



Update on Conflict and Diplomacy

16 FEBRUARY–15 MAY 2018

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This update is a summary of bilateral, multilateral, regional, and international events affecting the Palestinians and Israel. More than one hundred 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: After an unrelated fracas involving a senior aide to U.S. president Donald Trump brought to light the fact that several of his key advisors lacked permanent top-secret security clearances, chief of staff John Kelly rescinds the interim clearance of a number of people, including Trump's son-in-law and senior advisor Jared Kushner. Trump's peace initiative remains at a standstill as U.S. and Israeli officials prepare for the opening of the new U.S. embassy in Jerusalem on 5/14. The Israelis welcome the move but focus largely on issues unrelated to the Palestinians, including the ongoing investigation into corruption allegations against Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. An assassination attempt on Palestinian Authority (PA) prime minister Rami Hamdallah further complicates the already stalled Palestinian national reconciliation process. With conditions in Gaza approaching the brink of catastrophe, and the seventieth anniversary of the Nakba looming, Palestinians in the territory embark on a mass protest movement dubbed the Great March of Return. The Israeli army cracks down on the protesters in the worst assault since Operation Protective Edge (OPE), Israel's fifty-day war on Gaza in the summer of 2014.

THE PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI CONFLICT

After recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital and pledging to move the U.S. embassy there last quarter (see *JPS* 47 [3]), U.S. president Trump turned his attention away from his yet-to-be-seen peace initiative, focusing instead on the inauguration of the Jerusalem embassy in time for Israel's seventieth commemoration of

its establishment. Developments this quarter were driven by two signal events—the U.S.-Israeli effort to get the new U.S. embassy open in Jerusalem and a mass protest movement in Gaza calling for the right of return of Palestinian refugees to their homes—that reached their culminating point on 5/14 (see Chronology). The Israelis, for their part, welcomed the embassy move and appeared

content with a lack of progress on the U.S. peace initiative, focusing instead on internal politics and the abiding preoccupation with Iran's regional influence (see "Syria," "Lebanon," and "Iran" below). The Palestinian leadership, meanwhile, continued to ignore the U.S. peace initiative and cautiously explored a peace effort of their own.

THE TRUMP INITIATIVE

In the immediate aftermath of Trump's 12/6/2017 recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and his decision to cut U.S. support for UNRWA (UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) in early 1/2018 (see "Donors" below), the Palestinian leadership reacted in some disarray. They boycotted meetings with U.S. officials, explored new initiatives to gain recognition in international forums, and reached out to other countries in search of a new mediator or mediators for hypothetical future peace talks. As the quarter opened, they appeared to have settled on a more deliberate strategy.

According to a PA spokesman on 2/17, the Palestinians were embarking on a new phase in the struggle for liberation, with Jerusalem a key arena in the struggle, especially the Islamic and Christian holy places. Those comments were foregrounded to PA president Mahmoud Abbas's speech to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on 2/20, during which he reaffirmed (2/20) this new Jerusalem-centric framing of the conflict and laid out a new peace initiative. "We call for an international peace conference by the middle of 2018" to produce a "multilateral international mechanism" that can facilitate a resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, he said. Abbas urged Israel to suspend settlement growth and the United States to freeze the planned move of its embassy

to Jerusalem. In addition, he called for the implementation of the Arab Peace Initiative and for Palestine to be accepted as a full member of the UN (API; for the peace initiative, see Doc. B1 in *JPS* 31 [4]).

Although the Palestinians campaigned for Abbas's new peace plan throughout the quarter, they failed to gather much traction as all eyes were on Washington. The Trump administration was "finalizing" its own, long-gestating plan, which U.S. special representative for international negotiations Jason Greenblatt and Trump senior advisor and son-in-law Jared Kushner presented to the UNSC on the same day as the Abbas speech.

Trump himself focused more on moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem than the details of the plan. Then-secretary of state Rex Tillerson initially estimated (12/8/2017) that the process would take years, so it came as a surprise to many when the State Department announced (2/23) that the new embassy was set to open in 5/2018. Their plan, as reported, was to formally designate an existing consular office in Jerusalem's Arnona neighborhood as the new embassy and to slowly expand the facility while running most diplomatic affairs out of the old embassy building in Tel Aviv. A week after making the announcement, Trump sent a delegation of U.S. officials to Israel to get the process started and to negotiate any bureaucratic hurdles in Israel.

While Israel's leaders were celebrating the announcement and clearing those hurdles as fast as possible, the Associated Press reported (2/23) that the Trump administration was considering a recent offer from Republican megadonor and casino magnate Sheldon Adelson to pay for at least part of the new U.S. embassy in Jerusalem. While Adelson is a well-known backer of both U.S. pro-Israel groups and Israeli right-wing ones, for a private citizen

to offer to independently fund a government initiative was highly unusual. There were no further reports about Adelson's offer but its existence demonstrated the amount of pressure from influential and highly motivated pro-Israel backers on the Trump administration.

The 2/23 State Department announcement and the enthusiastic Israeli response further alienated the Palestinians. Saeb Erakat, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) secretary-general, responded on that day saying that the actions of the U.S. had destroyed the two-state solution. The PA Ministry of Foreign Affairs called (2/24) the announcement a "direct aggression" against the Palestinian people and a "reward" for Israel. Abbas, who had just returned to the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) after a reportedly routine medical checkup at a hospital in the United States, took a different tack. In a speech to the Fatah Revolutionary Council on 3/1, the eighty-two-year-old president discussed the Trump administration's efforts in the context of his own age and declining health. According to Fatah officials in attendance, Abbas said, "[The United States] can announce [their plan] whenever and wherever they want, but nothing will happen against our will."

In the meantime, unconfirmed reports about the contents of the Trump administration's plan prompted the Palestinians to take indirect action to counter it. On 2/28, *Asharq al-Awsat*, the pan-Arab newspaper based in London, cited "knowledgeable Arab diplomatic sources" as saying that the plan included a call for the international community to recognize a demilitarized state of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital and only limited sovereignty over borders not based on the pre-1967 armistice lines. A few days later, Erakat circulated a paper among the Fatah Revolutionary Council, titled "Dictates of

President Trump for the New Phase: Imposing a Solution, June 2017–March 2018." He purported to outline some of the plan's main points—a Palestinian capital in one of the suburbs of East Jerusalem, believed to be Abu Dis; U.S. recognition of Israeli annexation of up to 15 percent of the West Bank; and the establishment of a demilitarized Palestinian state. PA foreign minister Riyad al-Maliki disclosed (2/28) that the Palestinians were urging the European Union (EU) to lobby for changes to the Trump plan. Then, on 3/4, another senior official said the PA was relying on a counterreaction from Europe, via a "preliminary statement for a plan not based on a two-state solution outlined by the 1967 borders. 'The idea is that Europe will make it clear to the U.S. and Israel that you can't present a plan that fully adopts Netanyahu's stance and portray the Palestinians as rejectionists, so we're urging Europe to take swift action,'" the official indicated (*Haaretz*, 3/4). According to that same official, the Israelis were pushing for that exact outcome. He said that they assumed that the Palestinian leadership would reject such a plan, allowing Netanyahu to claim it was the Palestinians who walked away from negotiations. "We know Netanyahu is in distress, and he may call early elections due to Israel's internal crisis," the official added, referring to the Israeli police's ongoing investigation into corruption charges against the prime minister. "Therefore, it's important that the diplomatic arena, especially relating to the Palestinians, not be on the agenda today, and that the Palestinians and [Abbas] be depicted as rejectionists."

In the absence of any official announcements from Washington, one senior Palestinian official speculated (3/17) that the Trump administration was waiting for a new Palestinian leader to replace Abbas before

publishing the plan. A senior U.S. diplomatic official later said that Trump planned to publish the plan after the new embassy opened in Jerusalem (Al-Monitor, 3/25). Rumors and speculation continued throughout the rest of the quarter, but they were overshadowed by inconsequential exchanges of epithets between Abbas and U.S. ambassador to Israel David Friedman; the Palestinians' move to file (3/24) requests for admission to eight international treaties and conventions, including the International Convention against Apartheid in Sports (Channel 2 [Israel], 3/24); and later a massive grassroots protest movement in Gaza that led to the most deadly bout of violence in the oPt since Operation Protective Edge, Israel's fifty-day war on Gaza in the summer of 2014 (see *JPS* 44 [4]).

International Support for Trump's Jerusalem Policy

Although the vast majority of the international community opposed Trump's decision to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem and recognize the city as Israel's capital, there was a small minority eager to align with the new U.S. president and his departure from the decades-old consensus on so-called final status issues. Guatemala's President Jimmy Morales was the first to follow Trump's lead, announcing last quarter that he intended to move his country's embassy to Jerusalem (see *JPS* 47 [3]). At the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) conference on 3/4, Morales said that the Guatemalan embassy would open in Jerusalem two days after the U.S. one. "This decision strongly evidences Guatemala's continued support of Israel," he said. "And we are sure that many other countries will follow in our steps." A week after Morales's speech, a senior Israeli diplomat said (3/12) that both Honduras and Paraguay

were ready "in principle" to move their embassies (Paraguay's Foreign Ministry confirmed their embassy-move plans on 5/9). Also, Canada's Conservative Party announced (2/26) that they planned to move the Canadian embassy in Israel to Jerusalem the next time they were in power.

The series of announcements drew mixed responses from Ramallah. Some Palestinian officials said (3/9) that Abbas was not doing enough to convince foreign governments not to move their embassies. Others, including al-Maliki, blamed the Arab states for squandering their influence on this issue.

The conflict over Jerusalem was particularly divisive in Europe, where some EU members were eager to buck the bloc's policy on Jerusalem. Czech Republic president Miloš Zeman lauded Trump's announcement on 12/7/2017 and indicated that he would like to move the Czech embassy. After several months of internal negotiations, the Czech Foreign Ministry released (4/25) a statement reaffirming Czech adherence to the EU's position on Jerusalem, but also announcing plans to open an honorary consulate and cultural center in West Jerusalem by the end of 2018. "This step in no way prejudices the final agreement concerning Jerusalem," the statement read. "The Czech Republic fully respects common policy of the EU, which considers Jerusalem as the future capital of both the State of Israel and the future State of Palestine."

The issue was perhaps most divisive in Romania, where it exacerbated tensions between President Klaus Iohannis and Prime Minister Viorica Dăncilă. In mid-4/2018, Israel's Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely led a delegation to Bucharest to lobby in favor of moving the Romanian embassy to Jerusalem. Her trip was apparently productive, because Dăncilă submitted a draft resolution to her

cabinet ordering the move on 4/19. However, as the order needed the president's signature, and Dăncilă had not consulted Iohannis before submitting the resolution, on 4/20, the president said that he would not allow the embassy move to go forward until the Israelis and Palestinians had reached a comprehensive peace agreement. A week later, he called (4/27) for Dăncilă's resignation.

Settlement Growth in the Trump Era

Bolstered by the break from decades of anti-settlement policy and rhetoric in Washington, Israeli settlers and their allies embraced Trump. When prominent settler leader Yaakov Katz released a new report on settlement growth in 2017, he stated (2/19) that he was thankful "God . . . sent Trump to be president of the United States." According to Katz's "West Bank Jewish Population Stats" report, the number of settlers in the West Bank grew by 3.4 percent between 1/1/2017 and 1/1/2018, at almost double the pace of Israel's overall population growth. "This is the first time, after years, that we are surrounded by people who really like us, love us, and they are not trying to be objective," he said.

As had been the case since Trump's inauguration in 1/2017, however, Netanyahu was wary of provoking the United States and being seen as obstructing the Trump administration's peace efforts. Throughout the quarter, he struggled to restrain the settlers and their allies without compromising his ruling coalition, which was increasingly fragile amid the ongoing probe into corruption charges against him and other unrelated disagreements.

The most significant challenge to the Israeli cabinet came in the immediate aftermath of the Israel Police's 2/13 claim that there was "sufficient evidence" to indict Netanyahu.

As the implications of that claim were being debated in the halls of government and in the press, there was less than a month remaining before the High Court of Justice-mandated deadline for the demolition of the illegal settlement outpost of Netiv Ha'avot on 3/6. Similar demolition orders had sparked controversies within the coalition in recent years (see *JPS* 46 [2] and [3] for details on the most recent, surrounding the former Amona outpost), and Netanyahu was eager to find a compromise before the situation escalated out of his control. On 2/19, *Haaretz* reported that senior coalition leaders were working to secure at least NIS 20 million (approximately \$5.7 million) in compensation for the fifteen families slated to lose their homes. Education Minister Naftali Bennett and Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked (both Jewish Home Party) met with the families on 2/18 and promised to propose a three-month delay to give them time to secure alternative housing. After the meeting, however, the families set up a protest tent outside Netanyahu's residence and released a joint statement in which they said, "We are no longer satisfied with promises, and will not rest until we see actions on the ground." In addition to an indefinite delay to the demolition of their homes, they demanded the construction of 350 new housing units in the nearby Gush Etzion settlement bloc.

The government ultimately acquiesced to the settlers' demands. The Defense Ministry petitioned (2/20) for a three-month delay, which the High Court approved on 2/28, and Netanyahu's cabinet authorized (2/25) a NIS 60 million (approximately \$17 million) budget to fund the evacuation and temporary relocation of the Netiv Ha'avot residents, including NIS 24 million in direct compensation for the homes that they had built illegally and NIS 29 million for the

construction of the 350 new units the families were calling for as replacements. On 2/25 Netanyahu pledged that for every settler home dismantled as a result of a court ruling, a “community will be established in accordance with the law that they will not be able to move.”

However, at the same cabinet meeting where Netanyahu gave that full-throated defense of the settlement enterprise, he also cautioned against a “disproportionate” level of settlement growth in order to not upset the Trump administration.

