) his new regulations for settlement growth (see above), Israel’s ultranationalists advanced numerous plans and initiatives to strengthen the overall settlement enterprise. While wary of drawing the new U.S. pres.’s ire, none of their subsequent announcements provoked much of a response from Trump or his admin.

Israel’s Knesset passed (2/20) a new law allowing the govt. to require private businesses that choose not to sell products or services to Israel’s settlements in the oPt to display signage indicating that choice on their premises. Businesses that failed to comply were liable to fines. MK Shuli Moalem-Refaeli (Jewish Home), who proposed the legislation, said (2/20) that “if [businesses] fear being put on customers’ blacklists, they should treat them all equally.”

Following last quarter’s passage of the so-called Regulations Bill, which retroactively legalized settlement outposts in the West Bank (see *JPS* 46 [3]), the Knesset informed the High Court of Justice (3/26) that it had accepted Atty. Gen. Avichai Mandelblit’s 3/12 proposal to suspend Palestinian land expropriation under the bill until the Israeli govt. could map the extent of its impact. It was unclear how long the mapping effort would last. In a related development, the Israeli nongovernmental organization (NGO) Peace Now reported (4/22) that, despite Netanyahu’s 3/30 pledge to bar new
settlement outposts, construction on a new outpost e. of Ramallah had just begun. The founding residents said (4/22) that high housing costs in Jerusalem forced them to seek land in the West Bank. "Regardless of the outpost residents’ reasoning, the political implications of the outpost are the same," Peace Now responded in its report. "What distinguishes this outpost from others is the settler leadership’s cynical exploitation of the economic situation of the new residents of the outpost, by granting them free land and enabling them to construct homes illegally, as long as it contributes to the settler goals of destroying the possibility of ever creating a Palestinian state." Israeli forces ordered (4/22) construction on the outpost to stop soon after Peace Now’s report was released.

Meanwhile, Israel’s Ministry of Housing and Construction revived plans for the construction of 10,000 housing units in a Jewish settlement at the site of the abandoned Atarot Airport nr. Qalandia, according to a 4/24 report on Israel’s Channel 10. The plans had been shelved because of pressure from former U.S. pres. Obama, and reportedly revived soon after Trump’s inauguration in 1/2017. Likewise, Israeli construction minister Yoav Galant said (4/28) that plans to build 25,000 new homes in Jerusalem, including 15,000 outside the pre-1967 armistice lines, were back on the table now that Trump was in power. Some Israeli officials surmised that a formal construction announcement might coincide with Trump’s visit to the region on 5/22–23. Finally, the Mateh Binyamin Regional Council, which administers settlements in a region n. of Jerusalem, began soliciting bids to build more than 200 new apartments in the Tel Zion settlement (Haaretz, 5/15). These new dwellings were reportedly approved as part of a broader plan dating back to the 1980s.

PERSECUTING THE PALESTINIAN MINORITY AND OTHER OPPONENTS

For years, the right-wing Israeli govt. has been consolidating power at the expense of its left-wing rivals and the Palestinian minority in Israel. This quarter proved no exception to that trend, as Netanyahu and his allies advanced legislation and other measures to further marginalize, undermine, and persecute the Palestinian minority, the Israeli Left, and the BDS movement.

**Legislative Targeting and a Judicial Shake-Up**

On 2/22, the Knesset’s Judicial Appointments Comm. appointed 4 new justices to the Supreme Court. The move was widely seen as a victory for Justice Min. Ayelet Shaked’s (Jewish Home) years-long campaign to shift the composition of the court to the right. Three of the 4 new justices—David Mintz, Yosef Elron, and Yael Willner—were on Shaked’s short list of candidates. George Karra, a Palestinian citizen of Israel and a Tel Aviv District Court judge, was considered a compromise. Because the court is widely considered one of Israel’s last left-leaning centers of power, Haaretz’s editor in chief Aluf Benn called (2/23) the appointments “the most important achievement in the political and social revolution being pursued by Benjamin Netanyahu’s current government . . . one that will impact court rulings and Israeli democracy for many years to come.”

In the legislative domain, the Knesset passed (3/8) a preliminary reading of the so-called muezzin bill, which the Ministerial Comm. for Legislation approved last quarter (see JPS 46 [3]). The bill, barring mosques from broadcasting the call to prayer during certain hours or in certain situations, had already
stirred up controversy and drawn accusations of religious persecution, as well as a backlash from the international community. In a heated debate leading up to the 3/8 vote, Joint List chair Ayman Odeh ripped up a draft of the bill in protest and was ejected from the chamber. After it passed, a Jordanian govt. spokesperson said (3/8) that it might violate international human rights law and Israel’s peace treaty with Jordan. Following its preliminary reading, the muezzin bill was transferred to the House Comm., where MKs were set to deliberate and send a consensus draft to the full plenum for a 1st reading.

The following week, the Knesset approved (3/14) amendments to Israel’s Basic Laws that would bar politicians who use “inciting rhetoric” from running for office, including “cases where they aim or operate, explicitly or implicitly, to deny the existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, make racist or inciting comments, or support terrorism or an armed struggle against the State of Israel.” MK Osama Saadi (Joint List) said (3/14) that the backers of the amendments were letting it be known that they desired an “Arab-free Knesset.” Later, on 4/5, the Knesset passed “yet another law that expresses the continued policy of the Netanyahu govt. of discrimination against Israel’s Arab citizens,” according to MK Abdullah Abu Maaruf (Joint List). This law imposed maximum sentences on those convicted of illegal construction, and ceded some of the courts’ authority over such offences to the Ministry of Finance. Because construction planning and licensing in Palestinian communities inside Israel is notoriously difficult or impossible to obtain, the bill would disproportionately affect the Palestinian minority.

The most significant development in the Israeli Right’s campaign against the Palestinian minority this quarter was the resuscitation of the so-called nation-state bill. Disagreements over competing drafts of an earlier version of this bill brought down the previous Israeli govt. in late 2014 and early 2015, so its revival was momentous for Netanyahu and his allies. The draft, which the Ministerial Comm. for Legislation approved on 5/7 and the Knesset approved in a preliminary reading on 5/10, would cancel the status of Arabic as an “official language” and codify Israel’s status as the “national home of the Jewish people.” This new draft did not include the most controversial provision of previous versions, which would have subordinated Israel’s democracy to its Jewish character. Zehava Galon, a leader of the left-wing Meretz Party, said (5/7) that the bill was “a declaration of war against Israel’s Arab citizens and against Israel as a democratic and properly governed society.” After the bill passed the preliminary vote, Shaked announced (5/10) that the govt. would be drafting its own version, perhaps including the democracy provision, and presenting it within 60 days.

In addition to ongoing efforts to marginalize the Palestinian minority, Netanyahu and his allies also targeted left-wing Israeli groups this quarter. On 2/27, the Ministerial Comm. for Legislation approved a bill that would revoke tax benefits for donors to NGOs “acting against Israel” in the international arena. Proposed by Jewish Home MK Smotrich, the bill would specifically affect any “public institution that releases statements accusing the State of Israel of committing war crimes” and any “institution that takes part in calls for a boycott of the State of Israel.” Mordechai Kremnitzer and Amir Fuchs, researchers at the Israel Democracy Institute, said (2/27) that because “the question [of] who harms the state and what harms it is up for public debate,” and because it would
disproportionately affect left-leaning groups, the bill would tarnish Israel’s image abroad and undermine its legitimacy in international forums.

A couple of mos. later, Netanyahu provided an example of how this bill would work. A few hours after German FM Sigmar Gabriel arrived in Israel for a state visit on 4/24, Netanyahu threatened not to meet with him unless he canceled his plans to also meet with reps. of the left-wing NGOs B’Tselem and Breaking the Silence on 4/25. Gabriel stood his ground, saying (4/25) that it would be “regrettable” if Netanyahu decided to cancel their meeting due to his “totally normal” contacts with the 2 NGOs, and Netanyahu made the cancellation official. Although Gabriel said that it would likely not affect German ties with Israel, Haaretz reported (4/26) that tensions were high in the wake of the visit and that Germany was reticent to help Israel combat an allegedly anti-Israeli res. percolating through UNESCO as a result (see “United Nations” below).

The Ghattas Investigation

Last quarter, the Knesset Home Comm. lifted (12/21) MK Basel Ghattas’s (Joint List) parliamentary immunity, clearing the way for him to be tried on charges that he allegedly smuggled 12 mobile phones to incarcerated Palestinians at Ketziot Prison on 12/8 (see JPS 46 [3]). Seventy-one MKs signed a petition calling for Ghattas’s removal from the Knesset in 3/2017, initiating a debate on the proposal in the Home Comm. on 3/14. Before the debate could conclude, Ghattas accepted (3/16) a plea deal that would see him resign his seat, pay a NIS 120,000 (approx. $33) fine, and spend 2 years in prison. The Beersheba Magistrate’s Court accepted Ghattas’s plea on 4/9, and the former MK was set to begin serving his prison sentence on 7/2.

Meanwhile, Joumah Azbarga, a fellow Balad Party mbr., was sworn in (3/21) to replace Ghattas as a representative of the Joint List on 3/21. Azbarga, a resident of the Bedouin village of Lakia, said (3/21) he intended “to fight for recognition of [Bedouin villages] in the Negev” and to “deal with poverty issues among Negev residents.”

Countering BDS

In an effort to counter the growing strength of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, the Knesset passed a new law denying entry visas and residency rights to foreign nationals calling for economic, cultural, or academic boycotts of Israel or “areas under its control,” such as Israel’s settlements in the oPt. (The interior minister could make exceptions on a case-by-case basis.) Israel was already known for turning away individual travelers for political reasons, but this new law formalized the practice and ushered in a wave of high-profile denials, including the chair of the UK-based Palestine Solidarity Campaign, Hugh Lanning (3/12); British-Palestinian prof. Kamel Hawwash (4/7); and the executive dir. of the Palestinian Federation of Chile, Anuar Majluf (4/10). As each of these denials gave rise to controversy, the law had a galvanizing effect on the BDS movement. More than 100 U.S. Jewish studies scholars signed a petition protesting the bill in 3/2017, saying, “It will be bad for Israel, bad for the cause of democracy at this fragile moment, and bad for the principles of free speech and thought on which our scholarship is based.” Likewise, the U.S. NGO Americans for Peace Now sent a letter to potential participants in an upcoming study tour of Israel informing them that the trip was canceled in light of the new law. “We do not
know yet whether we will reschedule this tour to another date this year or whether we'll have to suspend our Israel Study Tour program indefinitely,” the letter read. “The law is a stain on Israeli democracy. It betrays the democratic principles upon which Israel was established.”

While the Israeli govt. was targeting BDS at a legislative level, the Israeli police continued to harass BDS cofounder Omar Barghouti, a resident of Acre. They detained him on charges related to tax evasion on 3/20, and interrogated him and his family over the course of the following week. Barghouti was allowed access to e-mail on 4/1, and sent a statement to his supporters: “Due to a gag order,” he wrote, “I am not allowed to delve into any facts about the case. I am thus denied the ability to even refute the vicious lies published by Israel’s regime against me. I am in no hurry to do so, though, as their main objective—attempts to tarnish my reputation and, by extension, hurting the BDS movement—has clearly failed.”

