

## **1995 The year that was**

The first nine months of 1995 in Palestine saw conditions similar to those of the previous year: frustrating and seemingly fruitless negotiations with Israel, further land confiscations and human rights abuses and continuing armed operations by the Islamic opposition. Important events, however, took place over the final three months of the year. Towards the end of September, the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Israel signed the Taba Agreement, the second stage of the process begun with the Oslo and Cairo Agreements. The most dramatic events of the year were two assassinations: the first of Islamic Jihad leader Fathi Shiqaqi by Israeli agents in Malta on 26 October, the second that of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a Jewish extremist on 4 November.

### **Continuing Negotiations with Israel**

Throughout early 1995, several meetings between Chairman Yasir Arafat, PM Yitzhak Rabin and Deputy PM Shimon Peres and failed to achieve any result towards extending self rule in the West Bank. In March, Arafat and Peres agreed on a deadline of 1 July for reaching an agreement. When this passed, 25 July became the new target. It was the cause of no little surprise when the 400-page Taba Agreement was finally reached, with the official signing ceremony taking place in Washington on 28 September.

### **The Taba Agreement**

The Taba Agreement divides the West Bank, excluding East Jerusalem, into three categories: area A: six major towns (excluding Hebron), from which the IDF redeployed by the end of the year, handing administrative control to the PA with joint PA-IDF patrols, and Israeli security duties including right of 'hot pursuit'; area B: a patchwork of Palestinian villages, in which the PA has civil authority, while the IDF retains overall "security responsibility"; and area C: Jewish settlements and areas defined by the Israelis as militarily sensitive, where Israel remains in full occupation. In Hebron, the IDF retains full control of the Ibrahimi Mosque, and the central district of the city in which settlers occupy five buildings. A partial IDF redeployment from Hebron was scheduled for March 1996 but subsequently delayed until after the Israeli election in May 1996. In sum, the PA gained various degrees of limited administrative control over 27% of the West Bank, with the Israelis retaining effective control over the entire area.

The complexity and difficulties in the implementation of the agreement were made apparent in October, when the Israelis presented redeployment maps differing from those agreed on at Taba, while Israeli President Weizmann refused to free four women prisoners whose unconditional release had been agreed. Nonetheless, 600 political and 200 civil prisoners were released on 10 October, and on the same day, the redeployment process began, with the PA establishing its presence in the village of Salfit near Jenin.

Caretaker Prime Minister Shimon Peres seemed to take advantage of the disarray in the Israeli right following the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin to accelerate the process. The IDF redeployed from Jenin on 13 November, and the Palestinian police entered the city.

The same process was repeated in five further towns in the West Bank: Tulkarm (10 December), Nablus (11 December), Qalqilya (16 December), Bethlehem (21 December) and Ramallah (27 December).

### **Preparations for Elections and Internal Political Developments**

Throughout the year various new political factions were formed, such as the Palestine National Grouping headed by Bassam Shaka'a and the National Democratic Coalition led by Haider Abd al-Shafi. Dialogue between the PA and the Hamas movement continued throughout the year. Following the Taba Agreement, PA and Hamas officials met in Cairo, with Israel facilitating the travel of Hamas leaders from the Palestinian Territories. The talks covered the elections; participation by Hamas in the PA; military

attacks on Israel and detainees in Israeli prisons.

The year ended with the prospect of Palestinians in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza voting in a political election for the first time, for an 88-member Legislative Council and President of the Authority. Executive powers will be exercised by a cabinet, 80% of whom will be members of the council, and 20% appointed by the president.

Voter registration began on 12 November. By the end of the month, 350 000 Gaza Strip residents had received voting cards. Registration in East Jerusalem was initially sporadic due to fears that registration might compromise residency rights in the city. The electoral law proposed by the PA was the cause of controversy, dividing the West Bank and Gaza in 16 districts with varying numbers of seats in each district. Candidates were to be elected by simple majority, leading to fears that the system would not give a fair chance for small parties to gain seat, but favour the main faction, Fatah, to gain a stronger position. Nevertheless, the law was ratified by the PA in late November. By the time nominations closed, 700 candidates had registered. Despite their decision to boycott the election, the religious and secular opposition urged their supporters to exercise their right to register as voters.

### **The Palestinian Authority**

1995 began with a symbolic demonstration of state-building, as Chairman Arafat mailed the first letter with a Palestinian stamp. Equally symbolically, however, the letter had to be put inside a second envelope with an Israeli stamp on it in order to be delivered. On 31 January, the PNA-appointed Mufti of Jerusalem announced the start of Ramadan, the first time the fast had begun without the go-ahead from Cairo or Amman. The first Palestinian passports were issued in March, and in April, the first group of Palestinian passport holders set out on the pilgrimage to Mecca. In May, plans for an airport in Rafah were announced, and in June, Palestinian Television began broadcasting, initially for two hours daily.

In February, Palestine and South Africa established full diplomatic ties at ambassadorial level. Foreign visitors included the Troika of European Union Foreign Ministers in February, which visited Chairman Arafat in Gaza and met with a Palestinian delegation headed by Faisal Husseini at Orient House in East Jerusalem, British PM John Major, US Vice President Al Gore in March and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl in June.