Apart from the Netiv Ha'avot affair, new settlement construction continued apace. On 2/21, the Jerusalem Municipality approved the construction of 3,000 new housing units south of the city between Gilo and the Gush Etzion settlement bloc. The same day that Netanyahu met with Trump in Washington (3/5), settlers established a new industrial site, dubbed Mevaser, outside the Kiryat Arba settlement near Hebron (Peace Now, 3/6). Finally, the Knesset's Ministerial Committee for Legislation approved (2/25) a first reading of a new Jewish Home Party-backed bill that would allow the Jerusalem District Court to hear certain cases related to building and planning, freedom of information, and other administrative claims filed by Palestinians in Area C of the West Bank. The purpose of the bill was two-fold: right-wing Knesset members (MKs) wanted to reduce the High Court of Justice's caseload, and to direct settlement-related disputes to more settlement-friendly judges.

PERSECUTING THE PALESTINIAN MINORITY AND OTHER OPPONENTS

Israel's ruling coalition advanced a years-long campaign to consolidate power with a string of new initiatives designed to marginalize the

Palestinian role in Israeli society, criminalize the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, and otherwise undercut dissenting voices.

Many of the most concrete advances in this campaign occurred in the Knesset, where Netanyahu struggled to hold his ruling coalition together amid a corruption investigation and other challenges to his leadership. On 2/26, the Knesset passed a first reading of a bill that would bar certain nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from organizing activities in Israeli schools. Cosponsored by the Jewish Home and Yesh Atid parties, the bill was specifically designed to crack down on groups like Breaking the Silence, an organization of Israeli combat veterans that vocally oppose the military occupation of Palestinian lands. A few weeks later, the Knesset passed (3/7) a new law authorizing the Israeli police to withhold the bodies of Palestinians killed by Israeli troops until their families agreed to certain preconditions on funeral arrangements. The law applied only to Palestinian citizens of Israel and residents of Jerusalem. Finally, the Knesset passed (5/1) the first reading of a new draft of the so-called Nation-State Bill, which would relegate Arabic from an official language to a language with “special status,” recognize Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people, and validate various state symbols. (See “Constitutionalizing Sophisticated Racism: Israel's Proposed Nationality Law,” *JPS* 45 [3], for a detailed analysis.) Unlike earlier versions of the bill, including one that brought down the previous ruling coalition and prompted early elections in 2015 (see *JPS* 44 [4]), this new draft excluded language that would subordinate Israel's democracy to its identity as a Jewish state. However, MK Avi Dichter

(Likud Party), the bill's primary sponsor, made sure (5/1) the purpose of the legislation was still clear: "Anyone who does not belong to the Jewish nation cannot define the State of Israel as his nation-state."

Right-wing leaders in the Knesset also took steps to limit the influence of their colleagues in non-Zionist parties. On 3/13, the Knesset Ethics Committee informed MK Yousef Jabareen of the Joint List coalition that his request to travel abroad to give a series of lectures had been denied. Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) was funding the trip, and the committee's decision reportedly stemmed from JVP's inclusion on the Ministry of Strategic Affairs blacklist of groups that support BDS (see *JPS* 47 [3]). Jabareen said (3/13) that he was considering a petition to the High Court of Justice, and argued that the ruling constituted a "harsh blow" to his "freedom of political activity as an elected official." In a similar development, the Knesset Ethics Committee voted (3/14) to suspend MK Haneen Zoabi (Joint List) for one week in response to a statement she made in a debate over the bill, mentioned above, barring NGOs from Israeli schools. "The [IDF] also murders from time to time," she said. "Who [is it that] murders the Palestinians in the occupied territories?" Zoabi argued to no avail that her comments were "part of the most basic freedom of expression and nobody has the right to silence others for opinions they find inconvenient. I spoke the truth."

Outside the Knesset, the Israeli authorities stepped up their efforts to keep Israel's border closed to supporters of BDS. On 2/17, they denied Mohammed Malik, a Norwegian citizen of Palestinian descent, entry due to his membership in the Norwegian Food and Allied Workers Union. The Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO), an umbrella group for Norwegian unions,

endorsed a boycott of Israel in 5/2017 (see *JPS* 46 [4]), and Malik's denial prompted speculation that the LO had been added to the abovementioned blacklist. Two months later, the Israeli authorities barred (4/16) the mayor of the Paris suburb of Gennevilliers, Patrice Leclerc, from entering Israel. Amid the outcry from French officials, Israel's Strategic Affairs Ministry published (4/16) a statement noting Leclerc's meeting with imprisoned Palestinian leader Marwan Barghouti on a recent trip to Israel. "The decision not to let him into the country was made for a series of reasons in connection to his activity in the BDS movement and his promotion of boycotts against Israel," the statement read.

There were a few other, similar denials in the final weeks of the quarter, but none as high profile as the case of Omar Shakir, the director of the Human Rights Watch (HRW) Israel/Palestine office. Shakir, who struggled throughout 2017 to secure a work permit allowing him to stay in Israel, tweeted on 5/8 [*sic*],

Israel has ordered me deported after compiling 7-pg intel dossier on me. 1st time in @hrw history Israel orders official out. Year ago it denied work permit before reversing, accusing us of "propaganda." Now its BDS. Real aim to muzzle dissent.

The organization denied that it supported BDS, or that Shakir did, but the Ministry of Strategic Affairs insisted, "Mr. Shakir has worked consistently, prominently and continuously to promote boycotts against the State of Israel and international companies investing in Israel." The ministry also clarified that the denial did not "constitute a principled or sweeping refusal for the organization to employ a foreign expert," but rather a denial of Shakir in particular.

Targeting the Palestinian Martyrs Fund

Increasingly in recent years, Israeli leaders and their allies in the United States have lobbied intensively about the Palestinian Martyrs Fund, which pays stipends to the families of Palestinians imprisoned, injured, or killed as a result of confrontations with Israeli soldiers or civilians. U.S. law dating back to 2014 mandates deductions, of amounts roughly equal to the family stipends, to be made from annual aid to the Palestinians. This quarter saw the escalation of Israeli and U.S. demands to scrap the program altogether.

The Palestinian Martyrs Fund dates back to the 1960s when the PLO set up the program to support imprisoned members of its nascent movement and their families. Although the program was modified over the decades, Palestinian officials have consistently defended the practice as a form of “social responsibility.” Abbas defended the program most recently in a speech in 6/2017. “It’s quite frankly racist rhetoric to call all our political prisoners terrorists,” he said. “They are, in effect, the victims of the occupation, not the creators of the occupation.”

On the U.S. side, pro-Israel lawmakers started working on a new measure to outlaw the Martyrs Fund in 2016. Representative Doug Lamborn (R-CO) and Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC) led the effort, introducing legislation named for Taylor Force, a former U.S. soldier who was killed on 3/8/2016 by a Palestinian in Tel Aviv (see *JPS* 45 [4] for more on Taylor Force; also S. 3414 of 9/28/2016 and H.R. 6398 of 11/18/2016 at congressionalmonitor.org). After their initial versions of the Taylor Force Act failed to gather sufficient support, Lamborn, Graham, and their allies submitted new drafts of the bill in 2017. Both Congress and the presidency were controlled by the Republican

Party at that point, and the legislation gradually gathered more cosponsors. This quarter, after almost two years of campaigning, Graham and Lamborn got a version of the bill attached to a key government funding measure (see H.R. 1625 of 3/20/2017 at congressionalmonitor.org), and it passed into law on 3/23/2018.

The new Taylor Force Act barred all assistance to the West Bank and Gaza “that directly benefits the PA” until the secretary of state could certify that the PA, PLO, and any successor organization had terminated all payments in connection to the stipend program and was “taking credible steps to end acts of violence against Israeli citizens and U.S. citizens” and “publicly condemning such acts,” inter alia. The text included a few minor exceptions for any aid to the East Jerusalem Hospitals Network, up to \$5 million in assistance for wastewater projects, and up to \$500,000 in assistance for child immunization programs.

Emboldened by the passage of the Taylor Force Act, Israeli lawmakers debated dueling proposals in the Knesset this quarter. The first passed a first reading on 3/5. Seen as the more far-reaching of the two, it would reduce the amount of tax revenues Israel transferred to the PA by a sum comparable to the amount paid out in stipends by the PA. The second measure, backed by the Defense Ministry, passed its first reading on 5/7. It would allow the security cabinet to freeze the funds deducted from the monthly transfers or to not make any deductions at all if there were so-called national security reasons for doing so. It also included a mechanism for redistributing the deducted funds to Israeli victims of Palestinian attacks and related initiatives. Although there was no further action on either measure by the end of the quarter, it was widely expected that some version would pass into law.

THE GREAT MARCH OF RETURN

With the Israeli occupation buttressed by a friendly new administration in Washington, the Palestinian national reconciliation process at a standstill, and the prospects for a resumption of peace talks dwindling, the Palestinian public was increasingly frustrated with the deteriorating humanitarian conditions across the oPt. On 12/6/2017, Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, these frustrations turned into mass protests calling for the right of return of Palestinian refugees. Dubbed the Great March of Return, the protests captured the world's attention and drew a brutal Israeli response. From the beginning of the march on 3/30 through the end of the quarter, the Israeli army killed more than 100 protesters, journalists, and medical personnel, and injured thousands more, including many children.

Months earlier, prominent Gazan activist and journalist Ahmed Abu Artema had gone (12/9/2017) for a walk along the border fence with a friend. "There lies our land," he later recalled telling his friend as they looked across the border into Israel (*New York Times*, 5/14). "It's just a few kilometers away from here." After that walk, Abu Artema wrote a post on Facebook about his longing for home and, according to his own recollection, "it struck a chord." He wrote more posts on the topic and on the Israeli blockade and started using the hashtag #GreatReturnMarch. "It seemed as if hundreds of people were talking about it," he wrote. "We established a youth committee and met with local agencies and institutions. We also met with the national political parties. We wanted to offer all sectors of society in Gaza the opportunity to be involved."

While Abu Artema and his comrades were organizing to make the Great March of Return a reality, intermittent violence had become

routine along the fence separating Gaza from Israel since the Israeli OPE assault in 2014 (see "Overview of the Violence" below and Chronology for details). As the quarter opened, there were approximately twice-weekly incidents, with Israeli forces firing on anyone who approached their unilaterally defined buffer zone, or Access Restricted Areas (ARA), conducting air strikes on Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestine (PIJ) posts, and demolishing tunnels, while Palestinians allegedly planted improvised explosive devices along the buffer zone.

These tensions escalated in the lead-up to the first planned Great March of Return protest on 3/30. The Israeli army deployed (3/28) one hundred snipers along the border fence, and IDF chief of staff Gadi Eisenkot reiterated that the army's terms of engagement allowed for the use of live fire against anyone seen attacking Israeli infrastructure, including the fence. "Anyone who approaches the border is endangering his life," added the IDF's Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), Yoav Mordechai. "From my point of view, if bus companies you own take some of the protesters and bring them to the border, you and your families will be held personally responsible."

The Great March of Return was not deterred. On 3/30, tens of thousands of Palestinians gathered along the buffer zone on the Gaza side to commemorate Land Day, call for the right of return for Palestinian refugees, and protest the Israeli blockade. Some protesters burned tires, hoping the resulting black smoke would block them from view of the Israeli snipers, while others erected tent cities or participated in peaceful activities such as bike riding, kite flying, and gymnastics. By the end of the day, Israeli troops had dispersed demonstrators in at least five locations, using

live ammunition, rubber-coated metal bullets, and copious amounts of tear gas, which killed 15 Palestinians and injured hundreds.

Scenes of the violence quickly proliferated across Palestinian and international social media. One video in particular, showing Abdul Fattah Abdul Nabi being shot in the back while running away from the buffer zone near Jabaliya refugee camp, drew outrage from the international community. UN secretary-general Antonio Guterres (3/30) and EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini (3/31) called for an independent and transparent investigation into the killings. Kuwaiti diplomats circulated a draft statement to the other members of the UNSC calling for such an investigation, but U.S. diplomats blocked it.

As the death toll mounted, the Israeli army took additional steps to undermine the protests. Mordechai confirmed (4/1) reports in the international press that the Israeli authorities were withholding the bodies of at least 2 killed on 3/30. He said they had no intention of returning them until Hamas returned to Israel the remains of the 2 Israeli soldiers allegedly being held in Gaza (see *JPS* 47 [3] for more on the soldiers' remains). Israeli defense minister Avigdor Lieberman, for his part, rejected (4/1) the international calls for an independent investigation and stated that the army had no plans to conduct internal probes. "All of our troops deserve a commendation," he said.

After the second Friday of protests, the death toll rose to 28, but little else changed. The Israeli authorities rebuffed the growing chorus of calls for an independent investigation; foisted responsibility for all the violence and suffering in Gaza on Hamas; suspended all imports of tires into Gaza, according to a PA official on 4/8; and announced (4/16) unspecified sanctions on fourteen Gazan transportation companies. Meanwhile,

International Criminal Court chief prosecutor Fatou Bensouda stated (4/8) that "any new alleged crime committed in the context of the situation in Palestine may be subjected to my office's scrutiny," referring to her ongoing preliminary examination of alleged Israeli war crimes. She also said that her office would "continue to closely watch the situation."

During this period, Egypt and Saudi Arabia embarked on the first major diplomatic effort to avert further escalation. On 4/7, an Egyptian foreign ministry official said that both Egyptian and Saudi diplomats had privately urged their counterparts in Hamas to stop supporting the protests. With Saudi backing, the Egyptians reportedly offered to guarantee more frequent openings of the Rafah border crossing in exchange for an early end to the Great March of Return. "The situation in the Gaza Strip is nearing an explosion," the official said. "Therefore, there is a fear that Palestinian anger will turn towards Egypt in the coming weeks."