In a related development, Haaretz reported (3/21) that Israel’s Strategic Affairs Minister Gilad Erdan, the official responsible for the govt.’s anti-BDS efforts, had been working for mos. on a proposal to build a database of Israeli citizens who promote and support BDS. The database would complement Erdan’s efforts to collect similar information on foreign activists. Mandelblit, however, was reportedly opposed to the proposal, even though Erdan insisted that the information would be culled primarily from public sources. Ronnie Barkan, cofounder of the Israeli NGO Boycott from Within, welcomed the news on 3/22: “It is a good sign that we’re on the right track.”

RESTRICTIONS ON PALESTINIAN SOCCER

In the spring of 2015, PFA chair Rajoub started a campaign to compel international soccer’s governing body, FIFA, to bar Israel from international competition. He argued that the Israeli authorities were restricting the movement of Palestinian players and coaches, obstructing the construction of Palestinian sports facilities, and violating Article 72.2 of FIFA’s statutes, which states that “member associations and their clubs may not play on the territory of another member association without the latter’s approval.” (Six teams in the Israel Football Association [IFA] are based in Israeli settlements in the West Bank.)

Rajoub’s initial efforts resulted in the creation of a FIFA monitoring comm. on 5/29/2015 (see JPS 45 [1]). In the ensuing 2 years, he kept up the campaign, working against an increasingly energized Israeli opposition in the lead-up to the 2017 meeting of the FIFA Congress, which was set for 5/10–11 in Bahrain.

Two mos. before the congress, Tokyo Sexwale, the monitoring comm.’s chair, met (3/22) with Rajoub and the head of the IFA, Ofer Eini, at FIFA’s headquarters in Zurich. He presented them a draft report he had prepared for the congress, including 3 recommendations for resolving the dispute: maintaining the status quo “with the legal risks arising therefrom”; allowing the IFA 6 mos. “to rectify the situation of the 6 clubs in question”; or requesting further negotiations. Eini was reportedly furious with Sexwale for suggesting that FIFA could suspend Israel if it did not disband the 6 settlement teams, leading to a “stormy, even virulent” meeting, according to a source close to the talks (Agence France-Presse, 3/24). None of the 3 recommendations passed muster with Rajoub. “I respect and appreciate what [FIFA] did,” he said, at a press conference in al-Ram on 4/3, “[but I would] prefer that we go right away to sanction and to suspension.”

After the meeting, Rajoub enjoyed a groundswell of support. More than 100 sports
associations, trade unions, human rights groups, and faith groups from 28 countries signed onto (4/28) a letter to the FIFA Council calling on it to suspend Israel if the IFA neglected to revoke the affiliation of the 6 settler clubs. Then, 174 Palestinian soccer teams threw their weight behind the call in another letter to the council on 5/4.

At the same time, the Israeli govt. stepped up its efforts to squash Rajoub’s campaign. On 4/18, Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent a cable to dozens of its embassies around the world with instructions on how to lobby their hosts: “We urge you to contact your countries’ representatives on the FIFA Council as soon as possible to obtain their support for Israel’s position, which rejects mixing politics with sport and calls for reaching an agreed solution between the parties” (Haaretz, 4/20).

Meanwhile, Eini’s response to Sexwale’s draft report apparently caused the FIFA official to reconsider. According to a senior Israeli official, Sexwale amended the report by removing any mention of the possibility that Israel could be suspended from international soccer.

In a last-ditch effort to prevent a vote on the matter, Netanyahu personally called FIFA pres. Giovanni “Gianni” Infantino on 5/5 to urge the removal of the Palestinian-backed motion from the congress’s agenda. He reportedly argued that Rajoub was only pushing so hard on the issue to make a name for himself ahead of Abbas’s increasingly imminent departure from politics. One official in Netanyahu’s office said (5/5) that the PM had also asked senior U.S. officials to push Abbas on the issue when he was in Washington on 5/3 (see above).

Following on Netanyahu’s conversation with Infantino, the Israeli govt. reportedly sent its own proposed res. to FIFA (Haaretz, 5/9). According to an Israeli official, the proposed res. “wouldn’t change the status quo regarding soccer games in the settlements, but would provide a practical solution to the issue.” The official did not disclose any specifics, saying, “Israel wouldn’t consent to the settlement teams ceasing to play in the [IFA] or to any decision that made a diplomatic statement.”

FIFA’s joint monitoring comm. held one last meeting between the parties the day before the congress was set to begin, but it was inconclusive. In the end, FIFA relented to Israeli pressure. The FIFA Council decided (5/9) to remove the Palestinian-backed motion from the congress’s agenda, stating, “At this stage it is premature for the FIFA Congress to take any decision.” FIFA’s congress then gave (5/11) Sexwale and his comm. a 9-mo. extension to finalize their report and work on a negotiated resolution. “We have good and loyal friends in FIFA,” Eini said of the results. “I don’t have enough words to thank them for firmly standing by our side and . . . removing the Palestinian proposal from the agenda.”

OCCUPATION DATA AND TRENDS

Reflecting a yearlong trend of declining violence, the number of Palestinian and Israeli casualties decreased slightly this quarter (see JPS 46 [1–3]): 21 Palestinians were killed as a result of Israeli actions (down from 29 last quarter), and 1 Israeli was killed as a result of Palestinian actions (down from 5 last quarter). Therefore, the comprehensive death toll since the beginning of the 2d Intifada in 9/2000 reached 10,919 Palestinians (including 59 Palestinian citizens of Israel and 19 unidentified cross-border “infiltrators”); 1,260 Israelis (including at least 246 settlers and 434 Israel Defense Forces [IDF] soldiers and security personnel); and 73 foreign nationals (including 2 British suicide bombers). These numbers include
individuals who died in noncombat-related incidents if their death was a direct result of Israel’s occupation or the ongoing conflict (e.g., ailing Palestinians who died while being denied access to medical care and Palestinians killed in smuggling tunnel accidents). They do include the 2 Palestinian citizens of Israel who died on 4/25 after triggering a piece of unexploded Israeli ordnance nr. Beersheba, but do not include the 3/24 killing of senior Hamas military commander Mazen Fuqaha. Despite Hamas officials’ allegations that Israeli forces were responsible, this had not been confirmed by the end of the quarter (see “Overview of the Violence” below).

Overview of the Violence

Apart from the outcry surrounding the Palestinian prisoners’ mass hunger strike at the end of the quarter (see “Palestinian Prisoners” below), there were fewer protests, clashes, and individual random attacks in the oPt this quarter. Therefore, the number of Palestinians killed in the West Bank and East Jerusalem continued to decrease. Twelve Palestinians were killed as a result of Israeli actions in this context: 10 as a result of confrontations with Israeli forces, 1 by an Israeli settler after the Palestinian allegedly committed a stabbing attack, and 1 of kidney failure resulting from medical complications developed in Israeli prison. The number of Palestinian injuries, however, rose considerably this quarter: 724 Palestinians were injured as a result of Israeli actions between 2/21 and 5/15, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), up from 219 last quarter. Meanwhile, a mentally unstable Palestinian stabbed and killed a UK woman in East Jerusalem on 4/14 (he was arrested after the incident); Israeli forces shot and killed a Jordanian after he allegedly stabbed and injured an Israeli soldier outside Jerusalem’s Old City on 5/13; and a Palestinian driver killed an Israeli in an alleged ramming attack nr. Ramallah on 4/6.

Also of note: a special IDF court at Kirya military base, Tel Aviv, sentenced (2/21) Elor Azariya, the IDF sgt. who killed a Palestinian execution-style in c. Hebron on 3/24/2016, to 18 mos. in prison, the minimum sentence allowed under his 1/4 conviction on charges of manslaughter, and demoted him to the rank of private. His sentence was substantially milder than the minimum sentence Israeli courts hand down to Palestinians convicted of throwing stones and firebombs, and even Ilan Katz, Azariya’s lawyer, admitted that the sentence was lenient. However, Israel’s ultranationalist and right-wing leaders, including PM Netanyahu (2/23), called on Israeli pres. Reuven Rivlin to pardon Azariya.

The number of Palestinians killed in the Gaza Strip as a result of Israeli actions fell by about half this quarter, down to 7 (from 13): 3 died while attempting to repair a smuggling tunnel in s. Gaza on 2/24; 1 was killed by IDF artillery fire on 3/22; 1 fighter affiliated with Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) succumbed to injuries sustained in an accident at a “resistance post” along the border on 4/26, according to the Gaza-based Health Ministry; 1 Hamas fighter died in a tunnel collapse on 4/17; and 1 fisherman succumbed to injuries sustained in a confrontation with Israeli naval forces on 5/15. The number of Gazans injured as a result of Israeli actions continued to fall this quarter; there were 13 reported injuries between 2/21 and 5/15, according to OCHA, down from 23 and 61 in each of the previous 2 quarters.

There was a slight increase in cross-border violence this quarter, placing in doubt the continuation of the cease-fire that has largely
held since Israel’s assault on Gaza in the summer of 2014 (see JPS 44 [1, 2]). Nine days witnessed significant exchanges between armed fighters in Gaza and the IDF, leading to 1 Palestinian death (3/22), 8 injuries (2/27 [5], 3/7 [1], and 3/22 [2]), substantial damage to various Hamas and PIJ sites across Gaza, and minor damage to 1 Israeli military vehicle (3/2). After exchanges of rockets and air strikes on 2/27, 3/1, and 3/2, Asharq Al-Awsat reported (3/2) that Hamas had arrested hundreds of mbrs. of local Salafist groups since 12/2016, and that this could possibly explain the recent uptick in cross-border violence. Although no group took credit for the rocket fire on 2/27 or 3/1, Salafist groups were widely suspected of returning to a tactic they had used in response to a similar Hamas crackdown in 2015, i.e., launching rockets into Israel to draw Israeli retaliatory strikes on Hamas military sites (see JPS 45 [1]).

The IDF maintained its strict enforcement of Israel’s unilaterally defined buffer zone, or Access Restricted Areas, along Gaza’s border this quarter. IDF troops violently dispersed Palestinian protesters approaching the border on 3 occasions (2/24, 3/3, and 3/10); fired on Palestinian land or other property 11 times (2/19, 2/25, 3/19, 3/26, 3/28, 4/1, 4/3, 4/4, 4/18, 4/21, and 4/30); and fired on Palestinian shepherds, bird-hunters, and others 10 times (2/24, 3/3 [2], 3/6, 4/7, 4/14 [2], 4/21, 4/26, and 5/2), causing 3 injuries (2/24 [1] and 3/3 [2]). Israeli forces also arrested 10 Palestinians attempting to cross into Israel (3/3 [3], 3/13 [3], 3/17, 4/11 [2], and 4/13); conducted 22 limited incursions to level land along the border fence (2/23 [2], 3/1 [2], 3/5, 3/6, 3/15, 3/22, 4/5, 4/6 [2], 4/13, 4/16, 4/19, 4/20, 4/30, 5/2, 5/7 [2], 5/9, and 5/14 [2]); and sprayed herbicide on Palestinian lands along the border nr. Khan Yunis (4/4 and 4/5) and nr. Rafah (5/9).

