

2014 - The Year That was

The year 2014 was declared as the year of solidarity with the Palestinian people by the United Nations. Even though it marked a significant progress in the internationalization of the Palestine question and as the year progressed a number of European states recognized Palestinian statehood, the year did not bring an end to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. On the contrary, 2014 will be remembered for the cycle of violence, revenge, horrific murders, killings, kidnappings, bombings, rocket attacks, continued Israeli settlement building, the introduction of a worrying religious aspect to the conflict, and a brutal war that left more than 2,100 Palestinians dead.

The peace negotiations revived in 2013 had already begun on shaky grounds since there was no consensus on the general basis of such talks and the suspension of settlement building as demanded by the Palestinians. It was thus no big surprise when **January** began unpromising with PM Netanyahu describing the Palestinian demand of a “so-called right of return” as “not right, not justified and not legitimate” and approving plans for 1,400 new settler homes in the West Bank.



February saw with President Abbas’ proposal for an American-led NATO force to patrol a future Palestinian State and the announcement by Palestinian chief negotiator Saeb Erekat that the Palestinian response to Israel’s ongoing atrocities would be to join the Fourth Geneva Convention and bring Israel before the International Criminal Court.

Also in February, representatives from Fatah and Hamas met to discuss steps towards reconciliation and Palestinians faced unprecedented challenges to Al-Aqsa Mosque compound as Israeli attempts to have a presence on the site and the demand to have access to the holy site were escalating. In response, Jordan warned on 26 February that it may review its 1994 peace treaty with Israel. With the peace talks at an impasse, Palestinian chief negotiator Erekat rejected the US suggestion to extend an April deadline for another nine months of talks with Israel to culminate in a framework peace deal.



In **March** Israel came up with a new demand, asking that Palestinians recognize Israel as a Jewish State, which, however, was outright rejected. When on 28 March Israel delayed the fourth release of 26 Palestinian prisoners, breaching an earlier agreement, in a bid to blackmail the PA with new conditions for continuing the diplomatic process, tensions on the ground increased. Meanwhile, Egypt closed over 1,300 tunnels along the border with Gaza, and both Israel and Egypt severely restricted the movement of Palestinians across the Gaza Strip's three main border crossings.



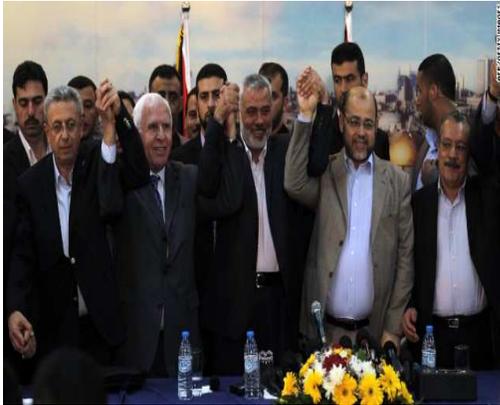
With the Israeli-Palestinian talks deadlocked, President Abbas, on 1 **April**, signed letters preparing for the PA/PLO's accession to 15 international treaties and conventions. The move signaled an attempt to achieve statehood outside the negotiations process. In response, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu announced that Israel would take its own 'unilateral steps' and approved the construction of over 700 settlement units in East Jerusalem as well as imposed economic sanctions against the PA. On 23 April, Hamas and the PLO surprised with a new reconciliation agreement to form a national consensus government and hold elections - harshly condemned by Israel and the United States. A day later, the Israeli Cabinet punitively announced it would not negotiate with a Palestinian government backed by Hamas. Peace talks spiraled into yet another impasse, each side accusing the other of bad faith and placing impediments in the way of reaching a solution. Consequently, the 9-month deadline for the peace talks expired with no agreement in sight and the talks were suspended.