Amid further reports of Egyptian diplomatic activity, the protests continued week after week, culminating in a mass demonstration on 5/14, when the United States formally opened its new embassy in Jerusalem on the eve of the seventieth anniversary of Israel's establishment and the Nakba. While Kushner, Friedman, and several other U.S. officials gave speeches in Jerusalem, at least 30,000 Gazans gathered along the buffer zone. As in previous weeks, Israeli troops fired at protesters near Khan Yunis, Rafah, Gaza City, al-Bureij and Jabaliya refugee camps. The death toll on 5/14 exceeded the number of killings in all the previous protests; Israeli soldiers shot and killed 61 Palestinians, and injured at least 1,300 more (see *Chronology* for details).

As the protests wound down in the evening of 5/14, the Palestinian leadership convened in

Ramallah to discuss their options. One senior official said (5/14) that they planned to file a new complaint against Israel to the ICC over settlement construction in the West Bank. The next day, al-Maliki announced (5/15) that Abbas had signed documents of accession for the State of Palestine to join three new UN organizations. He added that they had agreed to call on the UN Human Rights Council to form a committee to investigate Israel's actions. Finally, Abbas announced (5/15) that he was recalling the PLO envoy to Washington, Husam Zomlot, in protest of the embassy move.

The escalation of violence on 5/14 was accompanied by a parallel escalation of international criticism directed at Israel. Guterres averred (5/14) he was "deeply concerned." United Kingdom, French, German, and EU officials called for restraint and a return to calm. South Africa and Turkey both recalled (5/14) their ambassadors from Israel (Turkey also recalled its ambassador in Washington). Kuwaiti diplomats circulated (5/14) another draft statement to the UNSC calling for an investigation and condemning the Israeli violence. Belgium and Ireland summoned their respective Israeli ambassadors for questioning.

The international response was short of unanimous. Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull blamed Hamas for "provoking" the IDF, saying that its "conduct is confrontational," in line with the Israeli position. The United States joined Australia and Israel in blaming Hamas, and also blocked Kuwaiti efforts at the UNSC.

The violence in Gaza, the opening of the U.S. embassy in Jerusalem, and the tenor of the international community's response significantly ratcheted up tensions on the ground in Israel and the oPt as the quarter came to a close. It was unclear whether the violence

would escalate further, but there was at least one proponent of escalation among Israeli authorities. "It's time for the heads of Hamas to pay a personal price for organizing these terror attacks," Israel's Strategic Affairs Minister Gilad Erdan said (5/15). "We need to go back to targeted killings, and they need to go back to hiding underground and fearing for their lives, not organizing the masses to carry out terror attacks."

OCCUPATION DATA AND TRENDS

Israel's brutal response to the mass protests in Gaza in 3–5/2018 led to a significant increase in the number of Palestinians killed as a result of Israeli actions this quarter. Up from 29 last quarter, 140 Palestinians were killed as a result of Israeli actions. The number of Israelis killed as a result of Palestinian actions was 3, down from 4 last quarter. Therefore, the comprehensive death toll since the beginning of the Second Intifada in 9/2000 reached 11,147 Palestinians (including 65 Palestinian citizens of Israel); 1,277 Israelis (including at least 252 settlers and 442 Israeli army soldiers and other 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 because they were denied access to medical care, and Palestinians killed in smuggling tunnel accidents). They also include the Palestinian professor and researcher, Fadi al-Batsh, who was killed outside a mosque in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 4/21. While the Israeli government denied any involvement in his killing, Malaysian officials blamed "foreign agents" and several "Middle Eastern intelligence officials" later told the *New York Times* that the killing was part of a broader Mossad

operation aimed at eliminating Hamas-affiliated scientists training abroad (see Chronology).

Overview of the Violence

Despite the spike in violence in the oPt overall, the number of Palestinians killed as a result of Israeli actions in the **West Bank** and **East Jerusalem** decreased this quarter. Seven Palestinians were killed in this context (down from 13 last quarter): 2 of them in confrontations with Israeli soldiers (3/9 and 3/10); 1 who was fatally injured during an Israeli army raid on Jericho (2/22); 1 who was executed after allegedly stabbing and seriously injuring an Israeli civilian in Jerusalem's Old City (3/18); 1 killed after allegedly ramming his car into a bus stop outside the Ariel settlement (4/3); 1 fatally injured by Israeli soldiers at a checkpoint near Tulkarm (4/8); and 1 stabbed to death by an Israeli settler at a gas station near Jerusalem (4/9). The number of Palestinians injured as a result of Israeli actions in this context also fell. Between 2/13 and 5/21, 2,752 Palestinians were injured in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, down from 4,704 last quarter, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

However, in the **Gaza Strip** at least 132 Palestinian were killed as a result of Israeli actions this quarter, with the death toll expected to rise as some protesters injured during the attacks on 5/14 and 5/15 were not expected to survive. The vast majority of the fatalities, 106, stemmed directly from Israel's brutal response to the Great March of Return protests (see "The Great March of Return" above); of the 26 remaining fatalities, up from 15 the previous quarter, 14 were killed as a result of Israeli attacks unrelated to the Great March of Return (2/17 [2], 2/21, 3/3, 3/30, 4/4, 4/11, 4/12,

4/29 [3], and 5/6 [3]); 6 were Hamas operatives killed in unidentified explosions (5/5) and tunnel collapses (4/22); 5 were PIJ-affiliated fighters killed in disputed circumstances (4/14) and "accidental explosions" (3/10; see Chronology); and 1 Palestinian fisherman, who was shot by Israeli naval forces (2/25). The number of Palestinians in Gaza injured as a result of Israeli actions also rose considerably this quarter: according to OCHA, 10,403 Palestinian were injured (many of them maimed by direct sniper fire), up from 1,143 last quarter.

Between U.S. president Trump's 12/6/2017 recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and the Great March of Return, the level of cross-border violence in Gaza remained high. Armed groups in Gaza employed a new tactic this quarter besides rocket attacks. On at least six occasions, Hamas, PIJ, and others planted improvised explosive devices along Israel's so-called ARA, targeting Israeli military patrols and infrastructure (2/17, 3/15, 3/17, 3/24, 4/8; see Chronology for details). The Israeli military also kept up its ongoing campaign to demolish underground tunnels leading into Israeli territory, on 2/18, 3/18 [2], and 4/15, bringing the total number of tunnels demolished since the beginning of the campaign to eight (see *JPS* 47 [1–3]).

Once the Great March of Return began on 3/30, Israeli troops fired on Palestinian protesters and other civilians on a daily basis, both at those taking a few symbolic steps past the first layer of barbed wire and fencing, and at farmers working on their land in the area, as well as at bird hunters. Both before the mass protests began, and after they subsided, Israeli forces conducted twenty-seven limited incursions to level land and clear sightlines, up from eight last quarter.

Although the Israeli authorities again extended (4/10) the fishing zone off Gaza's southern coast from six nautical miles to nine, Israeli naval forces harassed Palestinian fishermen persistently. They opened fire on Palestinian fishing boats on sixty-five separate occasions, down from sixty-six last quarter, killing 1 fisherman (2/25), injuring another (2/21), arresting 14 (2/24 [2], 2/25 [2], and 3/12 [10]), and confiscating three fishing boats (3/12).

Movement and Access

Amid escalating tensions along the Gaza-Israel border, the Israeli authorities approved a series of measures allegedly designed to ameliorate the “extremely severe” situation in the **Gaza Strip** in 3/2018 (*Yedioth Ahronoth*, 3/20). They agreed to allow more Palestinian

merchants into Israel for business, more exports of fruit and vegetables, more permits for Palestinian minors to exit Gaza, and an increase in imports of all kinds, among others. A few weeks later, they extended (4/10) the fishing zone off Gaza's southern coast from six nautical miles to nine for a period of three months. However, the results appeared inconclusive by the end of the quarter: according to the Israeli NGO Gisha, exits of Palestinians from Gaza rose in 3/2018 to levels not seen since early 2017 (see figure 1), while exports of goods to the West Bank, Israel, and other foreign countries declined throughout the quarter after peaking in 1/2018 (see figure 2).

Further limiting Palestinian movement in and out of Gaza, the Egyptian authorities kept the Rafah border crossing largely closed

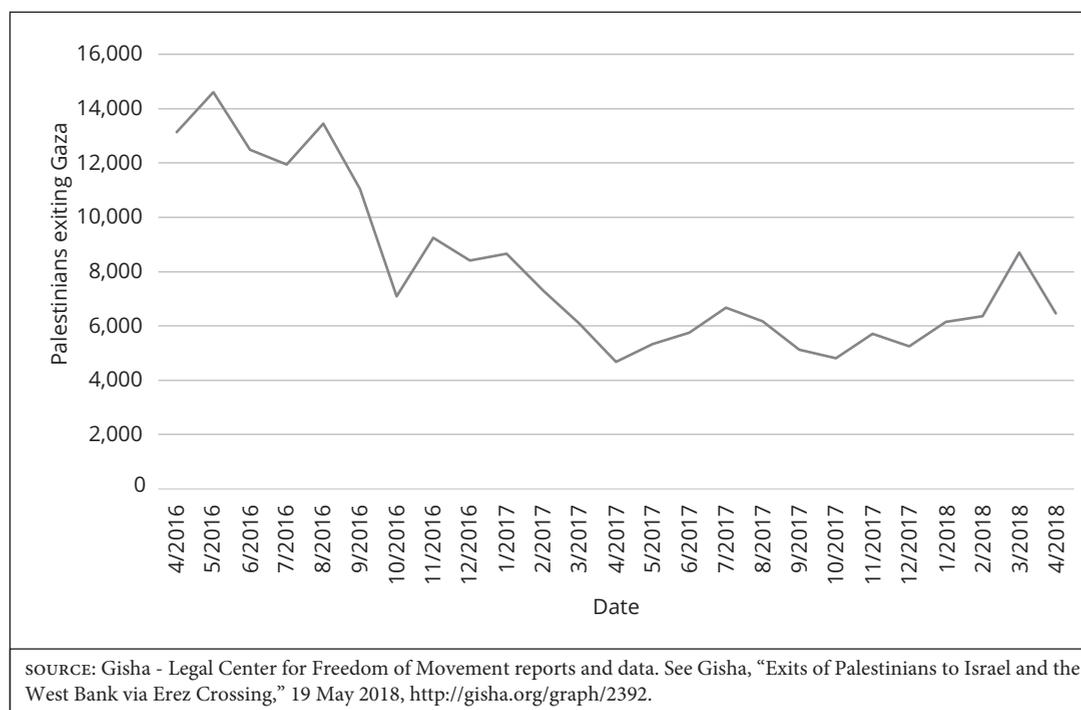


Figure 1. Palestinians exiting Gaza. The number of Palestinians—merchants, patients and their companions, and others—exiting Gaza via the Erez border crossing rose in 3/2018 only to return to the low levels seen throughout much of 2017. Almost twice as many merchants exited in 3/2018 relative to the previous month, accounting for the lion's share of the spike that month.

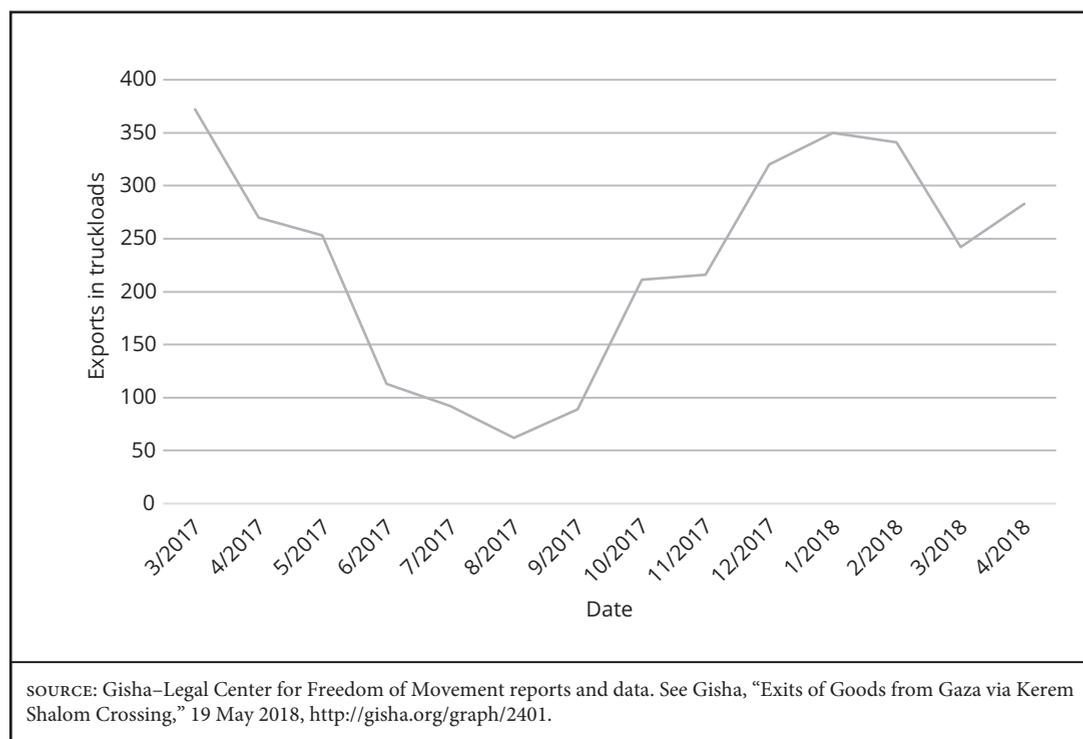


Figure 2. Exports from Gaza. After plummeting to zero in the late summer and early fall of 2017, exports of Gazan goods to destinations apart from Israel and the West Bank increased to levels last seen in 2015, before dropping again to between 10 and 20 truckloads per month in 2–4/2018.

this quarter. There were intermittent reports of Egyptian willingness to open the crossing more frequently in order to improve humanitarian conditions in Gaza, but the crossing was open for only fifteen days (2/19, 2/21, 3/23–25, 4/12–14, 4/28–30, and 5/12–15), up from ten last quarter. According to OCHA, some 2,921 Palestinians were able to return to Gaza (down from 3,950 last quarter), and more than 5,818 were able to leave (up from 3,247).