After wavering on their promise to extend the fishing zone off Gaza’s coast during the previous 2 quarters, the Israeli authorities expanded the zone from 6 to 9 naut. mi. along Gaza’s s. coast on 5/3. However, before and after the extension, Israeli naval forces continued harassing Palestinian fishermen. They opened fire on or otherwise confronted Palestinian fishing boats on 52 occasions, down from 58 last quarter. Over the course of these incidents, they killed 1 fisherman (5/15); injured 2 (2/21 and 5/8), arrested 14 (2/21 [4], 3/23 [2], 4/30 [2], and 5/15 [6]); and confiscated at least 3 of the fishermen’s boats (3/23 and 5/15 [2]).

In addition to the usual violence across the border and along the coast, there was 1 major incident in Gaza this quarter. On 3/24, unidentified assailants shot and killed senior Hamas military official and former Israeli prisoner Fuqaha in s. Gaza City. Throughout the quarter, Hamas officials insisted that Israel was responsible and threatened to retaliate, but Israeli leaders denied these allegations, and no major escalation of violence ensued.

Within hours of the killing, Hamas released a statement implying that Israel was responsible. Thousands of Hamas mbrs. and supporters called for revenge at Fuqaha’s funeral on 3/25, and Hamas’s military wing, the Izzeddin al-Qassam Brigades (IQB), threatened to “respond in a matter that befits [Fuqaha’s] position.” As Hamas’s investigation into the killing progressed, the Gaza-based Interior Ministry shut down (3/26) the Erez border crossing with Israel, only allowing humanitarian cases, and barred (3/26) all Gazan fishermen from the sea indefinitely. A little over a mo. after the ministry lifted (4/6) the restrictions, Hamas announced (5/11) that it had arrested the person responsible for killing Fuqaha. The
organization’s new leader, Ismail Haniyeh, described the arrested man as having “pulled the trigger following the instructions of his Israeli commanders,” doubling down on the allegation that Israel was responsible. Hamas then held (5/16) a press conference to announce that 3 Palestinians had confessed to their involvement in the killing and admitted to having received instructions from Israeli intelligence officers. The head of Hamas’s internal security forces, Tawfiq Abu Naim, said that the confession marked a “new stage” in Hamas’s dealings with Israel, but the Israelis didn’t respond to the evidence Hamas made public, nor were there any signs of Hamas retaliation.

**Movement and Access**

Apart from the extension of the fishing zone off Gaza’s s. coast (see “Overview of the Violence” above), there was only 1 significant change affecting Palestinian movement and access in the Gaza Strip this quarter. Humanitarian conditions continued to deteriorate, prompting numerous and increasingly urgent calls for a change in the status quo. In particular, the number of Palestinians permitted to exit Gaza continued to drop, from 26,317 in 11/2016–1/2017 to 18,056 in 2–4/2017, according to the Israeli NGO Gisha (see fig. 1). The greatest decrease registered was among merchants, highlighting the weakness of the Gazan economy according to a report in *Haaretz* (3/18). Many local industries were suffering from a lack of materials, such as wooden planks and boards, which Israel banned for security reasons, and fewer merchants had reasons to apply for exit permits as a result. As of 3/18, “only 1,363 traders have valid entry permits, a bit more than a third of the 3,600 permits Israel had approved in late 2015, and about a quarter of the quota set by Israel, which was never filled,” according to the *Haaretz* report. Citing the sputtering local economy, Gaza’s Ministry of National Economy announced (4/6) an increase in tariffs on 7 types of goods imported from Israel, including tahini and diapers. A ministry spokesperson explained (4/6) that the hope was that local producers would raise to 40% their market share on these products, up from approximately 15%, creating 500 new jobs.

Despite Pres. al-Sisi’s stated goal of opening the Rafah border crossing more frequently (see *JPS* 46 [3]), the Egyptian authorities kept it closed for all but 8 days this quarter, down from 17 and 21 days in each of the previous 2 quarters. According to OCHA, 5,004 Palestinians were able to return to Gaza and 2,054 were able to leave.

The IDF’s nr.-daily raids, house searches, and mobile checkpoints continued to obstruct Palestinian movement and access in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, although the Israeli crackdown on the *habba* (the surge of Palestinian resistance, random attacks, and protests that began in Jerusalem in 9/2015) included fewer village closures and other punitive restrictions this quarter. In the wake of a West Bank Palestinian’s stabbing and injuring of at least 4 people in Tel Aviv, the IDF’s Coordinator of Govt. Activities in the Territories (COGAT) suspended (3/23) single-day work permits granted to various enterprises bringing Palestinians into Israel. The alleged attacker in the Tel Aviv incident had obtained such a permit via Natural Peace Tours, a group that organizes personal interactions between Israelis and Palestinians.

The Israeli authorities maintained their practice of closing border crossings into the West Bank and Gaza around holidays (Purim [3/9–12], Passover [4/9–17], and Israel’s Independence Day [4/29–5/2]), with
exceptions for humanitarian cases. In a related
development, the Israeli authorities attempted
to block the Palestinian “March of Return,”
an annual protest held in parallel with Israel’s
Independence Day celebrations, for the 1st
time since the event’s founding 20 years earlier.
Specifically, the Israeli police denied the
marchers a permit, saying that there were not
enough available officers to secure the event
(Haaretz, 3/23). For their part, organizers said
they toured the planned site of the march
2 weeks prior with Israeli police officers, and
that they had agreed on the necessary
requirements. “We’re sure there’s a political
motive [to the reversal],” said the organizer’s
atty. Wessam Areed. The Israeli police later
reversed their ban provided that the route of
the proposed demonstration be altered,
allowing thousands of Palestinians to march at
the site of al-Kabri village on 5/2. The Israeli
authorities did ease 2 major restrictions on
movement and access in the West Bank this
quarter. First, a Palestinian source said (4/10)
that COGAT had recently granted permits to
270 Palestinian businessmen, allowing them to
drive their cars inside Israel for the 1st time
since 2000. The source also said that more
permits may be issued after 3 mos. if the
program goes well. Second, the Israeli govt.
and the PA signed (4/5) an agreement to allow
Palestinian telecom companies to offer 3G
services to their Palestinian customers in the
oPt, ending a long-standing Israeli ban on the
technology. The reversal was meant to stimulate
the Palestinian economy, according to COGAT.
The agreement came more than a year after
the PA and COGAT had reached a similar deal,
on 11/19/2015, that was never implemented.
Palestinian commentators at that time had lamented the fact that Jawwal and Wataniya Mobile, the 2 major Palestinian telecom companies, were unlikely to invest in 3G when 4G, a more advanced technology, was already standard across most of the Middle East (see JPS 45 [3]). However, less than a week later, Wataniya CEO Durgham Maraee announced that the company had already started work on bringing 3G to the West Bank, and that Wataniya was planning to begin operations in Gaza soon, ending Jawwal’s 18-year monopoly in the region.

Access at Haram al-Sharif remained contentious this quarter, with both Palestinians and Israelis chafing against restrictions at the sanctuary. On 2/28, the Palestinian News and Information Agency (WAFA) reported that a magistrate’s court in Jerusalem had ruled that Jews should be permitted to pray at Haram al-Sharif, a move that would violate a key component of the status quo arrangement forged in the wake of Israel’s capture of Jerusalem in 1967 (see Doc. R6 in JPS 45 [1] for background on the status quo). Israel’s Ministry of Justice did not comment on the ruling, and the Jordanian govt., which administers the sanctuary, registered a formal protest with the Israeli govt. on 3/1. The Israeli govt. did not move to implement the ruling by the end of the quarter. At the end of 3/2017, Netanyahu decided to reassess his ban on Israeli MKs and ministers visiting Haram al-Sharif (Jerusalem Post, 3/27), a measure he had put in place in 10/2015 as the habba (surge) began (see JPS 45 [2]). Any change in the policy, however, would be delayed for 3 mos. to avoid provocations at the sanctuary during Passover and Ramadan. Meanwhile, Israeli forces banned more than 40 Palestinians from the sanctuary for periods of as long as 6 mos., to “keep the peace” in Jerusalem during the Jewish High Holidays. As a result, approximately 1,600 Jews visited during Passover, a significant increase over the 1,015 that visited during Passover in 2016, according to the Israeli pro-settler group Yirah.

The Israeli authorities plotted new restrictions on Palestinian tourism this quarter. On 4/23, the Border Control Dept. of Israel’s Population and Immigration Authority notified Israeli travel agencies that, as of 5/15, they would have to “attach, with each request to bring a group of tourists into the country, a special form pledging that they will not send tourists to [the West Bank].” It was unclear why the Israeli authorities thought such a move was necessary, but it was widely expected to deter foreign tourism to the oPt, thereby weakening the Palestinian economy. An Israeli tourism worker predicted that “if this takes effect, then groups of tourists looking for a down-to-earth vacation in Israel and visiting religious sites will have trouble paying the prices, and will stop coming.” Under pressure from tour group operators, Israel’s Ministry of Interior then froze (4/26) the order, explaining that “the draft of the letter that was sent out included some errors. . . . In the next few days, after the interior minister revisits the issue, we will be sending out a corrected version” (Haaretz, 5/3). By the end of the quarter, the ministry had issued no corrected version.

On 3/15, Israel’s High Court of Justice ordered the Interior Ministry to restore the residency status of a Palestinian, Akram Abd al-Haqq, who was born in East Jerusalem, but who had lived outside the city for 12 years. The ruling effectively challenged the govt.’s policy on awarding East Jerusalem Palestinians residency status. Previously, any Palestinians born in East Jerusalem who had been away from the city for at least 7 years lost their residency. Setting a new precedent, the justices decided
that Palestinians born in East Jerusalem have a “strong affinity” with the city that must be taken into account in decisions on residency rights. Between 1967 and 2017, the Interior Ministry revoked the residency status of approximately 14,500 East Jerusalem Palestinians like Abd al-Haqq. Denials peaked at 4,577 in 2008, prompting a growing number of East Jerusalem Palestinians to seek Israeli citizenship, despite the stigma against it.

**Palestinian Prisoners**

On 4/17, Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti and approximately 1,500 of his fellow Palestinian prisoners embarked on a mass hunger strike, calling for “an end to [Israel’s] practice of arbitrary administrative detention, torture, ill-treatment, unfair trials, detention of children, medical negligence, solitary confinement, inhuman/degrading treatment, deprivation of basic rights such as family visits, and the right to education,” according to a statement released the same day. Various prisoners had conducted similar hunger strikes randomly in recent years, each one drawing the world’s attention to Israel’s carceral policies and galvanizing the Palestinian public (e.g., 2-time hunger striker Muhammad al-Qiq suspended his most recent action on 3/10; see JPS 46 [3]).

The Dignity Strike, as Barghouti and his supporters dubbed their collective action (see Palestine Unbound), built on these efforts and won the backing of all the major Palestinian political parties, including Fatah’s traditional rivals, Hamas and PIJ.

The inevitable Israeli crackdown began even before the strike started. On 4/16, Barghouti published an op-ed in the New York Times in which he linked the poor conditions in Israel’s prisons with the Israeli occupation overall. Numerous pro-Israel readers and Israeli politicians, including Netanyahu, complained, and the Times later amended the online version of the op-ed to include a summary of the crimes for which Israel had sentenced Barghouti. Also, the Israel Prison Service (IPS) warned (4/16) that participating in the strike would result in “serious consequences” for those involved. The nature of those consequences became clear soon after the hunger strike started. First, the IPS suspended all family and lawyer visits, according to a source with the International Comm. of the Red Cross (ICRC) on 4/18. Second, it moved Barghouti to solitary confinement and denied (4/18) his lawyers’ requests to visit him.