May began with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu plan to promote a “Basic Law” that would define the status of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people. After the collapse of the negotiations, the Palestinian leadership meanwhile sped up its diplomatic efforts for international recognition of Palestine as a state under occupation and for Israel to be held accountable as the occupier, including advancing the plan to join the International Criminal Court in The Hague. On 8 May, President Abbas declared that negotiations would not resume unless Israel released the fourth agreed-upon batch of prisoners and suspended settlement building for at least three months. During Nakba demonstration on 15 May, Israeli forces shot and killed two Palestinians teenagers in the West Bank, leading to further tensions on the ground. On 25 May, his Holiness Pope Francis visited Palestine and met with President Abbas who briefed him on the obstacles facing the peace process. While visiting Bethlehem, Pope Francis made an unplanned detour to hold a silent – but symbolically strong - prayer at the separation wall. By the end of the month, Fatah and Hamas agreed on the make-up of a national consensus government, comprising officials from both parties.



On 2 **June**, the seven-year old political division between Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza officially came to an end, when the latter surrendered their control to the new national consensus government that would rule over both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. While the vast majority of the international community cautiously welcomed the development, these plans were harshly and suddenly disrupted when on 12 June, three Israeli yeshiva students went missing at the Gush Etzion settlement bloc near Hebron. Israeli government immediately finger-pointed at Hamas as behind the “kidnapping” and launched Operation “Brother’s Keeper” to find the disappeared youth, thereby taking preemptive measures to crush Hamas in the West Bank. These moves were also directed towards President Abbas who was pressured to resolve the national consensus government over the incident. During the operation, three Palestinians were killed, many more injured and over 300 arrested. On 30 June, the bodies of the three missing Israelis were found near Halhul, triggering an unprecedented series of violence and counter violence.



In revenge to the killing of the yeshiva students, Jewish extremists in early **July** abducted and brutally murdered Palestinian teenager Mohammed Abu Khdeir from Shu'fat, setting off a spiral of violent clashes that erupted throughout Jerusalem. Attacks and additional kidnapping attempts on Palestinian children added a new worrying dimension to the worst year in a decade for Palestine in the city. The Israeli crackdown on Hamas in the West Bank had further serious consequences. Responding to that and expressing the growing frustration with the intensifying blockade on Gaza, rocket fire from there into Israel resumed as did Israeli air strikes, soon leading to the third war on the battered coastal strip since 2008. Israel's Operation "Protective Edge" began on 8 July and would last for 50 days. On 15 July, Hamas rejected an Egyptian ceasefire proposal because it had not been involved in the negotiations. Two days later, the operation was expanded to a ground invasion allegedly to destroy Gaza's tunnel system. However, the toll on the civilian population became so unbearable that on 28 July, the UNSC called for an "immediate and unconditional" ceasefire, allowing for the delivery of urgently needed humanitarian assistance to the Gaza Strip. By the end of the month, over 1,360 Palestinians had been killed and entire neighborhoods destroyed.



In early **August** Amnesty International demanded an immediate investigation into the Israeli assaults against hospitals and health professionals in Gaza. PA Tourism and Antiquities Minister Rula Ma'ayah denounced the destruction of 41 mosques during Israel's military operation, calling it a war crime. On 26 August, Israel and Hamas agreed to an open-ended ceasefire putting an end to seven weeks of Israeli bombardments which, according to the UN, had left 2,130 Palestinians killed (70% of them civilians and at least 491 children), over 11,100 wounded and 520,000 displaced. By the end of the month, President Abbas and Hamas representatives reportedly agreed on a three-phase plan that would lead to the establishment of a Palestinian state. After the war, Israel and Hamas both declared victory. (At the end of 2014, the sad truth is that the siege on Gaza is still in place and the reconstruction moving at a very

slow pace). And to add insult to injury, Israeli authorities announced on 31 August plans to confiscate 4,000 dunums of Palestinian-owned land west of Bethlehem, near the Gush Etzion bloc.



At the beginning of **September**, the PA declared that rebuilding Gaza would cost \$7.8 billion. On 9 September, President Abbas asked the UN to replace the US as the leading peace broker. Later the month, Fatah and Hamas reached a comprehensive agreement to return to a national consensus government. On 30 September, President Abbas vowed to join the International Criminal Court, if the UNSC failed to pass a planned resolution that would set a timetable for ending the Israeli occupation.