The most significant development pertaining to Palestinian movement and access in the **West Bank and East Jerusalem** this quarter was the establishment of a new military surveillance program. According to a report in *Haaretz* on 3/7, the Israeli army began collecting personal details about Palestinian males at mobile checkpoints in the West Bank. While women,

children, and the elderly were exempt, each young man was obliged to submit a photocopy of his ID and report his name, age, telephone number, identification number, vehicle type, license number, and both the origin and destination of his journey. The next day, *Haaretz* reported (3/8) that all these personal details were being entered into a new database.

The number of Israeli army raids and house searches in the West Bank and East Jerusalem rose again this quarter. According to OCHA, Israeli soldiers conducted 1,537 of these operations between 2/13 and 5/21, up from 1,126 last quarter and 893 during the quarter before that.

Finally, the Israeli authorities imposed additional restrictions on Palestinian movement and access around Jewish and Israeli holidays.

They shut down border crossings in and out of Gaza and the West Bank for Purim (2/27–3/3), Passover (3/29–4/7), and Israel’s seventy-year anniversary celebrations (4/16–4/19). Meanwhile, they relaxed (5/7) some of the restrictions on Palestinian movement during Ramadan, which was set to begin on 5/16, allowing a designated number of West Bank Palestinians to visit family in Israel, travel abroad, and pray at Haram al-Sharif. Marking a break with COGAT policy in recent years, the Israeli authorities said they would not permit any Palestinians in Gaza to travel during Ramadan.

Judaization of Jerusalem

Further marginalizing non-Jewish communities in Jerusalem, the Jerusalem Municipality implemented a new interpretation of its tax code in early 2/2018. It effectively ended tax exemptions for church-owned properties not directly used for worship—approximately 887 such properties. Christian leaders were outraged at the decision, and on 2/25 the Church of the Holy Sepulchre closed indefinitely in protest at what one church official called a “systemic campaign” of persecution. The church’s protest galvanized the Palestinian public and sparked a string of demonstrations. Two days later, Netanyahu froze (2/27) the new tax plan as well as a piece of legislation percolating through the Knesset that would have allowed the Israeli government to seize church property in certain circumstances. Satisfied, Jerusalem’s Christian leaders reopened the Church of the Holy Sepulchre on 2/28. Tensions over the incident lingered, however, and PLO Executive Committee member Hanan Ashrawi called (2/28) on Netanyahu to cancel the tax plan, rather than merely freezing it.

Another significant development came on 3/7 when the Knesset passed a new law allowing

Israel’s interior minister to revoke the residency rights of anyone in the city who exhibited “breach of trust” against Israel. The law also allowed any person whose residency status was revoked to be deported. Like the new tax plan, this law targeted the Palestinian community.

Finally, at a cabinet meeting held the day before the formal opening of the U.S. embassy in Jerusalem on 5/14, the Israeli government approved a series of programs aimed at “deepening [Israeli] sovereignty” in East Jerusalem. Estimated to cost at least NIS 2 billion (approximately \$500 million), the programs included plans to build a cable car from West Jerusalem to the Western Wall, increase funding for illegal Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem, compel Palestinian schools in the city to adopt the Israeli curriculum, and otherwise amplify the Israeli presence in East Jerusalem. “We will make a series of decisions to build up and develop Jerusalem, east and west, north and south, in all directions—to both reveal its past and build its future,” Netanyahu pledged in comments at the start of the cabinet meeting.

Maintaining Stability

With humanitarian conditions deteriorating across the oPt, the Israeli authorities maintained the implementation of some minor measures established by the Oslo Accords. In this context, the Israel Electric Corporation (IEC) tentatively reached a new agreement with the Palestinian Electricity Transmission Company (PETC) on 5/1 to regulate their relationship over the next fifteen years and partially settle an outstanding NIS 1 billion (approximately \$280 million) “owed” by the Palestinians. Specifically, it established a repayment scheme laying out exactly how much and by what means the IEC would be obligated to supply to the PETC. It also obligated the IEC and PA to jointly

construct four high-voltage substations, allowing the PETC more control over distribution networks in the West Bank. The PA hailed the deal as freeing the Palestinian electricity sector from Israeli control. The director general of Israel’s Finance Ministry, Shai Babad, said the deal would bring about “a new reality in the Palestinians’ energy sector” and kick off “a new era in economic relations between the two sides.” At the end of the quarter, the deal was still subject to review by the IEC’s board and Israeli regulators.

Palestinian Prisoners

The high-profile case of Ahd Tamimi, the sixteen-year-old Palestinian activist arrested on 12/19/2017 after slapping an Israeli soldier (see *JPS* 47 [3]), held the world’s attention as it wound its way through the military court

system in the oPt. After a judge ordered (3/18) trial proceedings to be held behind closed doors, thus shielding them from additional public scrutiny, Tamimi’s legal team reached (3/21) a plea agreement with the prosecutors. The plea deal included a NIS 5,000 (approximately \$1,400) fine and eight months in prison, including time served.

Meanwhile, the number of Palestinians in Israeli prisons fell steadily this quarter (see figure 3), according to Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association.

Prisoner Swap

Besides a few unconfirmed reports, this was another quiet quarter for the ongoing back-channel talks between Israel and Hamas over a possible prisoner swap. The only development came in the context of

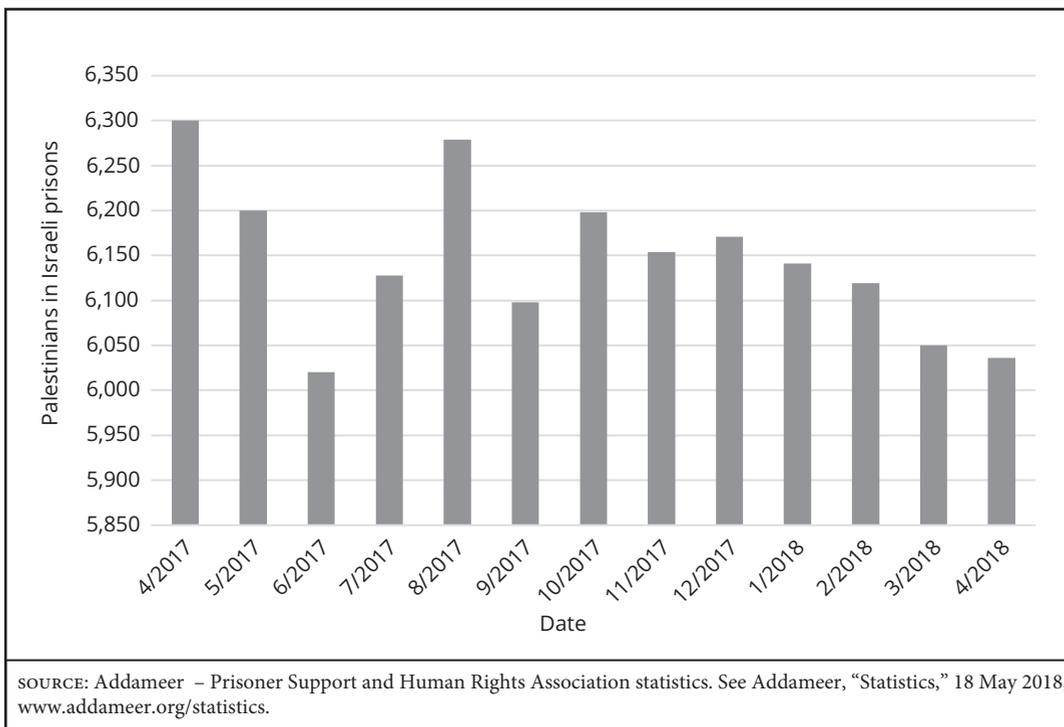


Figure 3. Palestinians in Israeli prisons. With the exception of a few outlier months, the number of Palestinian prisoners in Israel trended down between 4/2017 and 4/2018.

talks between Hamas and Egypt’s General Intelligence Directorate covering a wide range of issues, from the stalled Palestinian reconciliation process to the Great March of Return (see “The Great March of Return” above and “Egypt” below). According to an *al-Akhbar* report on 4/18, Hamas negotiators had agreed to certain details of a prisoner swap, including the names of specific Palestinian prisoners Israel would free in exchange for the return of the remains of the 2 Israeli soldiers killed in Gaza during Israel’s assault in 2014. The report added that the Israeli cabinet had already considered the proposal, and that they had rejected some of the names. A few weeks later, *Haaretz* reported (5/7) that Hamas had conveyed a new, broader proposal, offering

to negotiate a prisoner swap in the context of a long-term cease-fire agreement. With the Great March of Return and the opening of the U.S. embassy in Jerusalem ramping up tensions across Israel and the oPt, there were no further developments on this score by the end of the quarter.

Settler-Related Violence

Settler-related violence increased for a second quarter in a row. According to OCHA, there were 68 incidents of settlers attacking Palestinians or their property in the West Bank and East Jerusalem between 2/13 and 5/21. Forty-seven of these attacks led to the destruction of Palestinian property (up from 25), while the remaining 21 resulted in Palestinian injuries (up from 17; see figure 4).

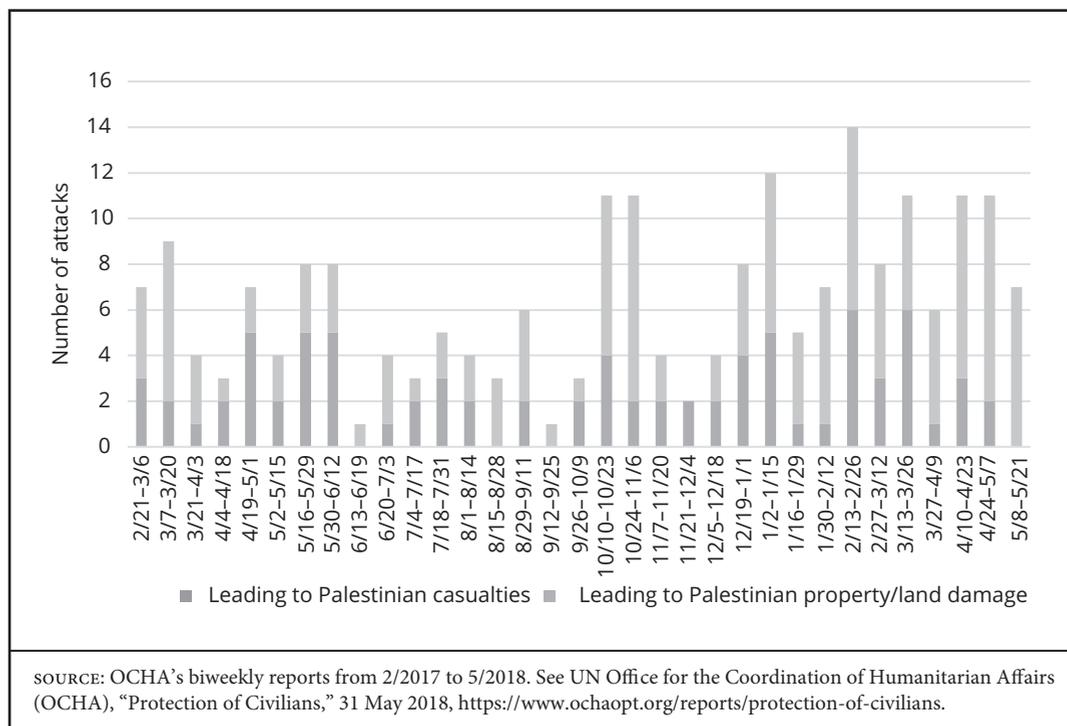


Figure 4. Israeli settler attacks. At the very end of 4/2018 and the beginning of 5/2018, there was a spate of reports about price-tag attacks in the West Bank (see Chronology). As the data show, these reports corresponded with a minor increase in the amount of settler-related violence.

Demolitions and Displacement

Israeli forces demolished 121 Palestinian buildings in the West Bank (61) and East Jerusalem (60) between 2/13 and 5/21 (up from 97 last quarter), according to OCHA. These demolitions displaced 103 Palestinians (down from 147 last quarter), including 66 in the West Bank and 37 in East Jerusalem.

In this same context, there were 2 reported incidents of Israeli troops demolishing or sealing Palestinian property. On 4/24, they carried out the second documented so-called punitive demolition of 2018, targeting the Jenin home of a Palestinian imprisoned in connection with the 1/9/2018 killing of an Israeli settler. Earlier in the quarter, they sealed (3/13) with concrete a Jenin-area apartment belonging to the family of a Palestinian arrested on charges related to the killing of an Israeli settler on 10/4/2017 (Israeli forces demolished the family's home on 12/1/2017).

INTRA-PALESTINIAN DYNAMICS

RECONCILIATION TROUBLES

The Palestinian reconciliation process stalled this quarter. The Hamas-Fatah agreement of 10/12/2017, which was celebrated as a historic achievement (see *JPS* 47 [2]) when it was concluded, was effectively a dead letter, with the two sides ignoring the benchmarks and deadlines set therein (see *JPS* 47 [3]). As a result, the major issues left unresolved in the agreement—the fate of Hamas's military wing in particular—were persistent sources of tension.

Two and a half weeks after Hamas and Fatah missed a key deadline mandated by the 10/12 agreement, PA prime minister Hamdallah laid out (2/17) the PA's position on reconciliation. He stressed that "financial empowerment of

the government, full control over the crossings, enforcing law and order, empowering the judiciary to carry out its duties and allowing former employees to return to their work places" were all required for the reconciliation process to succeed. Around the same time, the PA cabinet approved (2/27) its official budget for 2018, including a major overture to Hamas in the form of a conditional budget increase. According to Hamdallah on 3/3, the cabinet authorized funds to pay the salaries of approximately 20,000 employees of the Hamas-run government in Gaza should the PA be allowed to assume control of the territory.