Meanwhile, Palestinians across the oPt organized nr.-daily rallies and other solidarity actions. Public and private institutions throughout the West Bank went on strike on 4/27. Employees of Jawwal and Paltel, another Palestinian telecom company, organized a sit-in in Ramallah on 4/30. The armed wing of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) said (4/30) that it had launched “intensive cyberattacks” on sites and accounts “affiliated [with] the Zionist govt.” IQB published (5/3) a video threatening to make Israel “pay” unless the prisoners’ demands were addressed within 24 hours.

Although the strike did not capture the attention of the mainstream U.S. press, there were expressions of support elsewhere in the world. The Non-Aligned Movement denounced (4/22) Israel’s “illegal and oppressive” detention campaign. The ICRC announced (4/23) that it would consider the prisoners’ demand for increased family visits. The ICRC had coordinated 2 family visits per prisoner per mo. prior to 5/2016, but had decreased this to 1 per mo. due to an increase in family “no-shows” (see JPS 46 [1]).
On 5/4, the Arab League called on the UN to send a commission of inquiry to “view the violations being committed against the prisoners of war.”

After the IPS responded to a legal challenge from the Israeli NGO Adalah and agreed (5/3) to let the prisoners meet with their lawyers, the Israeli authorities ramped up efforts to undermine the strikers. According to Israeli media reports (5/4), the IPS was allegedly attempting to bring in foreign doctors to replace the Israeli doctors refusing to force-feed the prisoners (the Knesset passed a law authorizing force-feedings on 7/30/2015, but it was never implemented; see JPS 45 [1]).

Despite rumors that the IPS was interested in negotiating with the strike’s leaders, the Israeli authorities focused their efforts on smearing Barghouti. On 5/7, the IPS released footage allegedly showing the Palestinian leader eating cookies and candy bars in his cell at the Kishon detention center. The IPS did not say how Barghouti obtained the treats, but some IPS sources said (5/7) that the organization provided them to see if they could get him to break his strike. Various Palestinian groups and leaders, as well as Barghouti’s wife, Fadwa, denied that he had broken the strike and accused the IPS of fabricating the footage. “This was expected as part of the psychological and media war the IPS is conducting against the prisoners,” Barghouti’s lawyer said. “We can’t address the content of the clip so long as they don’t let us meet with Marwan. Let us visit him and then we will check the claims with him.”

The IPS ultimately allowed an ICRC delegation to visit Barghouti on 5/11, but his lawyers were denied access until 5/14, despite the 5/3 agreement. Throughout its duration, the Israelis accused Barghouti of organizing the strike for personal reasons. “As we’ve said all along, the terrorists’ hunger strike isn’t about their prison conditions, but only about Barghouti’s desire to bolster his status in preparation for the day after [Abbas],” Erdan said (5/8), referring to the PA pres.’s stated desire to leave office. Erdan also published (5/15) a list of Barghouti’s alleged demands, including access to 20 television channels, air conditioning, and unlimited books and magazines. “The document shows how over the top the demands are,” he said. "No country in the world would enter into negotiations with prisoners for such demands, and certainly Israel, which is in a campaign against terror organizations, will not . . . surrender to extortion and damage its deterrent against terrorists.”

The head of the PA’s General Intelligence Service, Majid Faraj, and a delegation of senior intelligence officials met with their counterparts in the Shin Bet in an effort to negotiate a resolution, according to PA sources on 5/15. The same sources, however, said that Erdan was holding out, and by the end of the quarter, the IPS had not officially entered into talks with the prisoners.

**Settler-Related Violence**

Instances of settler-related violence in the West Bank and East Jerusalem increased this quarter, with 34 incidents recorded in which Israeli settlers attacked Palestinians or their property, up from 20 the previous quarter, according to OCHA. Fifteen of these incidents resulted in Palestinian injuries, and 19 resulted in damage to Palestinian homes or other property. (See fig. 2 and Chronology for details.) These figures do not, however, include the settler killing of a Palestinian on 3/1 who
broke into the settler’s home at a settlement outpost nr. Hebron (see Chronology for details).

**Gaza’s Electricity Crisis**

Three mos. after Qatar and Turkey stepped in to avert a major electricity crisis in Gaza in 1/2017 (see JPS 46 [3]), the fuel they had paid for ran out. Gaza’s sole power plant was forced to shut down on 4/16, plunging the region into darkness once again. The Gaza Electricity Distribution Company (GEDCO) said (4/17) that it would only be able to distribute 133 MW of power per day, far less than the 450–500 MW needed. As a result, Gazans endured 12-hour blackouts, with 6-hour periods of power in between.

As in 1/2017, intra-Palestinian politics were partly to blame for the crisis. The PA in Ramallah held Hamas accountable, with a spokesperson accusing (4/17) GEDCO of collecting electricity fees from Gaza’s residents amounting to more than $27 m. without contributing anything to the monthly purchases of electricity from Israel and Egypt. The PA paid approximately $11 m. to Israel and $2 m. to Egypt for the 120 MW and 13 MW, respectively, which they imported to Gaza each mo. Hamas, for its part, accused (4/16) the PA of causing the crisis. The Hamas-run Energy Authority’s dep. chair, Fathi Khalil, argued (4/16) that they would have been able to purchase sufficient fuel to power the plant using tax revenues collected in...
Gaza, “but this [became] unaffordable after the [PA] suddenly decided to impose full taxes on the fuel.” Before the imposition of new taxes, the energy authority in Gaza could buy enough diesel fuel from Israel to run 2 of the plant’s generators.

With intra-Palestinian tensions ratcheting up (see “Intra-Palestinian Politics” below), the electricity crisis deepened throughout the quarter. Gaza’s hospitals prepared for rolling blackouts to increase, according to the Palestinian media on 4/19. Israeli and Palestinian officials estimated (4/19) that their energy reserves would only be able to power backup generators for 48–72 hours. Various power lines feeding the Gaza grid from Egypt were disconnected (4/17) or damaged (4/20 and 4/24), according to GEDCO, forcing further cuts on Gaza’s residents. Then, in a drastic move, the PA informed (4/27) the Israeli govt. that it would no longer be paying for the electricity Israel supplied to Gaza. Sources said (4/24) that PA pres. Abbas was looking to step up the pressure on Hamas to give up control of Gaza, and this move appeared to be the 1st implementation of his new approach.

The intractability of internal Palestinian politics dampened the international community’s willingness to deliver more emergency aid. UN coordinator for humanitarian aid and development activities Robert Piper approved (4/27) the release of $500,000 to buy fuel for Gaza’s hospitals, but Qatar, Turkey, and all of the Palestinians’ other major patrons were silent.

**Demolitions and Displacement**

For the 3d quarter in a row, Israeli forces demolished fewer Palestinian structures in the West Bank and East Jerusalem than they had in the preceding quarter. Between 2/21 and 5/15, they demolished 73 structures, including 30 in Area C of the West Bank and 43 in East Jerusalem, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). This marked a substantial decrease from the 155 structures that the IDF demolished last quarter (see *JPS* 46 [3]). The number of Palestinians displaced by these demolitions, however, went up to 205, from 161 the previous quarter.

There was only 1 reported instance of Israeli forces punitively demolishing Palestinian property during this quarter. On 3/22, the IDF sealed with concrete the Jabal Mukabir home of the Palestinian killed in a confrontation with Israeli soldiers on 1/7; 1 woman and 4 children were displaced (see Chronology).

In a related development, *The Marker* reported (5/7) that Netanyahu and Finance Min. Moshe Kahlon agreed to a 2-year freeze on demolition orders for homes built without permits in Israel, primarily affecting Palestinian communities (see *JPS* 46 [3]). Several high-profile home demolitions in these communities sparked a wave of protests last quarter, and suspending the policy could have been seen as a victory in the Palestinians’ campaign for equal rights. However, Israel’s Dep. Atty. Gen. Erez Kaminitz denied (5/10) *The Marker’s* report. “There was not, and there is not, any agreement by enforcement bodies to an all-encompassing freeze on enforcement against illegal construction,” he wrote. Notably, there were no high-profile demolitions of Palestinian property in Israel during the quarter, lending credence to *The Marker’s* report.

**INTRA-PALESTINIAN DYNAMICS**

**MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS MISFIRE**

After several delays over the previous 6 mos., Palestinians finally went to the polls this quarter, electing new municipal reps. on
5/13. However, rather than providing a foundation for future presidential elections and a smooth transfer of power from aging PA pres. Abbas, continuing Hamas-Fatah disputes overshadowed the electoral process and exacerbated long-standing tensions between the Ramallah-based leadership and the de facto rulers of Gaza.

Two weeks after the PA cabinet announced (1/31) that elections would go forward on 5/13, and a PA official said (1/31) that it was open to proceeding in the West Bank only (see JPS 46 [3]), Hamas submitted (2/15) to the Central Elections Commission (CEC) 3 conditions for its participation: the alleviation of pressure from Abbas on Hamas’s leadership in the West Bank; the cancellation of all decisions and decrees issued in connection with the elections, including Abbas’s 1/10 formation of a special elections court; and reverting to the Palestinian local elections law of 2005. But faced with obduracy on the part of Abbas and his deputies, Hamas then informed the CEC that it would not allow elections in Gaza (WAFA, 2/21). Following a meeting between PA PM Rami Hamdallah and the head of the CEC, the PA cabinet announced (2/28) that the elections would go forward as planned in the West Bank only. (The 2012 municipal elections also excluded Gaza; see JPS 42 [2, 3].) A Hamas spokesperson called the decision a “recipe for division.”

In addition to the disagreements over elections, new challenges to the PA’s control of the West Bank emerged this quarter, further undermining its legitimacy. Most notably, the IDF’s killing of Palestinian youth activist and intellectual Basel al-Araj
on 3/6 sparked a wave of protests and brought to the forefront the question of PA security coordination with Israel (see Palestine Unbound). Al-Araj and 2 other activists disappeared from Ramallah in 3/2016 under suspicious circumstances; within days, the PA revealed that it had arrested them at Israel’s request. The PA justified the arrest by claiming the 3 were carrying unlicensed weapons and planning to attack Israeli targets. When they were released 5 mos. later, the IDF arrested 4 of al-Araj’s associates. Al-Araj evaded capture and went to ground in an old house in the Ramallah area, where the IDF came for him on 3/6.

Much of the Palestinian public viewed the IDF’s killing of al-Araj as stemming from Palestinian Authority Security Forces (PASF) intelligence-sharing with Israel. Al-Araj’s killing galvanized Palestinians, who already opposed security coordination, especially after PA judicial officials announced (3/9) that they would proceed with a criminal case against al-Araj and his associates. Approximately 200 protesters gathered outside a courthouse in Ramallah on 3/12 to protest the case. PASF troops violently dispersed them, injuring at least 11 Palestinian civilians, including al-Araj’s father. Following complaints of excessive violence and increasing anti-PA sentiment, Hamdallah announced (3/13) the creation of a comm. to look into the PASF’s actions at the 3/12 protests. However, the PA’s response did nothing to quell the public outcry. The PFLP announced (3/13) that it would not participate in the 5/13 elections. “[O]ur withdrawal from local elections is the result of the PA policy in general . . . and of the [PASF’s] ongoing oppression of the people in particular,” explained PFLP official Khalida Jarrar on 3/23. The comm. recommended punishments for several PASF officers on 3/28, and Hamdallah accepted its recommendations on 3/29.