### **Human Rights**

The conduct of the Israeli government and security forces continued to call their commitment to peace into question during 1995. By the end of the year, it was estimated that 91 Palestinians, including seven police officers, had been killed by Israelis in 1995, 35 of whom were killed by the IDF, 14 by special units, 14 by settlers and 14 under interrogation. The first week of the year saw the IDF shooting three Palestinian police officers in Gaza, an undercover unit killing four Palestinians in Bet Liqia in the West Bank, and a shoot-out at Erez between the IDF and Palestinian police. Also in January, 30 families were expelled from their homes in the Yatta district near Hebron. In April, a Palestinian invalid died following interrogation at the hands of the Israeli secret police. The form of torture which resulted in his death, violent shaking, was endorsed by an Israeli ministerial committee in August. Three days later a Palestinian was shot dead at a checkpoint on the road to Jerusalem. In June, three Palestinians were killed by the IDF entering the Gaza Strip from Egypt, three demonstrators demanding the release of political prisoners were killed in Nablus, and an undercover unit killed a member of Islamic Jihad. Ironically, one of Yitzhak Rabin's last acts as Prime Minister was to order the murder in Malta of Islamic Jihad leader Fathi Shiqaqi.

The human rights record of the Palestinian Authority was far from ideal. A Middle East Human Rights Watch report issued in February concluded that, "The PNA has not demonstrated a commitment to installing the rule of law." In February, Raja Sourani, Head of the Gaza Centre for Rights and Law, was arrested for the first of several times following his criticism of the establishment on State Security Courts

in Gaza and Jericho. Several newspapers were closed for short periods during the year, among them al-Quds, al-Hayat al-Jadida, al-Watan and al-Istiqlal. As of September, five Palestinians had died in PNA custody. The PNA's policy of attempting to prevent attacks on Israelis led to periodic mass round-ups of Islamic and secular opposition activists, and the use of arbitrary military or state security courts for speedy trials, often held at night.

### **Israeli Settlements**

Continued expansion of Israeli settlements, especially around Jerusalem, remained a serious cause for concern in 1995, and a violation of the Oslo Agreement. In May, the Israelis began confiscating Palestinian land throughout the West Bank in order to build roads for the use of settlers bypassing Palestinian towns. Prime Minister Rabin admitted that the programme, consisting of 130 kilometers of roads in total, would cost the Israeli taxpayer \$250,000 per settler family. In order to complete redeployment, thousands of dunams of Palestinian land were expropriated, especially around Nablus, Ramallah and Bethlehem.

The Israeli right remained vehemently opposed to even the limited withdrawal envisaged by the government. In February, the 'Council for Settlement in Judea and Samaria' instructed all settlements in the West Bank to seize and enclose areas surrounding settlements designated as 'state land'. A further land grabbing campaign began in June, aimed at undermining the Taba negotiations. This intensified the following month with settlers closing off roads and attacking Palestinians and their property; the IDF did not intervene except to suppress Palestinian counter-demonstrators. In July, The Israeli authorities, however, did act to disperse 1,500 settlers who had camped at al-Khader near Bethlehem in protest against the prospect of redeployment. In the same month, several settlement rabbis issued a religious judgement that Israeli soldiers were obliged to disobey orders regarding the evacuation of settlements.

Settler violence resulted in the deaths of 14 Palestinians over the year. Incidents included an attack on the Qutuba girls' school in Hebron in September, following which 25 pupils and 20 toddlers from a nearby kindergarten were hospitalised. The IDF intervened on the side of the settlers, attacking parents with teargas and rubber bullets. The next month, Israel TV reported that settlers and rightists were planning to form a militia to resist any attempts to evacuate settlements. The strains in Israeli society culminated in the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin by a right wing extremist on 4 November.

### **Jerusalem**

Despite negotiations on the future of Jerusalem being due to begin in May 1996, Israeli politicians made repeated statements that the issue was closed. Palestinian daily life in the city remained hampered by Israeli restrictions. East Jerusalem remained under the closure imposed since March 1993, with Palestinians from the rest of the West Bank and Gaza still prevented from entering the city without permits. Settlement activity around the city continued apace. A crisis erupted in early May with the announcement of the biggest land confiscation proposal in Jerusalem since 1980, covering 130 acres of Palestinian land in the Beit Hanina and Beit Safafa areas. This, it was announced, was the first stage of a plan by the West Jerusalem Municipality to seize a further 1,000 acres of Palestinian land in the city. The Palestinian Authority could do no more than condemn the expropriation, and the United States vetoed a muted Security Council Resolution condemning the measure. In the event it was a combination of the Arab parties in the Knesset and the political ineptitude on the part of Israeli PM Rabin which led to the freezing of the move. Rabin declared a motion condemning the expropriation a matter of confidence, leading to the Likud threatening to vote for the motion in order to bring down the government. In the face of this, the government withdrew the proposal.

The Israeli West Jerusalem Municipality began a campaign to destroy 'unlicensed' Palestinian homes. In May alone, 27 demolition orders were signed, compared to 19 for the whole of 1994. Palestinian national institutions in the city were subject to harassment, three being briefly closed in July. Orient House was subject to settler demonstrations and harassment throughout the summer, with children attending the

nearby Dar al-Tifl school also suffering at the hands of settlers and police. In November, Rabin announced that he would not meet any foreign visitor of the rank of minister or above who had visited Orient House. In December, new residency regulations for Palestinians became apparent, with children whose mothers, but not fathers, were registered as Jerusalem residents, denied residency rights in the city.

### **Opposition**

The conduct of the Israeli government and settlers did much to provoke continued armed operations by elements of the Palestinian opposition. Bus bombings took place in January, July and August, leading to tension between the PA and the religious opposition, and mass detentions of opposition activists. In April, an explosion killed five Palestinians, among them a Hamas member, in Gaza's Sheikh Radwan neighborhood. Hamas accused the PA of collaboration with the Israelis, with the PA accusing Hamas of recklessness in storing explosives in a residential area. In retaliation, two suicide bombers attacked settlers and IDF personnel in the Gaza Strip. Much of the dialogue between the PA and Hamas which took place throughout the year was aimed ending such tension, and seemed to succeed, with no major armed operations taking place in 1995 after August.