With unemployment in Gaza at record high levels—the World Bank reported 44 percent unemployment in Gaza in 2017—the fate of the former civil servants was among the most hotly contested issues at play in the reconciliation process. Fatah's demand is that the PA civil servants who were forced out of their jobs when Hamas took over the administration of Gaza in 2007 be reinstated, while Hamas insisted that its own civil servants be allowed to remain in these now-filled posts regardless of the reconciliation. (Although the PA has maintained the salaries of the civil servants who were forced out of their jobs since 2007, Abbas imposed a 30 percent cut in 4/2017 as a part of his efforts to step up pressure on Hamas; see *JPS* 46 [4].) The 10/12 agreement called for Hamas and Fatah to resolve the issue of the rival civil services by 2/1/2018, but as mentioned above, they missed that deadline. The new PA budget and Hamdallah's comments therefore appeared to many as a major concession to get the process back on track.

The offer was too little too late for Hamas. Despite being under growing pressure from the Egyptians, who mediated the talks that led to the 10/12 agreement, Hamas officials did not

see the new PA budget as a significant gesture. “The PA and its government, headed by Rami Hamdallah, [hasn’t] made a decision to embark on the path of national unity,” a Hamas spokesperson said (3/5), calling on Abbas to lift the sanctions he imposed on Gaza in 2017 (see *JPS* 46 [4] and 47 [1]). The organization’s leader, Ismail Haniyeh, averred (3/5) that Gaza was on the brink of an “explosion” in part due to Abbas’s decision to pressure Hamas into reconciliation talks.

It was around this same time that exiled Fatah leader Mohammad Dahlan returned to the spotlight. A longtime rival of Abbas, Dahlan had been coordinating Gaza relief efforts with his patrons in the United Arab Emirates since the Israeli assault in 2014, in a presumed effort to build support for his possible return to Palestinian politics in Gaza. After Egypt facilitated a rapprochement between the exiled Fatah leader and Hamas in 6/2017, it was widely speculated that Abbas had submitted to the 10/12 reconciliation deal in part to marginalize Dahlan (see *JPS* 47 [1, 2]). With the 10/12 deal on life support, Dahlan gave a rare interview on Egyptian television on 2/26, suggesting that the PA leadership had become an “additional burden” on the Palestinian people. He spoke of the PA as “punishing” the people of Gaza and called for the formation of a “national salvation leadership.” A few days later, the *Times of Israel* (3/1) reported that a delegation of senior Hamas officials had met with Dahlan in Cairo in late 2/2018. On 3/1, a Hamas official said that the possibility of forming a new government with Dahlan was not being ruled out.

AN ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT

In the morning of 3/13, Hamdallah led a delegation of PA officials, including the director of the General Intelligence Service, Majid Faraj,

to Gaza to celebrate the inauguration of a new water treatment plant in Bayt Lahiya. Shortly after their convoy passed through the Erez border crossing, an explosive detonated on the side of the road, damaging 3 cars and injuring 7 security guards. Unhurt, Hamdallah and Faraj proceeded to the ceremony and prearranged reconciliation talks with Hamas officials.

Well before any details about the explosion were confirmed, the incident was being described as an assassination attempt. Abbas’s office put out a statement laying responsibility for the “cowardly attack” on Hamas. Other Fatah officials directly accused Hamas of perpetrating the attack. Later in the day, Hamdallah discussed the incident with Haniyeh, and they agreed that Israel and its collaborators in Gaza were likely to blame. They also agreed that the head of the Hamas-run Interior Ministry in Gaza, Tawfiq Abu Naim, would lead the investigation. “Despite what happened we will continue to build our institutions and we will press on with the reconciliation efforts with the help of Egypt,” Hamdallah said (3/13).

Abu Naim moved quickly with his investigation, making a handful of arrests within hours. However, inter- and intrafactional tensions were evident. There was speculation in the press that a group of dissenters within Hamas had planned and executed the attack without the leadership’s approval. Fueling these rumors, a senior PA official said (3/16) there was “no chance that someone in Hamas didn’t know that these bombs were placed there.” Abbas himself clearly remained suspicious, despite his prime minister’s pleas for unity. At the beginning of a PA cabinet meeting on 3/19, Abbas accused Hamas of perpetrating the assassination attempt and, in so doing, of sabotaging the reconciliation process.

“We condemn these irresponsible statements,” Hamas responded in a statement later that same night. “[Abbas] is paving the way for chaos that will facilitate the approval of Trump’s plan and Israel’s plans.” The next day, the PA called (3/20) on Hamas to give up control of Gaza “once and for all,” and a senior Fatah official said (3/20) that the PA could declare Gaza an “insurgent district,” which would exempt the PA from any responsibility in the region, including the monthly \$100 million it paid for electricity, water, and other public services.

As the two sides traded accusations, Hamas reestablished a security checkpoint on the Gaza side of the Erez border crossing, which it had taken down in an official ceremony on 11/1/2017, handing it over to the PA pursuant to the reconciliation deal. The new development effectively rolled back the only significant step that had been taken on the ground in the context of the 10/12/2017 deal. After reports of the new checkpoint spread on social media, a spokesperson at the Hamas-run Interior Ministry described it as “temporary,” saying that it would be removed after the investigation into the 3/13 attack on Hamdallah and Faraj was complete.

Almost two weeks following Abbas’s pledge to take new steps to safeguard the Palestinian “national project,” two Palestinian sources cited by the *Jerusalem Post* (4/2) alleged that the PA president was under considerable pressure from Egypt not to walk away from the reconciliation process. The Israeli newspaper report indicated that Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi had called Abbas after his 3/19 comments to his cabinet and requested that he allow Egypt’s General Intelligence Directorate more time to facilitate the process. Abbas then met (4/3) with the interim head of the directorate, Abbas Kamel, for further discussions.

At the same time, Abbas was positioning himself for another crackdown on his rivals. On 3/28, a group of Dahlan supporters in the West Bank accused the PA Security Forces of carrying out a “frenzied” campaign against them ahead of the Palestinian National Council (PNC) convention on 4/30 (see below). Later, the head of the union of former PA employees in Gaza, Arif Abu Jarad, announced that the PA had not paid the employees’ 4/2018 salaries. Instead, he said, the salaries had been deposited into West Bank financial institutions rather than banks in Gaza. Sources in Ramallah did not comment on the “terrible crime,” as Abu Jarad termed it, but analysts speculated that the move was designed to foment discord in Gaza, thereby upping the pressure on Hamas. The next day, the PA Ministry of Finance said (4/10) that the nonpayment stemmed from “technical issues” that they hoped would be overcome quickly. On 5/3, Abbas announced that the salaries would be deposited the next day, but thousands of former PA employees were disappointed to find that hadn’t happened when they went to withdraw funds on 5/4.

CONVENING THE PALESTINIAN NATIONAL COUNCIL

With the Great March of Return gathering momentum in 4/2018, Hamas and Fatah appeared more intent on facilitating and, in some cases, shaping the mass protests than advancing their stalled reconciliation process. It was in this context that the long-dormant PNC convened in Ramallah on 4/30.

Three weeks after eighty-two-year-old Abbas was admitted to hospital for a checkup during his trip to the UNSC in New York on 2/2018, the PLO Executive Committee agreed (3/7) to host the PNC’s first regular session since 1996 in order to elect a new

PLO Central Council and Executive Committee (3/7). The announcement was widely seen as an effort to consolidate power ahead of Abbas's expected exit from the political arena. In line with that thinking, Hamas put out (3/7) a statement demanding that the "one-sided" decision be rescinded. "Any decisions made in this meeting will not be binding or representative of the Palestinian people," the statement read.

In the lead-up to the meeting, complaints about the legitimacy of the PNC came from other quarters besides Hamas. Both PIJ and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) announced boycotts. (The PIJ is not a member of the PLO and therefore was not invited to participate in the first place.) Then, on 4/22, 109 members of the PNC sent a letter to Speaker Salim Zanoun calling for the meeting to be postponed. "In order to spare our Palestinian cause imminent dangers and out of our eagerness to achieve unity and end splits and division, we urge you to delay the PNC session," they wrote, citing travel restrictions and other circumstances preventing many of the PNC's 700 members from attending on 4/30. Finally, a spokesperson for the Hamas-run Interior Ministry in Gaza accused (4/28) three senior PA officials of planning the 3/13 attack on Hamdallah. Hamas's deputy leader in Gaza, Khalil al-Hayya, later alleged (4/28) that the PA used the attack to "kill reconciliation." While some Hamas officials had made such intimations in the immediate aftermath of the attack, this was the first time any had made an explicit accusation on the record, and it significantly heightened tensions surrounding the PNC meeting.

In the end, the meeting itself proceeded uneventfully on 4/30–5/3. In a kickoff speech on 4/30, Abbas called for the PNC to adopt the strategy he presented at the UNSC on 2/20

and reiterated his dedication to ending the division between the West Bank and Gaza. The PNC then chose (5/1) 103 new members to replace those who had died since the last meeting, discussed (5/2 and 5/3) possible reforms to the PLO, and elected (5/3) a new PLO Executive Committee composed of Abbas, Saeb Erakat, Hanan Ashrawi, Azzam al-Ahmad, Taysir Khalid, Bassam Salhi, Ahmad Majdalani, Faisal Aranaki, Saleh Ra'fat, Wasel Abu Yusef, Ziad Abu Amr, Ali Abu Zuhri, Adnan Husseini, Ahmad Bayyoud Tamimi, and Ahmad Abu Houli. As expected, two frequent rivals of Abbas on the executive committee, Yasser Abed Rabbo and Ahmad Qurai', were not asked to serve for another term. Abbas later explained that three spots on the 18-seat committee were left open in case Hamas, the PFLP, or any other faction decided to "accept national unity and abide by the decisions of the PLO." Finally, the PNC agreed (5/3) to a concluding statement calling on the executive committee to suspend its recognition of Israel until such a time that the Israeli government recognized a Palestinian state based on the pre-1967 armistice lines.

PALESTINIAN OPINION

The following data come from a poll conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR) on 14–17 March 2018. The results are based on a survey of 1,200 Palestinians from the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip. The complete poll, the 67th in a series, can be found at www.pcpsr.org.

1. In general, how would you describe conditions of the Palestinians in the [. . .] Gaza Strip these days?

	Total	West Bank	Gaza Strip
1) Very good	0.6%	0.4%	0.8%
2) Good	4.8%	5.1%	4.4%
3) So-so	9.7%	9.1%	10.8%
4) Bad	34.6%	35.0%	33.8%
5) Very bad	47.8%	46.6%	50.2%
6) Don't know/Not applicable	2.5%	3.9%	0.0%

2. In general, how would you describe conditions of the Palestinians in the Palestinian areas in the West Bank these days?

	Total	West Bank	Gaza Strip
1) Very good	2.6%	2.2%	3.4%
2) Good	17.8%	19.7%	14.0%
3) So-so	28.2%	30.0%	24.7%
4) Bad	30.7%	30.6%	30.8%
5) Very bad	20.2%	16.9%	26.4%
6) Don't know/Not applicable	0.6%	0.5%	0.7%

3. International reports indicate that economic and humanitarian conditions in the Gaza Strip are becoming worse and worse by the day and that the Strip is on the verge of collapse. Who in your view is [. . .] most responsible for the worsening of conditions in the Gaza Strip?

	Total	West Bank	Gaza Strip
1) PA and Fatah	25.5%	16.5%	42.7%
2) Hamas	18.3%	18.6%	17.7%
3) [Israeli] occupation	38.5%	43.1%	29.7%
4) Other	13.5%	16.7%	7.5%
5) Don't know/Not applicable	4.2%	5.1%	2.3%

4. On [13 March] in the Gaza Strip, an explosion targeted the convoy of Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah leading to several injuries among the guards. Who do you think stands behind this explosion?

	Total	West Bank	Gaza Strip
1) Israeli occupation	44.7%	47.1%	40.1%
2) PA or one of its agencies	14.2%	8.9%	24.3%
3) Fatah	2.4%	2.3%	2.8%
4) Hamas	13.5%	10.6%	19.0%
5) [Exiled Fatah leader] Mohammad Dahlan	1.1%	1.2%	0.8%
6) Egypt	0.8%	0.9%	0.5%
7) Extremist groups	2.9%	0.2%	8.2%
8) Other	2.2%	3.1%	0.5%
5) Don't know/Not applicable	18.2%	25.8%	3.7%

5. In your view, why was the prime minister targeted? Did the perpetrators aim at foiling reconciliation? Or did they seek to express opposition to the government policies toward the Gaza Strip? Or perhaps they had some other aims?

	Total	West Bank	Gaza Strip
1) To foil reconciliation	73.8%	74.7%	72.1%
2) To protest [PA] policy toward the Gaza Strip	16.7%	13.5%	22.9%
3) Other	4.1%	4.5%	3.4%
4) Don't know/Not applicable	5.3%	7.3%	1.6%

FRONTLINE STATES

EGYPT

Besides ongoing talks by the General Intelligence Directorate with Hamas on the stalled Palestinian reconciliation process and the Great March of Return (see “Intra-Palestinian Dynamics” and “Great March of Return” above), this quarter the Egyptian government lent its voice to the chorus of international condemnation on Israel’s use of deadly force in Gaza and the opening of the U.S. embassy in Jerusalem. That aside, there was only one significant Egypt-related development in the Palestinian-Israeli arena.

On 2/19, the consortium of companies leading extraction work at the Leviathan and Tamar natural gas fields off Israel’s coast—the U.S.-based Noble Energy and Israel’s Delek Group—announced a \$15 billion export agreement with Egypt’s Dolphinus Holdings. Under the agreement, Egypt would import 64 billion cubic meters of Israeli natural gas over ten years. Israeli prime minister Netanyahu lauded the agreement, saying it would “strengthen our economy” and “regional ties.” Israel’s Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz called it Israel’s most significant export deal with Egypt since the two countries’ 1979 peace treaty.