As protests against the PA continued, the election project suffered another setback. On 5/8, the National Comm. to Support Palestinian Prisoners’ Hunger Strike, formed to support the Dignity Strikers’ call for “freedom and dignity” in Israeli prisons, urged the PA to suspend the municipal elections and to halt its security coordination with the IDF.

In the end, the elections proceeded without incident. Although Hamas boycotted the polling, the party released (5/10) a statement encouraging West Bank Palestinians to vote for the “most competent” candidates. Independent candidates won 65% of the contested seats, Fatah lists won 27.6%, and Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine lists won 2.77%. Voter turnout was recorded at 53.4%, roughly equal to the turnout during the last round of municipal elections in 2012, according to the CEC.

Absent a full slate of candidates in the municipal elections, the annual student elections at Birzeit University, held the previous week (5/10), served as a bellwether for the Palestinian public’s mood. The Hamas-aligned al-Wafaa Islamic Bloc won 25 of the student council’s 51 seats with 3,778 votes. The Fatah-aligned Martyr Yasir Arafat Bloc came in 2d, winning 22 seats with 3,340 votes.

STRUGGLE FOR CONTROL OF GAZA

Hamas-Fatah tensions exploded after Hamas pulled out of the municipal elections, and the population of Gaza suffered the consequences. First, Hamas announced (3/16) the formation of a new comm. to administer Gaza, comprising mbrs. of the Hamas-affiliated Palestinian Legislative Council bloc and other senior party officials. Although one of the latter, Salah Bardawil, insisted (3/16) that “Hamas has not formed a substitute govt. to replace the consensus govt.,” Abbas reacted as if that was exactly what they had done. On 4/4, the
employees of the former PA govt. in Gaza, who had continued to receive their monthly salaries despite not working since Hamas took control in 2007, discovered that their 3/2017 paychecks had been cut by 30%. PA PM Hamdallah explained (4/8) that the cuts were commensurate with the austerity measures the PA had put in place in response to decreasing revenues from foreign aid in 2016. He also called (4/8) on Hamas to cede control of Gaza to the PA, arguing that the movement was exacerbating the Palestinians’ financial troubles by “taking all of the revenue [in Gaza] and spending it only on itself.” Hamas, for its part, described (4/10) the cuts as a “massacre.” UN special coordinator Nickolay Mladenov said (4/8) the cuts placed an additional burden on the people of Gaza, who were already struggling to survive in a difficult situation (see “Gaza Electricity Crisis” above), and urged Hamas to allow the PA to resume governance of the region.

On 4/11, Fatah Central Comm. mbr. Jamal Muhaisin announced a new reconciliation effort. Fatah would send a delegation to Gaza after Israel’s closure of the West Bank ended on 4/17 (see “Movement and Access” above) to discuss “possible future steps . . . upon the delegation’s return.” Hamas leaders met with representatives of various other factions in Gaza City on 4/12 to prepare for the delegation’s arrival, but Abbas cast a pall over their preparations when he told Palestinian diplomats gathered in Bahrain on 4/13, “These days, we are in a dangerous and tough situation that requires decisive steps. . . . Therefore, we are going to take unprecedented steps in the coming days to end the division.” Abbas did not elaborate on what sort of steps he was planning, but many speculated that he intended to stop paying the salaries of former PA employees in Gaza altogether.

As the Fatah delegation’s visit approached, senior Hamas officials began expressing hesitation. Hammad al-Ruqab said (4/17) that bilateral talks would “only cement the siege” on Gaza, and suggested that “a meeting . . . be held for all Palestinians so that all [of the various parties] can be involved.” Khalil al-Hayya reiterated (4/17) Hamas’s commitment to existing plans for the formation of a new Palestinian National Council and for the PA to take over the Gaza Strip (see JPS 36 [3]), but said Abbas would have to reverse the 3/2017 salary cuts and cancel the taxes imposed on Gaza’s power plant if he wanted Hamas participation in the meeting. In the event, the 2 sides met on 4/18 in Gaza City, with Fatah’s reps. reportedly proposing a road map with several key conditions: the PA would take control of Gaza, Hamas would dissolve its new administrative comm., and a new round of municipal elections would take place within 6 mos. The meeting was positive, according to Bardawil (4/19), and the 2 sides reportedly agreed that the PA would transfer the funds it had withheld when it cut the salaries of former employees on 3/2017.

As the electricity crisis in Gaza deepened, the optimism of the 4/18 meeting faded. On 4/25, sources close to Abbas said he was preparing to issue Hamas an ultimatum: either cede control of Gaza immediately or give up all PA funding. “We realize this sounds cruel,” a PA source said. “But in the end, after 10 years of the split and Hamas rule in the Strip, [Hamas] must decide whether it will control things in every sense, including ongoing expenses, or let the Palestinian government rule.” Hamas, for its part, suspended schools and closed govt. offices in Gaza on 5/2 to encourage people to attend anti-PA and anti-Abbas rallies. In addition, Hamas forces arrested several local Fatah leaders ahead of a
counterprotest on 5/3. In a meeting with Arab ambs. in Washington on 5/4, Abbas held his ground and threatened further escalation. “Things will be painful,” he told them. With humanitarian conditions in Gaza deteriorating and international pressure growing for the PA and Hamas to heal the rift, there were no signs of a resolution by the end of the quarter.

HAMAS’S POLITICAL TRANSITION

As conflicts unfolded over the municipal elections, Gazan PA employees’ salaries, and the electricity crisis, Hamas’s leadership was quietly preparing a major shift in its stated policy positions. According to a 3/8 report in Asharq Al-Awsat, Hamas officials were working on a document that would constitute a dramatic departure from the 1988 charter, in which Hamas’s founders called for armed struggle to recover all of historic Palestine, and framed the struggle in religious terms as a battle of Muslims against Jews. Breaking the news about this initiative (3/8), a senior Hamas official stated, “Anyone who has followed the statements of Khalid Mishal and the Hamas leaders will not find anything different [in the new document]. . . . But in light of the major changes that have occurred in the region and within the Palestinian arena, Hamas has formulated this document to represent the movement and its principles.”

On 5/1, Hamas unveiled the “Document of General Principles and Policies,” including provisions accepting the notion of a Palestinian state with borders based on the pre-1967 armistice lines and calling for resistance to Israel as a Zionist project rather than a war against Jews (see “A Newer Hamas? The Revised Charter” in this issue). While Hamas leaders had articulated the various positions and policies laid out in the document over the previous 10 years, its publication marked the 1st time the party as a whole had assented formally to all of them. In terms of timing, Hamas sources attributed the early 5/2017 release of the document to the desire to better position the party ahead of U.S. pres. Trump’s meeting with Abbas on 5/3 and the new admin.’s efforts to restart Israeli-Palestinian peace talks (see “The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict” above). Israeli PM Netanyahu’s office called (5/1) the document a “smoke screen,” while Fatah said (5/2) ”nothing [in the document] signals that Hamas is actually moving toward national unity.”

One week after unveiling the document, Hamas elected (5/6) Haniyeh, former PM in Gaza, to replace Mishal as head of the party’s political bureau. “We are certain that the new leadership will lead the organization wisely for the benefit of the Palestinian people,” Mishal said (5/6). Haniyeh was widely considered the front-runner for the position after Mishal signaled in early 2017 that he intended to step down. Mishal was expected to split his time between Gaza and Qatar, where he is based.

PALESTINIAN OPINION

The following data comes from a poll conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR) on 8–11 March 2017. The results are based on a survey of 1,270 men and women from the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip. The complete poll, the 63d in a series, can be found at www.pcpsr.org.

1. Do you see benefit or harm to reconciliation in the holding of these [municipal] elections in 5/2017?
2. Hamas announced its decision not to participate in these local elections. In your view, is Hamas justified or unjustified in boycotting these elections?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>West Bank</th>
<th>Gaza Strip</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Benefit</td>
<td>34.7%</td>
<td>31.2%</td>
<td>40.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Harm</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Neither benefit nor harm</td>
<td>34.4%</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Don't know/Not applicable</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
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3. More than 2 months since his inauguration, what is your expectation of the Trump admin.’s impact on future Palestinian-Israeli relations?

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<th>Total</th>
<th>West Bank</th>
<th>Gaza Strip</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Will push toward return to the peace process</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Things will remain as they were under Obama</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>38.3%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Will lead to greater Palestinian diplomatic and political confrontations against Israel</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Will lead to greater Palestinian popular and perhaps armed confrontations due to settlement expansion</td>
<td>37.7%</td>
<td>37.8%</td>
<td>37.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Other</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Don't know/Not applicable</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
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4. If the Trump admin. called upon the Palestinians and Israelis to return to negotiations within a 2-state solution framework, but without any preconditions, should the Palestinian side accept the invitation and return to negotiations?

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<th>Total</th>
<th>West Bank</th>
<th>Gaza Strip</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Yes</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
<td>31.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) No</td>
<td>57.5%</td>
<td>60.6%</td>
<td>52.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Not sure</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Don't know/Not applicable</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
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5. The Gaza Strip suffers from a permanent crisis of electricity shortages, to which various actors contribute. Who, in your view, is the actor most responsible for the continuation of this crisis?

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<th>Total</th>
<th>West Bank</th>
<th>Gaza Strip</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) PA/Pres. Abbas</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
<td>30.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) [Israel's] occupation</td>
<td>35.0%</td>
<td>43.9%</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Hamas govt./Ismail Haniyeh</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Egypt</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Hamas govt./PA</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) GEDCO</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) Other</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8) Don't know/Not applicable</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
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**FRONTLINE STATES**

**EGYPT**

Despite some coordination between Egyptian pres. al-Sisi and PA pres. Abbas on the incoming U.S. admin.’s new “outside-in” approach to resolving the Palestinian-Israeli
conflict, minor disagreements persisted, and the Egyptian-Palestinian relationship remained uneasy. The tensions came into sharp focus on 2/27, when the Egyptian authorities refused PFA chair Rajoub entry into the country for an Arab League meeting on terrorism and extremism, citing a decision by Egyptian intelligence. Rajoub did not respond publicly, and the Palestinian delegation withdrew in protest. Egyptian officials provided no public explanation beyond stating that Rajoub’s name appeared on a no-entry list. “We did not expect Egypt to treat Rajoub that way,” said a senior Fatah official on 3/10, in revealing comments about the incident. “Although I doubt Rajoub attacked Egyptian policy in the first place, some Palestinians are putting words in his mouth and accusing Egypt of interfering in Palestinian internal affairs.” Abbas then met (3/20) with al-Sisi in “response to those calling into question” the Palestinians’ relationship with Egypt, according to the PA Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 3/20.