Overshadowed by the war in Gaza, Israel had also escalated its assaults on Al-Aqsa Mosque compound – with closures and bans for Palestinian worshippers and an unprecedented number of Jewish right-wing “visitors”, who more often than not tried to perform their rituals at the site. On 8 **October**, President Abbas warned the Netanyahu government of the repercussions of such actions, and indeed, clashes broke out almost daily between worshippers and Israeli forces at the compound, soon spreading to other neighborhoods in the city. The situation further sharpened when on 22 October Palestinian Jerusalemite Abdul Rahman Al-Shaludi slammed his car into a light-rail station, killing two and injuring 8 others. A similar attack took place a few days later prompting, along with numerous attacks by Jews on Palestinian workers in West Jerusalem, many commentators to speculate about the possibility of a third Intifada. Clashes intensified when Israel – after the attack on right-wing Jewish activist Yehuda Glick at a rally outside the Menachem Begin Heritage Center in Jerusalem and the subsequent killing of the suspect, Mutaz Hijazi, from Abu Tor, a few hours later by Israeli forces - closed all access to Al-Aqsa Mosque for first time since its occupation in 1967. At the end of the month, on 30 October Palestinians scored a victory on the international level when the Swedish government officially

recognized the state of Palestine. Meanwhile in Gaza, the Palestinian national consensus government had held its first ever meeting in Gaza City on 9 October. And on 12 October envoys from countries around the world gathered in Cairo to discuss aid for Palestinians, eventually pledging \$5.4 billions for Gaza's reconstruction.



November began as violent as October with Ibrahim Al-Akkari from Shu'fat ramming his car into a group of commuters at the light rail station in Sheikh Jarrah, killing an Israeli border policeman and injuring 13 others before being shot and killed himself at the scene. The month saw further attacks on both sides, including the storming of a synagogue in West Jerusalem on 18 November, where Ghassan Abu Jamal and his cousin Uday from Jabal Al-Mukabber killed four men before being shot dead themselves. Hours later, Spanish members of parliament voted nearly unanimously to exert pressure on Madrid to recognize Palestine as a state. In Gaza, a series of bombings hit Fatah targets, causing Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah cancel a planned trip to Gaza City. On 28 November, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius told his parliament that the government was working at the UN to get a resolution adopted that would set a two-year timeframe to reach a negotiated solution between Israel and Palestine.



By **December**, the Israeli intelligence organization "Shurat HaDin Israel Law Center" formally requested the ICC prosecutor to open an investigation into alleged war crimes committed by Palestinian President Abbas. On 2 December, French lawmakers voted in favor of recognizing Palestine as a state, following by

similar moves in Ireland and Portugal on 10 and 14 December respectively. Over the last month, Israeli forces carried out 112 assaults against Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque and Hebron's Al-Ibrahimi Mosque. Amnesty International stated that the Israeli military committed war crimes during its Gaza offensive in the summer and must be investigated. On 10 December, PA cabinet member without portfolio, Ziad Abu Ein, died after confrontations with Israeli forces at a protest march in the West Bank. On 17 December, the European Parliament overwhelmingly backed the recognition of a Palestinian state "in principle". The same day, representatives of 126 High Contracting Parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention met in Geneva to adopt by consensus a ten-point declaration recalling applicable international humanitarian law (IHL) in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem. On 30 December, the UNSC failed to adopt a Palestinian resolution calling for an Israeli withdrawal from the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem and the establishment of a sovereign and independent Palestinian State by late 2017. In response, President Abbas signed on to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.



Besides the horrifying images of the Gaza War, the year 2014 will also be remembered as one where unilateral Palestinian efforts to advance statehood in international institutions progressed significantly, and where Israel faced growing international isolation (especially its relations with the Obama administration reaching a new low). However, with no formal peace talks on the table for the first time in decades, the situation on the ground is further deteriorating for Palestinians with no end in sight to the occupation and its manifestations: ongoing Judaization/Israelization, growing racism facing Palestinians at all and worrying levels, continued siege of Gaza, no improvement of peoples' lives and livelihoods, and little, if at all, perspectives for the young majority of the society. It is thus no coincidence that the outlook for 2015 remains very gloomy.