The Egyptian response to the 2/19 deal appeared conflicted. On 2/26, *Haaretz* reported that Egyptian officials had “signaled” that implementation was contingent on Israel abdicating its claim to a \$1.8 billion Egyptian debt (on 4/28/2017, an international court in Geneva ordered Cairo to pay the sum to the IEC in compensation for suspending natural gas exports in 2012). This appeared to come as a surprise to the Israelis. “Israel hasn’t given up on the debt and the matter did not come up for discussion during talks on the Leviathan export deal to Egypt that was signed [last] week,”

Israel’s Ministry of Energy stated (2/26). “There won’t be any backing down on the debt,” the IEC added. “The company continues to seek to collect it.” By the end of the quarter, it was unclear whether the deal would go forward or some new compromise would be reached.

JORDAN

The Jordanian government accepted the credentials of incoming Israeli ambassador Amir Weisbrod this quarter, ending the diplomatic crisis pursuant to the killing of 2 Jordanians in Amman by an Israeli embassy security guard on 7/23/2017 (see *JPS* 47 [2, 3]). The new ambassador took up his post in Amman on 4/16, and two weeks later Israel’s Economy Minister Eli Cohen met with Jordanian, Palestinian, and Japanese officials to discuss a Japanese proposal to expand a joint industrial zone near Jericho.

SYRIA

In the wake of a deadly exchange of violence on 2/10 (see *JPS* 47 [3]), tensions along the Israel-Syria border remained high. The Israeli government was increasingly willing to take both military action against Iranian forces supporting the Syrian government as well as credit for the attacks. Against a backdrop of growing uncertainty around the U.S. presence in Syria, and its commitment to the 7/14/2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA; see “Iran” below), the Israeli Air Force (IAF) conducted a series of missions targeting Iranian troops and infrastructure in Syria this quarter. The campaign culminated in major attacks on 4/9, 4/29, and in the immediate aftermath of U.S. president Trump’s decision to pull the United States out of the deal on 5/8.

Just six days after a drone flew (2/10) from Syria into Israel and the Israelis retaliated with air strikes on 12 Syrian and Iranian targets

in southern Syria, Prime Minister Netanyahu met (2/16) with UN secretary-general Guterres and protested Iranian activities in Syria. He said that Israel would not allow Iran to establish a military presence in close proximity to its territory and warned that the Israeli army would act against any attempt to do so. Two days later, he again threatened military action in a speech at the Munich Security Conference. Holding a piece of the aforementioned drone, he said, "We will act if necessary not just against Iran's proxies but against Iran itself."

After a relatively uneventful 3/2018, Trump shocked the international community and many in his administration when he announced, at a rally on 3/29, that a U.S. withdrawal from Syria was imminent. "We're knocking the hell out of ISIS," he said. "We'll be coming out of Syria, like, very soon. Let the other people take care of it now." Although State Department officials later clarified that they were unaware of any withdrawal plans, the Israeli prime minister was clearly concerned. He spoke with Trump by phone on 4/3, and according to a White House statement, Trump "reiterated the commitment of the United States to Israel's security and the two leaders agreed to continue their close coordination on countering Iran's malign influence and destabilizing activities." Two White House officials described the call as "tense."

Events in early 4/2018 tested the purported U.S. resolve. First, there were reports of a chemical weapons attack in the suburbs of Duma, outside Damascus, on 4/7 when some 40 people died of symptoms consistent with chemical weapons. Although Syrian state media denied that any such attack had taken place and it was unclear who was responsible, the reports put Trump in the position of having to respond. (He ordered a military strike against Syrian forces after a similar attack was

reported in 4/2017). Second, Israel conducted air strikes on an airbase outside Homs on 4/9, killing 14 people, allegedly including at least 7 Iranians.

The strikes on 4/9, made without Israel first informing the Russian government, exacerbated existing tensions between the major international players in the Syrian conflict. Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov called (4/9) the Israeli strikes a "dangerous development," and the Russian Foreign Ministry summoned (4/10) the Israeli ambassador for questioning. Russian president Vladimir Putin reportedly called Netanyahu (4/11) and urged him not to take any further steps against Iran in Syria. With the prospect of a Russian response looming, Trump worked with the United Kingdom and France to organize and execute (4/13) air strikes on Syrian government research, storage, and military targets near Homs and in Damascus on 4/13. The strikes, which caused unspecified damage and casualties, prompted the Russian ambassador to the United States to threaten "consequences." However, the attack was widely seen as limited in order not to provoke Russia into escalating the conflict any further.

Iran and Israel, meanwhile, made explicit threats to do just that. After an unnamed Israeli official admitted (4/16) that Israel was responsible for the 4/9 attack, a spokesperson for Iran's Foreign Ministry said (4/16), "The occupying Zionist regime will, sooner or later, receive an appropriate response to its actions." Israeli defense minister Lieberman countered (4/16) that Israel would not allow Russia to impose constraints on its response to any Iranian counterattack from Syria. "We will not allow Iranian consolidation in Syria," he added. At the same time, Lieberman said that Israeli diplomats were in constant contact with

their Russian counterparts to ease “friction” over their opposing stances on Syria.

Two weeks after the joint U.S., UK, and French strikes in Syria, the Israelis attacked again, conducting air strikes on Syrian army facilities near Hama and north of the Aleppo International Airport late at night on 4/29; 26 people were killed, including at least 11 Iranian troops, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR). U.S. officials later said (5/2) that the strike came after Iranian forces transferred a shipment of anti-aircraft missiles to one of the targeted facilities. One source claimed that some 200 missiles were destroyed (*New York Times*, 4/30). The strike ratcheted up tensions to the point that a senior U.S. official stated, “On the list of the potentials for most likely live hostility around the world, the battle between Israel and Iran in Syria is at the top” (NBC News, 5/2).

Trump’s 5/8 decision to pull the United States out of the 7/14/2015 JCPOA nuclear deal with Iran sparked another exchange of cross-border violence. Within an hour of the announcement, Israeli forces attacked a military base south of Damascus known to house Iranian troops; 15 people were killed, including 8 Iranians, according to SOHR. The Israeli army also went on high alert and instructed local authorities in the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights to prepare bomb shelters. The long-awaited Iranian counterattack came the next day. Iranian forces fired (5/9) approximately 20 Grad and Fajr-5 rockets toward Israel. Most fell short of the border, and the remaining few were intercepted by Israel’s Iron Dome missile defense system. Israel’s air force then retaliated again, bombing dozens of Iranian weapons storage, logistics, and intelligence sites across Syria. According to SOHR, 27 people were killed, including 19 Iranians. Later, Israeli sources called the barrage the largest Israeli

military operation in Syria since 1974. The Syrian army claimed that only three people had been killed but acknowledged that the strikes marked a “new phase” of direct conflict with Israel.

Also of note: The Israeli government lifted its gag order on the Israeli press reporting that Israel was responsible for the bombing of a Syrian nuclear facility in 9/2007 (see *JPS* 37 [2]). Although it was widely known that Israel was behind the attack, this marked the first time the Israeli government openly admitted it. “The courageous decision of the Israeli government almost 11 years ago [. . .] sends a clear message,” Intelligence Minister Yisrael Katz tweeted (3/21).

Devastation in Yarmouk Refugee Camp

For the first time in two years (see *JPS* 45 [4]), there was a surge of violence in Yarmouk refugee camp outside Damascus. Once home to the largest concentration of Palestinian refugees in Syria and approximately 160,000 residents overall, the camp’s population plummeted after the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011. According to UNRWA, only around 12,000 residents remained this quarter, including approximately 6,200 Palestinian refugees. With humanitarian conditions in the camp already dire, renewed fighting put residents at further risk.

In what the Syrian government claimed was an effort to retake territory under ISIS control and solidify control over the area around Damascus, Syrian army troops began an “intensive bombardment” of Yarmouk refugee camp on 4/19, according to a 4/24 report at the Electronic Intifada. After five straight days of fighting in the camp, the PLO called (4/23) for an end to the bombing. “The humanitarian situation in Yarmouk and surrounding areas has long been very harsh and is rapidly

deteriorating,” said an UNRWA spokesperson on 4/25. “Supplies of food and medicine are running low. There is no running water and very little electricity. Healthcare options are limited and there are no doctors remaining in the area.”

However, the fighting continued. By the end of 4/2018, the Syrian army had retaken approximately 60 percent of the camp and approximately 3,500 Palestinian refugees were able to escape (Al Jazeera, 4/29). At the same time, the Action Group for Palestinians of Syria reported (5/1) that at least 15 civilians had been killed since 4/19. A small armed group, Tahrir al-Sham, an al-Qaeda affiliate, agreed (5/1) to evacuate the approximately 15 percent of the camp it controlled and to retreat to Idlib province, but it was unclear if the violence would ebb by the end of the quarter.

LEBANON

With U.S. support, Israel and Lebanon pursued a diplomatic resolution to the issues driving tensions along their shared border last quarter, specifically the proposed route of a new Israeli border fence and Lebanon’s planned exploration for offshore oil and gas in the eastern Mediterranean (see *JPS* 47 [3]). On 3/8, Reuters reported that Lebanese and Israeli officials were meeting on a near-daily basis. “There is a full engagement from all the sides,” said a spokesperson for the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). “The dialogue is open. No one has ever walked out from these meetings.”

There were no reports of a breakthrough by the end of the quarter, but there was no further escalation of tensions either, despite minor provocations on both sides. During a conference in Rome on 3/15, Lebanese prime minister Saad Hariri announced a new deployment of the Lebanese army in southern

Lebanon. “While we are thinking of ways to move from a state of cessation of hostilities to a state of permanent cease-fire, Israel continues to make plans to build walls . . . along the blue line,” he added. Then, on 3/31, an Israeli Hermes 450 drone crashed in southern Lebanon. The Hermes 450 was known for carrying out assassinations, according to foreign sources (*Haaretz*, 3/31), and this particular drone was armed with four missiles, according to the local Lebanese press.

A Hezbollah Victory

As the Israel-Lebanon border remained largely uneventful, Hezbollah and its allies claimed a victory in the first Lebanese parliamentary election since 2009. They won (5/6) approximately a third of the plenum’s 128 seats, which Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah celebrated (5/7) as a “political and moral victory for the resistance.” Hariri’s Future Movement Party lost 11 of its 32 seats, but it was still the largest Sunni bloc, and the prime minister was expected to return for another term. “My hand is extended to every Lebanese who participated in the elections to preserve stability and create jobs,” Hariri said (5/7), pledging to continue working closely with Lebanese president Michel Aoun.

REGIONAL AFFAIRS

IRAN

Despite personal pleas from European leaders, repeated threats of retribution from the Iranian government, and frequent assurances of Iranian compliance by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), U.S. president Trump announced (5/8) that he was pulling the United States out of the 7/14/2015 Iran nuclear deal. Fulfilling a campaign promise,

he called the JCPOA a “great embarrassment to me as a citizen,” adding, “It is clear to me that we cannot prevent an Iranian nuclear bomb under the decaying, rotten structure of the current agreement.” A senior U.S. official said that in addition to reinstating all sanctions on Iran, Trump planned to impose new economic penalties, presumably in connection with Iran’s ballistic missile program and human rights record, both frequent subjects of his bellicose rhetoric.

Trump’s long-awaited decision followed months of politicking among the signatories of the agreement, with the three European parties—Germany, France, and the United Kingdom—scrambling to both preserve the deal and maintain their relationships with the belligerent new administration in Washington. Following Trump’s announcement last quarter that he intended to extend the JCPOA-connected waivers of U.S. sanctions only one last time and that he wanted to pursue a “follow-on” agreement instead to address the issues he saw in the JCPOA, British, French, and German diplomats engaged in talks to achieve such an agreement. Their U.S. interlocutors specifically wanted a deal that addressed “Iran’s development or testing [of] long-range missiles, ensures strong inspections, and fixes the flaws of the [JCPOA’s] ‘sunset clause,’” according to a diplomatic cable leaked to Reuters on 2/19.

Throughout the rest of the quarter, UK prime minister Theresa May, French president Emmanuel Macron, and German chancellor Angela Merkel each personally spoke with Trump on multiple occasions, urging him to stick with the JCPOA and increase pressure on Iran in other ways. Their deputies jointly lobbied for new EU sanctions on Iran in mid-3/2018, but they were unable to secure the necessary support from the rest of the bloc.

In the lead-up to Trump’s next deadline to either waive sanctions again or abandon the deal (5/12), Macron, May, and Merkel conferred frequently with each other and Trump, but they failed to reach a compromise enticing enough for Trump to back down from his campaign promise. According to several unnamed sources, the German, French, and UK governments simultaneously began work on measures that would protect European business connections with Iran should the United States reapply sanctions (Reuters, 5/4).

On the other side of the deal, there were no indications that Iran was willing to compromise or negotiate a subsidiary or “follow-on” agreement of any kind. The only variables in the Iranian rhetoric were the scope and variety of response the United States and its allies could expect were they to allow the JCPOA to fail. On 3/16, Iranian deputy foreign minister Abbas Araghchi said that the European countries would be making a “big mistake” and that Iran would be forced to respond if they imposed new nonnuclear sanctions on Iran “in order to please the [U.S.] president.” A month later, on 4/21, the foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, said that Iran would “vigorously” resume uranium enrichment if the United States abandoned the deal. Other Iranian officials suggested that Iran could back out of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, which stipulates that no signatory can produce nuclear weapons. Iranian president Hassan Rouhani, for his part, threatened (4/24) “serious consequences” to those who did not “live up to their commitments.”

In the days leading up to Trump’s decision, as European diplomats shuttled back and forth from meetings with Trump administration officials, Rouhani addressed the increasingly real possibility of the United States backing out of the JCPOA. Iran would likely continue

meeting its obligations, he said, especially if Germany, France, and the United Kingdom could guarantee that they would not renew their own sanctions. “What we want for the deal is that it’s preserved and guaranteed by the non-Americans,” he said (5/7). “Then the U.S. pullout will be okay.”