At the same time, Israel and Egypt were cooperating more closely in the ongoing counterinsurgency campaign against the Sinai Province of the Islamic State (SPIS) and other armed groups in the n. Sinai Peninsula, with the IDF presence in Sinai highlighting a deep tension in the Israeli-Egyptian relationship. One mo. after a major bout of cross-border violence (see 2/18–19 in Chronology for details), Israel’s Amb. to Egypt David Govrin made (3/23) an unusual speech at Tel Aviv’s Institute for National Security Studies in which he stated, “The relations between Israel and Egypt rely to too great an extent on the military leg.” He added, “If peace is to forge deep roots, it needs to stand on two feet, the military and the civilian-economic. It is only the combination of the two that will ensure long-term cooperation between the countries.” Govrin criticized Egypt’s view of peace as merely an absence of war rather than a full normalization of relations and cultural exchange with Israel. Egypt’s amb. to Israel, Hazem Khairat, then replied to Govrin’s speech, describing relations between the 2 countries as good and commending in particular Israeli-Egyptian security cooperation in Sinai. A spokesperson from Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded to the ambassadorial exchange, saying (3/23), “Israel attaches supreme importance to its relations with Egypt and is committed to advancing them at every level.”

Relations hit a snag in 4/2017 as cross-border tensions erupted again. On 4/10, the Israeli authorities shut down the Taba border crossing into Egypt over suspicions that SPIS was planning to attack Israeli tourists in Sinai. Hours later, SPIS fighters launched a rocket into Israel that struck a greenhouse in the Eshkol region but caused no serious damage or injuries. Although the Israeli authorities ultimately reopened the Taba crossing on 4/21, the National Security Council’s Counter-Terrorism Bureau warned (4/21), “the threat to Israelis in the Sinai remains serious, concrete, and imminent.”

Also of note: Human Rights Watch (HRW) called (4/13) on the Egyptian govt. to “immediately disclose” whether or not it was detaining 4 Gaza men, all reportedly Hamas affiliates abducted on 8/19/2015 as they traveled by bus from the Rafah border crossing to Cairo (see JPS 45 [3]). “Based on media reports, including photographs purporting to show 2 of the men in a Cairo detention facility, the families believe they are in Egyptian custody,” HRW’s report stated. “If true, their prolonged incommunicado detention, with Egyptian authorities denying knowledge of the detention or refusing to reveal their
whereabouts, would constitute enforced disappearances. Authorities should immediately charge the men if they suspect them of criminal activity, or otherwise release them.”

SYRIA

Israeli interference in the Syrian civil war sparked a minor diplomatic crisis between Moscow and Tel Aviv this quarter. After the Israeli Air Force reportedly carried out air strikes against several Hezbollah positions in s. Syria late at night on 3/16, the Syrian govt. claimed that its forces had fired anti-aircraft missiles at the Israeli jets in response and downed 1 of them. The Israeli govt. said no aircraft was damaged and the IDF later reported that its Arrow anti-missile system had intercepted (3/16) a Syrian missile heading toward Israeli territory. The following day (3/17), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moscow summoned the Israeli amb. for questioning about the incident, which Syria’s permanent rep. to the UN, Bashar Jaafari, described (3/19) as a “clear message” Russian pres. Vladimir Putin was sending to Israel. “The fact is that the Israeli amb. was . . . told categorically that this game is over,” he said, referring to the incident. The next day (3/20), Syrian pres. Bashar al-Asad indicated he was relying on Russia to play “an important role” in preventing a military conflict between Syria and Israel. PM Netanyahu reiterated the Israeli position on 3/21: “If there’s intelligence and operational feasibility, we strike, and we will continue to do so.” Through the rest of the quarter, the status quo held, despite Israeli strikes (4/23) against a pro-govt. militia nr. Qunaytra. The Israelis claimed this was in response to errant projectiles fired into Israel, and that they had struck (4/27) ammunition depots nr. the Damascus airport.

LEBANON

Tensions flared along the Israeli-Lebanese border this quarter, which observers attributed to Lebanese pres. Michel Aoun’s friendly ties with Hezbollah (see JPS 46 [2]). The escalation began late last quarter when Aoun said (2/12) in an interview on Egyptian TV that Hezbollah played a “complementary role to the Lebanese army,” and that “as long as the Lebanese army is not strong enough to battle Israel . . . we feel the need for its existence.” His comments fueled speculation in the Israeli press that the Lebanese army had started coordinating with Hezbollah along the border between the 2 countries. The following week, Israel’s UN amb., Danny Danon, sent a protest letter to UN secy.-gen. António Guterres alleging potential Lebanese violations of UN Security Council Res. 1701, which prohibits Lebanon from fielding militias on the border, including Hezbollah (see Doc. A2 in JPS 36 [1]). Aoun responded (2/18) that “any attempt to hurt Lebanese sovereignty or expose the Lebanese to danger will find the appropriate response.” He denounced Danon’s letter as a “masked attempt to threaten security and stability” in s. Lebanon. Around the same time, Hezbollah secy.-gen. Hassan Nasrallah told (2/16) a rally that Israel’s nuclear weapons facility at Dimona represented a “threat to the entire region,” and that Hezbollah would “turn it into a threat to Israel.” His comments prompted the Israeli govt. to send a back-channel message to Hezbollah threatening to retaliate in response to any aggression (al-Hayat, 2/19). While the rhetoric on both sides intensified at various times during the quarter, there were no serious indications that any of the parties was interested in escalating it to violent confrontation.
While Lebanese and Israeli leaders were rattling their sabers, violence erupted once again in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Fatah security forces and armed mbrs. of local Islamist groups clashed in ‘Ayn al-Hilweh refugee camp (r.c.) on 2/25, leading to 3 injuries and forcing the closure of UNRWA’s schools and health facilities in the area. Although it is not clear what sparked the violence, the clashes coincided with Abbas’s visit to Lebanon and a visit to ‘Ayn al-Hilweh by the wife of exiled Fatah leader Mohammad Dahlan. After a brief cease-fire on 2/26, a bomb detonated outside a call center in ‘Ayn al-Hilweh on 2/27, sparking a fresh round of clashes before the 2 sides reached another truce on 2/28 (2 Palestinians died of injuries sustained in the 2/27 clashes). The heads of various Palestinian factions in Lebanon, including Fatah and Hamas, then met (2/28) at the Palestinian Embassy in Beirut to address the persistent violence plaguing ‘Ayn al-Hilweh (see JPS 46 [3]). They issued a joint statement (3/2) demanding that Islamists wanted by the Lebanese authorities leave the camp, and reiterating their commitment to security and stability in all Palestinian camps across Lebanon. PLO secy. Fathi Abu al-Aradat added (3/2) that the Palestinian leaders had reached an agreement with the Lebanese govt. to form a joint security force to flush out wanted Islamists in ‘Ayn al-Hilweh, and turn them over to the Lebanese authorities.

Calm in the camp held for about 3 weeks before a new round of clashes broke out on 3/23–24. Two Palestinians were killed and 4 were injured in the renewed clashes. A 3d Palestinian died in the camp on 3/24, but Lebanon’s National News Agency reported that his injuries stemmed from an unrelated, personal dispute. When the joint Palestinian force deployed in the camp on 4/7, an Islamist group attacked them, leading to 5 straight days of fighting; at least 10 Palestinians were killed, including 1 child, and more than 50 were injured. By 4/11, the Islamists had reportedly lost control of the perimeter around their base in the al-Tira neighborhood of the r.c. Their leader, Bilal Badr, evaded capture, and although the fighting subsided, his followers remained loyal to him. The joint force increased its numbers from 100 to 150 to regain control of al-Tira, vowing to maintain their presence until Badr was arrested.

The security situation in ‘Ayn al-Hilweh had stabilized by 4/14, according to UNRWA, and the agency was able to resume its services to residents. With Badr at large, however, tensions lingered. His followers threatened to bomb of the joint force’s positions nr. al-Tira on 5/9, and Badr himself was reportedly demanding cash payments—approximately $30,000 up front and $6,000 per mo. after that—to end his campaign (Daily Star, 5/9).

REGIONAL AFFAIRS

The 11/2016 election of U.S. pres. Trump sent shockwaves across the world, and the Middle East was no exception. As Trump took office on 1/20 and began implementing a new foreign policy, the region’s heads of state were still adjusting to the new challenges and possibilities of a Trump-led foreign policy, particularly concerning the growing rift between the Saudi-led Sunni axis and Iran’s growing Shi’ite sphere of influence. By the end of the quarter, several Arab states, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), had prepared a proposal to help facilitate the resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks (Wall Street Journal, 5/15). The proposal outlined a number of steps toward
normalizing relations with Israel in exchange for a freeze in settlement construction outside the major blocs in the oPt, and an ease on trade restrictions in Gaza. “We no longer see Israel as an enemy, but as a potential opportunity,” an Arab official involved in the discussions said. The specific steps being considered reportedly included visas for Israeli athletes and merchants and permits for Israeli aircraft to fly within their airspace. Netanyahu, who had long touted a regional approach to Israeli-Palestinian peace, appeared open to the proposal. On 3/8, he told the Knesset’s Foreign Affairs and Defense Comm. that “shared interests are emerging” between Israel and the Arab states and that the Israeli govt. may be able to normalize relations with them, but only “[if] we act wisely.”

IRAN

Amid shifting regional dynamics, internal Iranian politics fluctuated throughout the quarter. Iranian pres. Hassan Rouhani was in the final year of his 4-year term, and the upcoming presidential elections were seen as a referendum on his reformist platform, including the 7/14/2015 nuclear deal reached with the P5+1. The new and more hostile U.S. admin. threatened to undermine Rouhani’s achievements and bolster his conservative rivals ahead of the 5/19 election.

At the height of campaign season in Iran, the U.S. imposed (3/24) new sanctions on 11 companies and individuals from China, North Korea, and the UAE for transferring technology to Iran that could allegedly be used to help its missile program. Rouhani responded in kind, imposing sanctions on 15 U.S. companies for alleged human rights violations and for cooperating with Israel, according to Iran’s state news agency IRNA on 3/26. A mo. later, the Trump admin. demonstrated a new willingness to abide by the nuclear deal, rather than undo it immediately, as Trump had promised on the campaign trail in 2016. In a letter addressed to Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, U.S. secy. of state Tillerson confirmed (4/18) that Iran was compliant with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). However, Tillerson also expressed the Trump admin.’s concerns about Iran’s alleged sponsorship of terrorism, and indicated that the U.S. pres. had directed an “inter-agency” review of the deal to “evaluate whether suspension of sanctions . . . pursuant to the [deal] is vital to the national security interests of the U.S.” Trump claimed (4/20) that Iran was not adhering to the “spirit” of the deal: “I can tell you that, and we’re analyzing it very, very carefully, and we’ll have something to say about it in the not too distant future.”

As the quarter came to a close, the Trump admin. had nothing more to say about the nuclear deal, and Rouhani was poised to win the presidential race. On 5/15, fellow reformist and chief opponent of Rouhani, Mostafa Hashemitaba, endorsed the Iranian president’s candidacy, pledging to “vote for the current president to help [extend] this govt.’s constructive approach” (IRNA, 5/15).

INTERNATIONAL

UNITED STATES

The foreign policy community in Washington, both in and out of govt., struggled with the persistent uncertainty surrounding the new U.S. pres.’s plans this quarter. Trump’s vision in the realm of international relations remained unclear, especially with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian arena. Trump delayed or rolled back several key campaign promises
Trump’s willingness to break his campaign promises and to overturn other long-standing principles of U.S. policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (such as the 2-state solution) posed new challenges to the traditional power structures underpinning the peace process and the bipartisan pro-Israel consensus in Washington.