The last major player in this process was Israeli prime minister Netanyahu, a longtime critic of the JCPOA. He campaigned throughout the quarter for Trump to either “fix or nix” the deal. His efforts culminated in a dramatic press conference at the headquarters of Israel’s Defense Ministry in Tel Aviv on 4/30, during which he stood in front of a wall-sized screen and presented “new” evidence allegedly exposing Iranian lies about its nuclear program. A senior Israeli official later said that Netanyahu’s presentation was partially based on information derived from a trove of documents that Israeli spies smuggled out of Iran in 1/2018. While many analysts, and even the chair of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Bob Corker (R-TN), said that Netanyahu presented “nothing new,” Trump praised (4/30) the presentation. “[It] showed I was 100 percent right.”

The IAEA declined (5/1) to address Netanyahu’s specific allegations and opted instead to reiterate its position that Iran’s nuclear program never went “beyond feasibility and scientific studies” after 2009. Typifying EU responses, the French Foreign Ministry put out a statement on 5/1, saying that the details Netanyahu presented should be “studied and evaluated,” but that they appeared to reinforce only the “pertinence” of the JCPOA, rather than a need to abandon it. “The inspection regime put in place by the IAEA thanks to the deal is one of the most exhaustive and the most robust in the history of nuclear non-proliferation,” the statement affirmed. In the wake of his

presentation, Netanyahu shifted his position slightly. Rather than saying Trump was “about to nix” or “rip up” the JCPOA, he started saying that the deal was “in [Trump’s] hands.” Israeli diplomatic sources said that the prime minister did not want to be seen as interfering or applying any pressure on Trump in the lead-up to his 5/12 deadline (*Haaretz*, 5/2).

Trump’s announcement came at the end of the quarter, so it was unclear what new long-term strategies the major players would adopt. In the immediate aftermath, however, there was a burst of activity. A preemptive Israeli strike on Iranian forces in Syria prompted two days of cross-border violence (see “Syria” above). As that was playing out, Zarif tweeted Iran’s intentions to pursue a “diplomatic effort to examine whether remaining JCPOA participants can ensure its full benefits for Iran. Outcome will determine our response.” Meanwhile, U.S. treasury secretary Steve Mnuchin said (5/9) that Trump intended to impose new sanctions that would pressure Iran into accepting a tougher replacement agreement. May, Merkel, and Macron released a joint statement urging Iran to “continue to meet its own obligations under the deal” and pledging to meet their own commitments as well. China and Russia, the final two signatories to the JCPOA, also pledged to abide by the deal.

SAUDI ARABIA

The Saudi role in Middle East affairs was evolving this quarter, particularly around Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s campaign to consolidate his own power and further intensify Saudi Arabia’s antagonistic foreign policy toward Iran and to enhance the kingdom’s unofficial but warming relationship with Israel.

Rumored last quarter, the Saudi government ended its seventy-year ban on Israeli aircraft

flying in its airspace, as well as aircraft flying to or from Israel. On 3/22, Air India flew a Boeing 767 from New Delhi to Tel Aviv along a new, shorter route across Saudi Arabia. The flight marked the first tangible sign of a warming of ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia and prompted Netanyahu to comment (3/25) on the “huge” potential it held for Israel’s future role in the region. Following an Israeli report about secret Egypt-mediated Saudi-Israeli negotiations leading up to the flight, a PA official also remarked on the significance of the development (Channel 10 [Israel], 3/9). “The warm relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia are damaging the PA,” he said. “It seems that Israel is no longer the greatest enemy in the region anymore.”

Meanwhile, Crown Prince Mohammed embarked on a twenty-day visit to the United States in 3–4/2018. He met with Trump (3/20) and other U.S. officials to discuss a wide range of issues. According to some press reports, Trump administration officials briefed him on the contents of their long-awaited peace plan (see “The Trump Initiative” above). Bin Salman also gave (4/2) an extensive interview to *The Atlantic’s* Jeffrey Goldberg, covering topics from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to the JCPOA. In response to a question about the Jewish people’s right to a nation-state, the Saudi crown prince said, “I believe that each people, anywhere, has a right to live in their peaceful nation. I believe the Palestinians and the Israelis have the right to have their own land. But we have to have a peace agreement to assure the stability for everyone and to have normal relations.” Goldberg followed up with a question about Saudi Arabia’s shared interests with Israel, to which the crown prince responded, “Of course there are a lot of interests we share with Israel and if there is peace, there would be a lot of interest between Israel

and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and countries like Egypt and Jordan.” His comments prompted Goldberg to speculate that “the Saudis, like many Arab leaders, have tired of the Palestinians.”

While the Ramallah-based Palestinian leadership neglected to respond directly to the interview, Hamas, PIJ, and PFLP leaders all condemned the crown prince’s comments. The Saudi monarch and father of the crown prince then clarified (4/3) that Riyadh remained “steadfast” in its dedication to “the Palestinian issue and the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people.”

Nevertheless, the crown prince’s statements concerning the Palestinians remained a source of tension. On 4/29, Israel’s Channel 10 reported that Crown Prince Mohammed told a group of U.S. Jewish leaders in New York on 3/27 that the Palestinian leadership needed to accept the Trump administration’s peace plan or “shut up and stop complaining.” He also reportedly said that the Palestinians were not a top priority for Saudi Arabia because he had “much more urgent and important issues to deal with,” such as Iran.

QATAR

Last quarter, Qatari officials reportedly blocked Al Jazeera from airing a documentary, titled “The Israel Lobby,” on the influence of pro-Israel groups in Washington. The move followed a string of visits from U.S. Jewish leaders to Doha in late 2017 and early 2018, and on 4/10, the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA) announced that its president, Mort Klein, was personally responsible for getting the project cancelled. Klein held numerous meetings with senior Qatari officials, including “a two-hour meeting with the emir in his palace,” according to the ZOA. Qatari officials denied the first round of reports that they had

blocked the documentary in 2/2018. This time, Al Jazeera put out its own statement rejecting the ZOA's claim that the documentary was canceled. By the end of the quarter, however, Al Jazeera had not aired the documentary, marking seven months since the head of the network's investigate unit, Clayton Swisher, said it would be airing "very soon."

Interest in the documentary persisted throughout the affair, prompting at least one publication to uncover some details about the revelations it allegedly contained. The Electronic Intifada reported (3/5) that the investigative film explored how one Washington think tank, the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), functioned as an agent of the Israeli government. Specifically, a source who reportedly saw the finished documentary said it contained footage of a former Israeli army intelligence officer saying that the FDD worked on projects for Israel, including "data gathering, information analysis, working on activist organizations, [and] money trail."

INTERNATIONAL

UNITED STATES

Personnel Changes

U.S. president Trump's administration was in flux this quarter, with several top officials involved in issues related to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict losing either their jobs or access to classified information. Although these changes did not appear to have any immediate effect on the administration's overall peace initiative, they collectively indicated the situation was not one of Trump's priorities.

At the top of the list, Trump's son-in-law and senior advisor Kushner was stripped of his top-secret security clearance in late 2/2018.

According to a 2/27 report in the *Washington Post*, the downgrade came, in part, after National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster learned that officials in at least four other countries, including Israel and the United Arab Emirates, had private discussions about ways they could influence Kushner using information about his various business entanglements, debt, and lack of experience. One former White House official indicated that there was concern that Kushner was "naïve and being tricked" in the conversations he was having with foreign officials outside standard National Security Council processes. Kushner was leading the administration's Palestinian-Israeli peace initiative, and it was unclear how the downgrade would affect his work in that area, if at all. He reportedly continued work on the administration's peace plan throughout the quarter, alongside U.S. ambassador to Israel Friedman and Special Representative Greenblatt, and he attended the opening of the U.S. embassy in Jerusalem on 5/14.

Apart from Kushner's downgrade, Trump replaced Secretary of State Tillerson with Central Intelligence Agency director Mike Pompeo and McMaster with former U.S. ambassador to the UN and Fox News pundit John Bolton in 3/2018. Both Pompeo and Bolton are known as hawks on Iran, and it was frequently pointed out that they had greatly influenced Trump's 5/8 decision to pull the United States out of the JCPOA (see "Iran" above). Bolton, in particular, advocated for bombing Iran instead of signing onto the deal in the first place. In a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed published on 1/15/2018, he called for "ending Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution before its fortieth anniversary" in 2/2019. The Trump administration "has joined with extremist Zionists, fundamentalist Christians and white racists," PLO Executive Committee member

Ashrawi commented (3/22) on Bolton's hiring. "This man has a long history of hostility to Palestinians, dating to when he was at the UN, where he was protecting Israeli immunity," she said. "All this will lead to a devastating reality for Palestine and the region." Pompeo was less well known to the Palestinians, but he drew their ire before the quarter ended. During a three-day trip to the Middle East on 4/28–30, he repeatedly called on the Palestinians to reengage with the U.S. peace initiative. He also fielded numerous questions about Israel's brutal response to the Great March of Return protests in Gaza. "We do believe the Israelis have a right to defend themselves and we're fully supportive of that," he said (4/30), after meeting with Israeli prime minister Netanyahu.

Legislative Crackdown on BDS

The bipartisan campaign to undermine and marginalize the BDS movement confronted new challenges this quarter. At the same time, however, new anti-BDS measures advanced in both the U.S. Congress and the Kansas state legislature.

Ahead of the annual AIPAC conference in early 3/2018, senators Ben Cardin (D-MD) and Rob Portman (R-OH) unveiled a new draft of their Israel Anti-Boycott Act on 3/3. It became the main vehicle for anti-BDS sentiments in Congress this quarter, reviving a debate over Israel boycotts and the First Amendment. Cardin and Portman introduced the initial draft of the legislation alongside Rep. Peter Roskam's (R-IL) identical companion measure in the House on 3/23/2017 (see *JPS* 46 [4] and 47 [1]). It would have prohibited U.S. persons from supporting any boycott of a U.S. ally and specifically any boycott requested, fostered, or imposed by an international organization against Israel, inter alia (see S. 720 and H.R. 1697 of 3/23/2017

at congressionalmonitor.org). The measure quickly attracted more than 40 cosponsors in the Senate and more than 200 in the House, and for a time it was seen as having a good chance of passing into law. That progress slowed to a halt after the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and numerous Palestinian solidarity activists started campaigning against the bill on the grounds that it would infringe on free speech. After they persuaded one senator, Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), to rescind her cosponsorship, Cardin and Portman suspended work on the bill.

When Cardin and Portman offered up their new version of the bill on 3/3, they put out a press release clarifying their new position. "We have welcomed the public discussions that have been essential in focusing this bipartisan legislation in such a way that definitively upholds the rights of individual Americans while clarifying decades-old legislation," Cardin said. "I am confident this bill strikes the right balance between protecting U.S. businesses and our Israeli allies from unfair targeting by international organization [*sic*], while upholding America's commitment to free speech and individual liberty," Portman added. They insisted that the new text should not be seen as infringing on anyone's right to free speech and said that the new text made clear that a "person's noncommercial speech or other noncommercial expressive activity" could not be "used as evidence to prove a violation." The ACLU, however, came out (3/6) against the measure again. Noting "several significant improvements," the ACLU stated that "the bill's fundamental purpose violates the First Amendment." There was no further action on the bill in Congress.

Outside Washington, both sides of the BDS fight claimed victories this quarter. After a federal judge blocked (1/30) enforcement of

the anti-BDS law that Kansas passed on 6/17/2017, the state house passed a new version of the measure on 3/26. The bill, which would bar the state from contracting with companies engaged in a boycott of Israel, then came up against unexpected opposition in the state senate. One Republican senator in particular, Rob Schaaf, reportedly pledged to filibuster any effort to bring it up for a vote (*St. Louis Jewish Light*, 5/9).

Four months after the ACLU filed the first legal challenge to Arizona's new anti-BDS law in 12/2017 (see *JPS* 47 [3]), the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) filed (3/2) a similar lawsuit against Arizona State University (ASU), the Arizona Board of Regents, and Arizona's attorney general. The law passed during the first wave of anti-BDS legislation in 3/2016 (see *JPS* 45 [4]), and it required all state contractors to certify that they were not engaged in a boycott of Israel. CAIR's lawsuit stemmed from a recent incident at ASU, where the founder of American Muslims for Palestine (AMP) and Berkeley lecturer Hatem Bazian refused to sign a contract, prior to a scheduled appearance at a campus event, stipulating that he did not boycott Israel. ASU's administrators later sent him a clean contract, allowing him to speak on 4/3 as scheduled. (AMP is one of the organizations Israel blacklisted because of its BDS activities.) The future of the anti-BDS law, however, was still in question at the end of the quarter.

U.S. Jewish Community Divided

With recent polls showing a growing partisan divide over the Palestinian-Israeli conflict across the United States, Jewish and pro-Israel groups were struggling to balance the will of their constituents and the increasingly friendly relationship between Trump and Netanyahu. Once seen as a bastion of bipartisan U.S.

support for Israel, the annual AIPAC conference served as a battleground for this struggle in early 3/2018. It started on 3/4 when AIPAC's chief executive officer Howard Kohr stressed the need for a two-state solution in his address to the conference. "We must all work for that, toward that future, two states for two peoples: one Jewish with secure and defensible borders and one Palestinian with its own flag and its own future." The next day, settlement movement leader Yossi Dagan condemned Kohr's comments. "I am astounded as to why such a great, meaningful organization as AIPAC, whose *raison d'être* is pro-Israel advocacy in the United States, would present the positions of the State of Israel (and of the United States) so inaccurately before senior government officials, senators and congressmen, and the general pro-Israel public." Dagan concluded his open letter by urging AIPAC to "update its talking points."