Trump’s 12/15 nomination of David Friedman as U.S. ambassador to Israel, and his support for Israel’s settlement enterprise in particular, proved to be a partisan wedge issue. Friedman, who called the 2-state solution an “illusion” in an Arutz Sheva op-ed on 2/8/2016, reversed his stance in his hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Comm. on 2/16. He said a 2-state solution was the “most ideal” option and the “best possibility for peace in the region,” and that he would support a “peace deal that included Beit El [settlement],” despite his widely known fiscal and political support for that settlement (see JPS 46 [3]).

Notwithstanding such pronouncements, Friedman’s connections to Israel’s settlement enterprise dogged his nomination. The comm.’s ranking Democrat, Ben Cardin (MD), reminded (2/16) the comm. of Friedman’s comments on anti-settlement groups in the U.S.—he once compared left-wing U.S. Jewish groups to “kapos,” referring to the Jews who had collaborated with the Nazis during the Holocaust. Later, U.S. sen. and former presidential candidate Bernie Sanders (I-VT) sent a letter to Friedman (3/1) asking for clarification on his support for a 2-state solution, his position on Israel’s settlements, and his views on U.S. aid to Israel. Amid the debate over Friedman’s ties to the settlements, Haaretz reported (3/7) that they were deeper than previously known. In addition to his leadership role in a group that raised money for Beit El, Friedman had reportedly made several donations to Ateret Cohanim, the far-right messianic organization heavily involved in settlement activity to Judaize East Jerusalem. In the end, the Foreign Relations Comm. approved (3/9) Friedman’s nomination in a 12–9 vote, with only Robert Menendez (D-NJ) breaking party lines. The full senate followed suit on 3/23, with only Joe Manchin (D-WV) joining Menendez in voting with the Republicans.

The bipartisan consensus largely held on issues unrelated to Israel’s settlements; however, there were indications that PM Netanyahu’s personal conduct was threatening the fragile consensus. On 3/28, Haaretz reported that at least 5 senior officials at major U.S.-Jewish organizations had relayed their fears to the Israeli govt. that Netanyahu’s warm embrace of Trump was putting Democrats and left-leaning U.S.-Jewish groups in a difficult position. “Close cooperation between Israel and the Trump admin. on security and diplomatic issues is a good thing,” said one of the officials, “but when the PM seems like he is literally hugging Trump and tweets praise for his plan to build a wall on the border with Mexico, that goes beyond diplomatic relationships and becomes political.” Another official noted that the Israeli govt. might not be sympathetic to such fears, and that his Israeli interlocutors responded to his concerns with “a silent nod that expressed understanding, but not agreement.”

Meanwhile, Rep. DeSantis (R-FL) and Bill Johnson (R-OH) launched (4/27) the Congressional Israel Victory Caucus to promote pro-Israel policies in Congress but they failed to bring a single Democrat on as amb. Within the Democratic party, Minnesota rep. Keith Ellison’s bid to lead the Democratic
National Comm. presented a challenge to the party’s traditional support for Israel, drawing complaints from pro-Israel megadonors and a wave of enthusiasm from Palestinian solidarity activists last quarter (see JPS 46 [3]). Ellison ultimately lost (2/25) the race to former labor secy. Tom Perez. In his 1st official motion as chair, however, Perez appointed (2/25) Ellison dep. chair, signaling a willingness to work with a colleague deeply critical of Israel’s human rights record.

**Aid to the Palestinians**

In the final hours before Trump took office on 1/20, the Obama admin. released $221 m. in previously frozen aid to the PA. When the news broke on 1/24, the Trump admin. promptly refroze the aid. This quarter, however, they released the money, redirecting it to humanitarian organizations working in the oPt, according to a State Dept. spokesperson on 3/9.

Around the same time that the Trump admin. was deciding what to do with that $221 m., it was formulating its 1st federal budget proposal. On 3/15, it unveiled a document titled “America First: A Budget Blueprint to Make America Great Again,” which outlined large cuts to the Environmental Protection Agency and the State Dept., and increases for the Dept. of Defense. The budget blueprint did not provide many details on funding for programs related to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. A mo. later, *Foreign Policy* reported (4/24) on a leaked 15-page State Dept. document that laid out the Trump admin.’s intentions on a more granular level. Beginning in fiscal year 2018, the admin. reportedly planned to overhaul U.S. foreign aid, cutting economic aid to Egypt by 47.7%, and to Jordan by 21%, and a simultaneous increase of 4.6% to the West Bank and Gaza, totaling approximately $215 m. per year.

**Legislative Crackdown on BDS**

Outside of Washington, the legislative campaign to stymie the growing Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement at the state and local levels made steady gains this quarter. New measures were introduced in 10 state legislatures this quarter barring public employee retirement funds from investing in companies that boycott Israel or barring states from contracting with such companies (AR, IL, KS, ME, MN, MT, NY, NC, OR, and TX). These measures passed into law in Texas (5/2) and Arkansas (3/29). Furthermore, Texas agriculture comm. Sid Miller visited (3/23) the Itamar settlement in the West Bank and announced the revival of a dormant exchange program between Israel and Texas for joint energy, trade, and agriculture projects, which Miller’s predecessor had allowed to lapse. “Israel and Texas share a deep bond based on the values of freedom, democracy, and the love of our land,” Miller said. “Increasing our economic cooperation will be good for the people of Texas and the people of Israel.” He also said it was time “the world recognizes that Judea and Samaria are legitimate” and a “mainstream part of the economy and the govt. of Israel.”

Although less successful in passing legislation, the BDS movement’s opponents in the U.S. Congress were also active this quarter. Sen. Cardin (D-MD) and Rep. Pete Roskam (R-IL) introduced the Israel Anti-Boycott Act on 3/23 in the Senate and House, respectively (see S. 720 and H.R. 1697 of 3/23/2017 at congressionalmonitor.org for details). The measure opposed the UNHRC’s 3/24/2016 creation of a database of Israeli settlement companies and any efforts to boycott those companies, and required the Export-Import Bank to consider BDS when reviewing potential credit applications. Both versions of
the bill were referred to comm. and proceeded no further.

**Anti-Semitism Crisis**

In the wake of Trump’s election, a wave of more than 100 bomb threats targeting Jewish institutions across the world and desecrations of Jewish cemeteries across the U.S. sparked a minor diplomatic controversy and serious speculation about rising anti-Semitism. The controversy started when Israeli opposition leader Herzog called (2/27) on Netanyahu to prepare Israel for a massive wave of migrants fleeing anti-Semitism in the U.S. After some interpreted his comments as an attack on Trump, Herzog clarified (3/1) his statement at a Jewish People Policy Institute conference in Jerusalem, explaining that the wave of threats and attacks were a “red alert” that the Trump admin. “must deal with” and that “we should not feel guilty about it.” The following week, Trump called (3/6) Netanyahu to discuss the matter.

In a surprising turn of events, the Israeli police arrested (3/23) an Israeli-American youth nr. Ashqelon. The 18-year-old was allegedly the primary source of the bomb threats, which undermined the view that anti-Semitism was on the rise and widespread. Later, Israel’s Ministry of Justice rejected a U.S. request to extradite the youth, likely because of the international nature of his crimes, according to a 4/23 report on Israel’s Channel 2. Israel and the U.S. generally maintain robust extradition protocols, and it was deemed unusual for Israel to deny the request. By the end of the quarter, it was unclear if the Trump admin. would press for the young man’s extradition.

**EUROPEAN UNION**

Marking the latest EU-Israeli conflict over Israeli demolitions of Palestinian property, the EU’s Amb. to Israel Lars Faaborg-Andersen had a reportedly tense meeting with the new dir.-gen. of Israel’s Foreign Ministry, Yuval Rotem, in late 3/2017. “Immediately after the meeting began, Faaborg-Andersen announced that he was taking advantage of [it] to deliver a message that had been approved by the EU’s security and diplomacy commission, on which all 28 mbr. states are represented” (*Haaretz*, 4/4). The document described Israel as an “occupying power” and demanded an end to Israeli demolitions in Area C of the West Bank (see “Demolitions and Displacement” above), especially in the Bedouin community of Khan al-Ahmar, where Israeli forces issued more than 40 demolition orders on 2/19 (see Chronology for details). “The practice of enforcement measures such as forced transfers, evictions, demolitions, and confiscations of homes and humanitarian assets (including EU-funded), and the obstruction of delivery of humanitarian assistance are contrary to Israel’s obligations under international law, including in particular provisions of the 4th Geneva Convention . . . and cause suffering to ordinary Palestinians,” the document read. After news reports of the meeting surfaced, Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the EU’s dep. amb. for clarification and a ministry spokesperson reaffirmed that “in Israel, illegal construction is dealt with according to the law.”

**UNITED KINGDOM**

On 4/3, PA pres. Abbas called on the UK govt. to offer incoming Palestinian rep. Maen Areikat the same diplomatic status as his predecessor, Manuel Hassassian. “We asked the British govt. to deal with the new representative in the same way it dealt with the outgoing one,” he said. “They should not
change that, lest it be understood as a malicious act.” Since 2011, the Palestinian office in London has been an official diplomatic mission. The British govt. did not respond to Abbas’s request.

The apparent downgrade in the Palestinians’ status in the UK came amid rising tensions surrounding the 100-year anniversary of the 11/1917 Balfour Declaration. PA FM Riyad al-Maliki previously threatened legal action against Britain should it proceed with planned celebrations (see JPS 46 [1]). This quarter, Abbas reiterated (4/3) that threat, and more than 13,000 UK citizens signed onto a petition calling on the UK govt. to “openly apologize to the Palestinian people.” The UK govt. is required to respond to all petitions garnering more than 10,000 signatures, and the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) did so on 4/25. “The Balfour Declaration is an historic statement for which [the British govt.] does not intend to apologize,” the FCO said. “We are proud of our role in creating the State of Israel.”

RUSSIA

After briefly partaking in the international effort to facilitate a new round of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks in late 2016 (see JPS 46 [2]), Russia was largely absent from the Israeli-Palestinian arena this quarter. An exception to this was a statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 4/6 clarifying its position on one of the major final-status issues to be resolved in any negotiations. In a statement condemning Israel’s plans to build a new settlement in the West Bank, as announced on 3/30 (see “The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict” above), the Russian Foreign Ministry said, “We reaffirm our commitment to the UN-approved principles for a Palestinian-Israeli settlement, which include the status of East Jerusalem as the capital of the future Palestinian state. At the same time, we must state that in this context we view West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.” Previous Russian statements had indicated that East Jerusalem should be the capital of any future Palestinian state and neglected to mention the status of West Jerusalem.

CHINA

The Israeli cabinet approved (4/23) a major 1/2017 deal with China to provide 6,000 laborers to fill an unmet demand for construction workers in Israel. While the agreement was largely irrelevant to Palestinian affairs or the wider Arab-Israeli conflict, one provision stipulated that no Chinese worker was to be employed in Israel’s West Bank or East Jerusalem settlements. The Chinese govt.’s official reason for requesting the provision was worker safety, but several Israeli officials acknowledged (4/23) that it stemmed from political concerns. Furthermore, when the outline of the deal was announced in 1/2017, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson responded (1/5) to a question about potential political implications by saying, “China’s position on the Palestine-Israel issue is consistent, clear, and unchanged. We oppose building Jewish settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem and [the] West Bank.”

UNITED NATIONS

Emboldened by the new U.S. admin.’s pro-Israel rhetoric, the Israeli govt. ramped up its efforts to counter allegedly anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic programs at the UN this quarter. Their efforts yielded a range of results, and together served to further alienate Israel in the international community.
Despite intense Israeli lobbying, the UNHRC approved 4 resolutions with large majorities during its 3/24 session on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict: the 1st urged mbr. states to avoid ties with Israel’s settlements in the oPt; the 2d reaffirmed the Palestinians’ right to self-determination; the 3d concerned human rights in the oPt; and the 4th condemned Israel for violating the human rights of Druze residents of the Golan Heights. In response, Israel’s amb. to UN institutions in Geneva, Aviva Raz Shechter, said (3/24) that Israel rejected all 4 resolutions, and Netanyahu ordered a $2 m. cut to Israel’s annual funding of the UN. A Foreign Ministry spokesperson said (3/29) that the money would be redirected to support development programs in countries that support Israel in international forums. Last quarter, Netanyahu had reduced Israel’s annual UN contribution by $6 m. in response to the passage of Security Council Res. 2334 on 12/23/2016 (see JPS 46 [3]). The retaliatory cuts left Israel’s projected 2017 UN contribution at $3.7 m., approximately a quarter of the $11.7 m. Israel disbursed in 2016.

The UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) also passed (5/2) a resolution critical of Israel’s conduct this quarter. In the face of yet another Israeli diplomatic campaign, the UNESCO resolution, titled “Occupied Palestine,” reiterated the agency’s call to Israel to cease the “persistent excavations, tunneling, works and projects in East Jerusalem, particularly in and around the Old City”; to end its blockade of Gaza; and to lift its limitations on Palestinian movement and access to al-Ibrahimi Mosque in c. Hebron. Israel’s lobbying efforts were not entirely unsuccessful. Ahead of the 5/2 vote, Italy announced it would be voting “no,” marking a shift from its abstention on a similar UNESCO resolution in 4/2016 (see JPS 45 [4]). Also, Trump reportedly ordered U.S. ambassadors in UNESCO mbr. states to lobby against the res. (Times of Israel, 4/24). The res. ultimately passed 22–10, with 23 abstentions (the 4/2016 res. passed 33–6, with 17 abstentions). Before UNESCO’s executive board ratified (5/5) the res., Netanyahu ordered another retaliatory cut in Israeli funding to the UN, this time totaling $1 m.

A similar controversy broke out over a 3/15 report published by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA). The report, titled “Israeli Practices towards the Palestinian People and the Question of Apartheid,” concluded that Israel had “succeeded over the past decades in imposing and maintaining an apartheid regime that works on two levels,” according to a UNESCWA press release on 3/15. “First, the political and geographic fragmentation of the Palestinian people, which enfeebles their capacity for resistance and makes it almost impossible for them to change the reality on the ground. Second, the oppression of all Palestinians through an array of laws, policies, and practices that ensure their domination by a racial group and serve to maintain the regime.” It was the first time a UN agency had used the term “apartheid” to describe Israel’s policies toward the Palestinians, and it drew immediate criticism from both the Trump admin. and the Israeli govt. Under pressure, UN secy.-gen. Guterres pressured UNESCWA’s Exec. Secy., Rima Khalaf, to either rescind the report or resign. Following her resignation, the report was removed from UNESCWA’s website (see the full report at www.palestine-studies.org).

Finally, UNRWA announced (2/26) that it had suspended the chair of its employees’ union, Suhail al-Hindi, following Israeli
complaints that al-Hindi had been elected to a leadership position in Hamas. “We have seen the latest communication from the Israeli authorities,” an UNRWA spokesperson said (2/26). “Before that communication, and in light of our ongoing independent internal investigation, we had been presented with substantial information from a number of sources which led us to take the decision this afternoon to suspend Suhail al-Hindi, pending the outcome of our investigation.” Al-Hindi denied any link to Hamas, but UNRWA parted ways with him regardless. A spokesperson confirmed (4/22) that al-Hindi no longer worked for the agency.

Also of note: the PA’s Ministry of Education and Higher Education suspended (4/13) ties with UNRWA over rumored changes to the textbooks used at the agency’s schools in the oPt. According to reports in the Palestinian press, the proposed changes included maps updated to exclude references to Palestinian cities inside Israel as Palestinian, and other revisions made to decrease hostility toward Israel. “UNRWA schools follow the curriculum of the host authority,” responded (4/13) UNRWA spokesperson Chris Gunness. “It is UNRWA policy to review, and where appropriate, to enrich, the official PA textbooks, curricula, and other learning materials used in UNRWA schools to ensure compliance with UN values and principles,” he added. The PA Education Ministry, for its part, said (4/13), “Any change to any letter [of the Palestinian curriculum] to appease any party is a betrayal of the Palestinian narrative and the right of the Palestinian people under occupation to preserve its identity and struggle.” PA PM Hamdallah met (4/17) with UNRWA comm.-gen. Pierre Krähenbühl to discuss the controversy. Krähenbühl “addressed recent public misrepresentations of the matter” and, according to an UNRWA statement released after the meeting, he reaffirmed UNRWA’s practice of reviewing new textbooks in host countries to “ensure consistency with UN values and international agreements.” Although Hamdallah and Krähenbühl reportedly agreed to a follow-up meeting, there were no further developments through the end of the quarter.

DONORS

The Ad Hoc Liaison Comm. (AHLC), the chief policy-level coordination mechanism for development assistance to the Palestinians, met on 5/4 in Brussels, under the chairmanship of Norwegian FM Børge Brende. Attendees considered reports from UN special coordinator Mladenov, the World Bank, the PA, and the IMF. Breaking from the standard practice at past meetings of the AHLC, the minutes were not made public, causing uncertainty around the attendees’ discussions and conclusions. It is worth noting that this was the 1st AHLC meeting in which a rep. of the Trump admin. participated. U.S. special representative for international negotiations Greenblatt told the group that the Trump admin. wanted to “see meaningful progress” on the Palestinian economy. “The U.S., the international community, and the parties should work together to finalize measures which improve the lives of ordinary Palestinians,” he stated. Greenblatt also held Hamas responsible for the electricity crisis in Gaza and said that it “must allow” the PA to resume control of Gaza (see "Gaza Electricity Crisis" and "Intra-Palestinian Dynamics" above).

The international community maintained their funding to the PA and Palestinians in the oPt this quarter. Germany agreed (3/6) to
donate €18 m. (approx. $20 m.) to support PA programs meant to improve local services and to develop municipalities in the West Bank and Gaza. Japan transferred (4/25) $8 m. to the PA in budget support via the World Bank. The EU announced (4/11) a €11.75 m. (approx. $13.2 m.) grant to the PA, to fund social welfare allowances to 71,500 impoverished Palestinian families. Saudi Arabia donated $80 m. to help rebuild homes destroyed during Israel’s summer 2014 assault on Gaza, according to the PA on 3/23 ($40 m. of this was to be disbursed via UNRWA; see below). Finally, the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS) announced (4/18) that Japan had contributed $905,650 to support its efforts protecting civilians and supporting reconstruction in Gaza (Japan previously gave UNMAS $3 m. in 2015 and $500,000 in 2016 to support activities in Gaza).

In addition, UNRWA as the agency in charge of providing health, education, and other social services to Palestinian refugees announced $126.35 m. worth of new donations from Japan (2/24), Liechtenstein (3/1), the European Commission for Humanitarian Operations (3/8), Saudi Arabia (3/23), the Islamic Development Bank (3/23), the EU (3/30), Russia (5/9), and South Korea (5/12), up from a total of $119.627 m. last quarter. The bulk of the funds, some $80 m., were designated for reconstruction efforts in Gaza.

GAZA AID SCANDAL

Beersheba Dist. Court judge Nasser Abu Taha advised (3/28) Mohammed El Halabi, a former employee of the Christian aid charity World Vision in Gaza, on trial for allegedly diverting funds to Hamas, that he had “little chance” of being acquitted and urged him to take the plea deal he had rejected last quarter (see JPS 46 [3]). Israeli forces had arrested El Halabi on 8/4/2016 and accused him of stealing $43 m. in international aid. As the Israeli legal proceedings continued, Australia’s Dept. of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) announced (3/21) that its review of the Israeli allegations “uncovered nothing to suggest any diversion of govt. funds.” Australia donated m. of dollars to World Vision during the period concerned, and suspended its aid following his arrest. The DFAT also said that Australian support to World Vision would remain suspended at least until the conclusion of the trial.

In a related development, Israel’s Shin Bet accused (3/21) 2 more Gazan aid workers—Muhammad Murtaj, the manager of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency’s Gaza branch, and Mehmet Kaya, the Gaza rep. of the Turkish NGO Humanitarian Relief Foundation, also known as the IHH—of diverting “millions of shekels” in international aid to Hamas. Israeli forces arrested Murtaj in 2/2017, but Kaya had not been arrested at the time of the Shin Bet’s announcement.

BOYCOTT, DIVESTMENT, AND SANCTIONS

Over 170 Palestinian civil society groups launched the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (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.”

BOYCOTT

One major organization threw its weight behind the movement to boycott Israel this quarter. Representing almost 1 m. workers, the Norwegian Confederation of Trade
Unions (Landsorganisasjonen i Norge, LO) endorsed a full economic, cultural, and academic boycott of Israel on 5/12. The Palestinian BDS National Comm. welcomed (5/13) the move and called on the LO to “apply pressure on the Norwegian govt. to end all its military ties with Israel’s regime of oppression and to divest its sovereign fund from all companies that are complicit in Israel’s occupation and illegal settlement enterprise.” The LO’s endorsement was not the only indication of rising support for the BDS movement in Europe. On 4/19, Barcelona’s city council passed a declaration upholding the rights of citizens to boycott Israel, condemning Israel’s occupation of Palestinian lands, and calling for an end to the blockade of Gaza. In doing so, Barcelona joined the more than 50 Spanish municipalities that have backed BDS since 2014 (Electronic Intifada, 4/20). Elsewhere, the Belgian municipality of Sint-Jans-Molenbeek, 1 of 19 in the Brussels area, adopted (4/26) a motion to boycott companies and other institutions complicit in the Israeli occupation. In Italy, the Univ. of Turin’s student council passed (3/1) a motion calling for the annulment of agreements between the university and Technion–Israel Institute of Technology, due to Technion’s collaboration with the IDF.

Also of note: the U.S. literary organization PEN America stopped accepting donor support from the Israeli govt., according to the U.S. activist group Adalah-NY on 2/23. The move came mos. after more than 240 writers and publishers called on PEN to end its relationship with the Israeli govt. surrounding the nonprofit’s annual World Voices Festival in 2016. The Israeli govt. provided funding for the festival in 4 of the previous 5 years.

DIVESTMENT

U.S. universities remained a hotbed of divestment-related activity this quarter. On 3/15, the student senate at De Anza College, a community college in Cupertino, CA, passed a res. calling on the school’s board of trustees to pull investments from Hewlett Packard Enterprise (HPE), Motorola Solutions, Caterpillar, and G4S due to their complicit roles in Israeli abuses of Palestinian human rights. With their successful resolution, the student activists at De Anza added to similar accomplishments by their peers at 7 of the 9 Univ. of California campuses, nearby San Jose State Univ., Stanford Univ., and the Univ. of Chicago. Later, the undergraduate student senate at Tufts Univ. passed (4/9) a similar res., targeting HPE, G4S, Elbit Systems, and Northrop Grumman.