Annual Human Rights Report

Marking yet another break with former president Barack Obama's administration, Trump's State Department expunged any use of the term "occupied territories" in reference to the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Golan Heights in its 2018 report on human rights. Published on 4/20, the report summarized human rights violations perpetrated around the world, including by the Palestinians and Israelis, as in previous years. Apart from the new terminology, the only other change came in the form of a methodological statement: "Because of timing constraints, the Israeli government was not able to provide a detailed response to every alleged incident, but it did maintain generally that all incidents were thoroughly investigated and parties held accountable, as appropriate, according to due process of law." Israeli officials as high-ranking as Defense

Minister Lieberman celebrated the terminology change. “They say that if you repeat a lie enough, it eventually becomes the truth, but the truth will always be stronger,” he tweeted (4/21). “The announcement by the U.S. State Department is proof of that.”

PLO on Trial

The U.S. Supreme Court rejected a petition to hear the case of *Sokolow v. PLO* on 4/2. In doing so, the court reaffirmed the appeals court’s decision (8/31/2016) to throw out the U.S. District Court of New York 2/23/2015 ruling in favor of the families of U.S. citizens killed in a string of attacks in Israel between 2002 and 2004 (see *JPS* 44 [4] and 46 [2]). The PLO was therefore no longer liable for the \$655 million in damages awarded in the initial ruling.

In an unexpected development, the Trump administration sided with the PLO prior to the ruling, despite appeals from both the families and a bipartisan group of lawmakers. On 10/26/2017, 24 senators had signed onto a letter to Attorney General Jeff Sessions and Tillerson calling on the administration to acquiesce to the Supreme Court’s request for an amicus curiae brief. “We urge the administration to demonstrate its resolve to combat international terrorism and put American victims first by avoiding any unnecessary delay and responding as soon as possible to the Supreme Court’s request,” they wrote. Solicitor General Noel Francisco filed the Trump administration’s brief four months later (2/22), but he urged the court to reject the appeal and reaffirmed the appeals court’s reasons for throwing out the initial verdict.

Facilitating Easier Entrance for Israelis

The U.S. embassy in Israel announced a new program (3/22) designed to facilitate

the application process for Israeli citizens looking to renew their non-immigrant visas. The new Interview Waiver Program allowed applicants who held valid tourist visas or visas that had recently expired to mail their application materials to the embassy. Previously, such applicants were required to visit the embassy for an in-person interview.

Also of note: All one hundred U.S. senators signed onto a letter (2/20) to the Department of Homeland Security requesting that Israel be included in the Customs and Border Protection office’s Global Entry program, which would allow certain Israeli travelers expedited customs and immigration screenings when entering the United States. “Israel’s membership in Global Entry would not only provide its passport holders a smoother visit to the United States but would also help to make our country safer by enhancing bilateral law enforcement cooperation,” the senators wrote.

UNITED NATIONS

UNESCO

Months after the United States and Israel pledged to walk away from the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) by the end of 2018 (see *JPS* 47 [2, 3]), Palestinian, Israeli, Jordanian, U.S., European, and other diplomats reached (4/12) a compromise on a new resolution, titled “Occupied Palestine.” The resolution, which UNESCO then passed (4/12) by consensus, criticized Israeli actions in Jerusalem and Gaza, but left the strongest language under discussion to a nonbinding annex. They also deferred further action on Israel and the oPt to the subsequent UNESCO session due to be held in 11/2018.

UNSC

While the United States was blocking any attempt to have the UNSC condemn Israel's deadly response to the Great March of Return protests in Gaza (see "The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict" above), the Palestinians and their Arab allies were campaigning against Israel's bid to win a seat on the council. Israeli officials declared their candidacy in early 2017 but did little in the way of campaigning until early 2018. In order to win one of the two rotating seats allotted to the Western European and Others regional group, Israel needed the support of two-thirds of the UN General Assembly in a vote set for 6/8. Especially after the surge of violence in Gaza, it was unclear if it would be able to overcome mounting opposition from the Arab states and the rival candidacies of Germany and Belgium.

"We are doing everything possible to convince as many countries as possible to block [Israel's bid]," PA foreign minister al-Maliki said on 4/12, two weeks after Israeli troops began killing Palestinian protesters in Gaza. "We believe we can, as Arab and Islamic states," he added, indicating that they had already secured the support of several European countries. Three weeks later, the Israeli delegation to the UN announced (5/4) that they were suspending their campaign.

UNRWA

Trump's punitive cuts to U.S. contributions to UNRWA last quarter created an "unprecedented financial crisis" for the Palestinian people, according to UNRWA's Commissioner-General Pierre Krähenbühl on 3/5 (see *JPS* 47 [3] for more on the cuts). "If 525,000 students no longer have access to education, 3 million patients don't have access to healthcare and 1.7 million don't receive

emergency assistance, we will see [a] catastrophic rise in insecurity."

In an effort to address the new budget shortfall, the agency launched a fundraising campaign last quarter, dubbed "Dignity is Priceless," and organized a donors' conference in Rome on 3/15. The UN Central Emergency Response Fund transferred \$30 million to UNRWA for its food aid program on 3/13 and Kuwait pledged \$900,000 in early 2/2018 (see *JPS* 47 [3]), but UNRWA was still facing a deficit of \$446 million, according to UN secretary-general Guterres at the 3/15 conference. Diplomats from ninety different countries collectively pledged approximately \$100 million in new support, including \$50 million from Qatar alone. Separately, the EU made (3/15) €82 million (approximately \$101 million) available immediately. Krähenbühl said (3/15) that all of this support was "a start" and that the money would allow the agency to continue its core services at least through the summer. Although UNRWA received another \$112.3 million in new pledges from Japan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Italy by the end of the quarter, it was still unclear if every UNRWA school would be able to open as planned in the fall.

UNHRC

As in recent years, the UN Human Rights Council adopted five resolutions related to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict during its thirty-seventh session in Geneva on 3/23. These condemned Israel's settlements in the oPt as illegal; urged Israel to refrain from growing the population of the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights; called for recognition of the Palestinian right to self-determination; called for "ensuring justice" against violations of international law in the oPt; and called for the preservation of human rights in the West Bank

and Gaza. While the Palestinians supported the votes, Israel's Foreign Ministry condemned the UNHRC as a "sham" and "a mockery of the noble purposes it pretends to represent."

EUROPE

As Israel met the protests in Gaza with lethal fire (see "The Great March of Return" above), the Israeli press reported (4/16) that a number of "European groups" had put forth the outlines of a possible "cease-fire" agreement. These were reported to have offered to facilitate the creation of an EU institution that would pay the salaries of Gaza's civil servants in exchange for Hamas renouncing armed struggle against Israel for at least five years. Hamas's response was not made public, and there was no further action reported.

UNITED KINGDOM

Controversy dogged the UK Labour Party and its leader, Jeremy Corbyn, this quarter, leading to a diplomatic row with Israel's Labor Party. The affair began when Corbyn, a longtime critic of the Israeli occupation, attended a Passover Seder organized by Jewdas, a self-described "radical" Jewish group. The UK press picked up the story after Jewdas's Twitter account posted (4/3) an "Israel-Palestine prayer" read at the meal. "We take a moment to consider how shit the State of Israel is in general and particularly at this moment," it read. In response, a number of Zionist UK Jewish groups and Labour Party officials accused Corbyn of facilitating anti-Semitism. "How can we take his stated commitment to be an ally against anti-Semitism seriously?" asked the president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, Jonathan Arkush. Corbyn rejected their allegations, but the story stuck. On 4/10, Israel's Labor Party leader Avi Gabbay

announced that he was cutting ties with the UK Labour Party. "It is my responsibility to acknowledge the hostility you have shown to the Jewish community and the anti-Semitic statements and actions you have allowed as leader of the Labour Party UK," he wrote in a letter to Corbyn. "You are not fulfilling your role in curbing anti-Semitism around you, and your public statements carry a load of hatred toward Israel."

DONORS

Besides the outpouring of international support for UNRWA in the wake of the U.S. aid cuts last quarter (see "UNRWA" above), there were a number of new pledges of support for the Palestinians. The Norwegian government agreed (5/2) to transfer \$2.71 million to support the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics through 2020. Japan alone donated (3/4) \$4.5 million to support the programs of the UN Children's Emergency Fund in the oPt, \$40 million (3/7) to support a variety of new economic development and humanitarian projects, and \$500,000 (4/19) to the UN Women's Palestine Office for a one-year economic empowerment project in Gaza. The UN was particularly active. On 2/20, the UN Humanitarian Fund released approximately \$900,000 to provide health and food support for 140,000 Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Specifically citing the large number of Palestinian injuries stemming from Israeli violence against the Great March of Return protestors (see "The Great March of Return" above), the UN's Coordinator for Humanitarian Aid and Development Activities, Jamie McGoldrick, released (4/26) \$2.2 million to address urgent humanitarian needs in Gaza. Germany also

contributed to relief efforts, announcing a €2 million (approximately \$2.34 million) donation to support Gaza's hospitals on 4/30.

The Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, the main policy-level coordination mechanism for development assistance to the Palestinians, convened in Brussels on 3/20. EU foreign policy chief Mogherini hosted the meeting, and Norwegian foreign minister Ine Eriksen Søreide chaired it. According to a summary prepared by Søreide, the attending donors noted the need to "reduce and eventually lift the blockade on Gaza," as well as the urgent needs for energy, water and sanitation, work, trade and job creation, income and liquidity, and humanitarian assistance. In keeping with that goal, they collectively committed €456 million (approximately \$559 million) to a new clean water project, which was set to include the construction of a large desalination facility and upgrades to associated infrastructure. The new water project was not fully funded, however (the total estimated cost was €562.3 million, approximately \$656.9 million). They also noted that work was under way to upgrade the electricity supply lines from Egypt and put in place plans to upgrade Gaza's sole power plant, inter alia. Also at the meeting, the Israeli representatives "recommitted" to getting construction materials shipped to Gaza to the appropriate building sites.

Finally, the Israeli press reported that Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates transferred approximately \$250,000 to the Islamic Waqf in early 5/2018 to finance renovations at Haram al-Sharif (*Hadashot*, 5/2). The reports, which were not confirmed, framed the donation as a direct response to the opening of the U.S. embassy in Jerusalem on 5/14.

BOYCOTT, DIVESTMENT, 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

As has increasingly been the case in recent years, Hollywood produced the highest profile boycott-related development of the quarter. The Genesis Prize Foundation, which annually awards individuals "who inspire others through their engagement and dedication to the Jewish community and/or the State of Israel," cancelled (4/19) its annual award ceremony when this year's recipient, Academy Award-winning actor Natalie Portman, decided she would not be traveling to Israel to accept the \$2 million prize in 6/2018. Portman, an avowed Zionist and dual U.S.-Israeli citizen, said she did "not feel comfortable participating in any public events in Israel" due to "recent events" that were "extremely distressing to her," according to her representatives. Coming amid reports of a mounting death toll in Gaza, the announcement made international news, with Palestinian solidarity activists pleasantly surprised by her apparent reversal on Israel and defenders of Israel shocked at her apparent betrayal. Less than twenty-four hours later, Portman clarified, on Instagram, that her decision was not meant to signal support for BDS. "My decision [. . .] has been mischaracterized by others," she wrote. "I chose not to attend

because I did not want to appear as endorsing [Israeli prime minister] Netanyahu, who was to be giving a speech at the ceremony. [. . .] Because I care about Israel, I must stand up against violence, corruption, inequality, and abuse of power.”

Meanwhile, boycott activists launched two major new campaigns this quarter. On 3/28, the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) published an open letter calling on the online television and movie screening service Netflix to remove the Israeli drama *Fauda* from its offerings. They argued that the show, which depicts the actions of an undercover Israeli soldier in the West Bank, served as “racist propaganda for the Israeli occupying army.” PACBI also threatened legal action should Netflix ignore their campaign. Second, BDS Argentina launched a campaign in 4/2018 calling on the country’s national soccer team to cancel a friendly match scheduled for 6/9 in Tel Aviv. With the hashtag #ArgentinaNoVayas, the campaign gained momentum through the end of the quarter.

Ireland was a hotbed of boycott-related activity. On 3/22, nearly two-thirds of the student body at Trinity College Dublin voted for a measure calling on their student union to adopt a long-term policy in support of BDS. The following month, the Irish National Teachers’ Organization (INTO), the country’s largest teachers’ union, unanimously approved (4/4) a motion calling on INTO to address Israel’s abuses of Palestinian children and mandating INTO leaders raise the issue with “the relevant government departments.” The following day, the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), representing approximately

374,000 students at universities and colleges across the country, approved (4/5) a similar measure. “The students of Ireland have today made the historic decision to support the people of Palestine,” USI president Michael Kerrigan said (4/5). Finally, the Dublin City Council unanimously approved (4/9) a motion endorsing BDS and committing the city to ending contracts with Hewlett Packard Enterprise and its subsidiary DXC, both accused of supporting the Israeli occupation.

In the United States, the Durham City Council in North Carolina unanimously voted (4/9) to block the city’s police department from participating in any “military-style” training programs abroad, including those in Israel. Likewise, in Italy, the University of Pisa’s student government adopted (3/24) a motion calling for the university’s administrators to “condemn [the Israeli] regime” and “reject any contracts with Israeli universities committed to supporting the state of apartheid imposed on the Palestinian territories.”

DIVESTMENT

The U.S. academy was the primary arena for divestment-related action this quarter, and BDS proponents achieved a string of victories. In a referendum at the University of Minnesota, the student body called (3/11) on the university’s administrators to divest from companies deemed complicit in Israel’s violations of Palestinian human rights. Second, Barnard College students approved a similar divestment measure on 4/18, with 64 percent of the votes in favor. However, Barnard’s president Sian Beilock rejected the call on 4/23, informing the students that she would not consider divestment action until a clear consensus formed across the Barnard

community (fewer than half of all enrolled students voted in the referendum). Finally, George Washington University's student senate passed (4/23) a resolution calling on their administrators to divest from nine

companies that were contributing to abuses of Palestinian human rights: Boeing, Lockheed Martin, Elbit Systems, Caterpillar, CEMEX, General Electric, Northrop Grumman, Raytheon, and Motorola Solutions.