

1

2004-The Year That Was

The year 2004 will be remembered as the year in which Palestinians lost several leaders, most notably, their father-symbol Yasser Arafat, and in which Israel perpetrated unabated grave breaches of International Law, in part, by escalating its attacks against Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip and continuing with the building of its controversial separation barrier in the West Bank.

The news at the beginning of the year was dominated by the ongoing construction of the wall and the resulting protests and demonstrations involving Palestinian villagers and local and foreign peace activists. Israel also continued its incursions into Palestinian camps, towns, and cities, the first of which ended on 5 **January**, when Israeli troops finally left Nablus after a three-week-long operation there during



which 12 Palestinians had been killed. On 8 January, PM Qrei'a caused an uproar in Israel by stating that Palestinians would seek to forge a single binational state with Israel if Israel were to carry out its West Bank separation plans, while Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin triggered another series of discussions by saying that Hamas would agree to a "temporary peace" with Israel in exchange for the establishment of a Palestinian state "on the basis of the 1967 borders," the evacuation of settlements, and the resettlement of Palestinian refugees inside Israel. On 12 January, PM Sharon

presented his unilateral Disengagement Plan to the Knesset, causing much controversy, especially when, two days later, a Hamas female suicide bomber from Gaza blew herself up at the Erez checkpoint, killing four Israelis and wounding nine. On 20 January, the Israeli army resumed implementing its house demolition policy, flattening 30 homes and a mosque in Rafah RC. On 26 January, Pres. Arafat and PM Qrei'a announced a long awaited series of reforms in the Palestinian security services. Meanwhile, in Jerusalem, Israeli authorities continued to confiscate land to make way for the separation barrier and began replacing the existing fence in Abu Dis with an 8-m-high concrete wall.



In addition, Israeli authorities demolished three homes, sealed a fourth, and damaged a wall. On 29 January, a Palestinian suicide bomber blew himself up in West Jerusalem, killing ten people and wounding dozens more. On the regional level, a German-mediated prisoner swap deal between Israel and Hizbullah resulted at the end of the month in the release of 23 Lebanese prisoners and 400 Palestinians as well as 12 other Arabs and a German citizen in return for a kidnapped Israeli businessman and the bodies of three soldiers. With regard to the international arena, the PA submitted a formal affidavit to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) supporting its right to rule on Israel's separation barrier.



Violence continued throughout **February**, with Israeli troops killing over 20 Palestinians, mainly in raids on Rafah RC and Gaza City. Internal matters were dominated by a hastily convened military court in Gaza City charging four Palestinians on 7 February with planting explosives that killed three US security guards in a convoy in Gaza in Oct. 2003. On

22 February, and after intense pressure, Israeli workers dismantled a small part of the separation barrier east of Baqa Ash-Sharqiyya to ease the conditions for local Palestinians. A day later, as the ICJ began three days of hearings in The Hague concerning the legal consequences of the construction of Israel's separation barrier, Palestinians – joined by thousands of people in the Arab World - observed a 'Day of Rage' and protested against the construction work. During an army operation in Ramallah on 25 February, Israeli troops raided Pres. Arafat's HQ as well as four Palestinian banks on the pretext of search of money transfers from abroad to local 'militant' groups. The month ended with deliberations of the Fateh-Revolutionary Council at the Muqata'a in Ramallah that concluded with calls for a general ceasefire, and the implementation of the 'road map' and the Saudi initiative. In Jerusalem, Israeli forces demolished in February at least ten homes and various other structures and repeatedly clashed with Palestinian, Israeli, and foreign demonstrators protesting against Israel's separation barrier in Abu Dis and the Biddu area, where three protestors were killed and over 70 injured. On 7 February, tensions ran high when settlers took over 15 apartments in three buildings in Silwan. Later In the month, on 22 February, another suicide bus bombing in West Jerusalem left seven people dead and dozens of others injured.



The death and destruction continued in Gaza, where on 7 **March**, Israeli troops raided the Nusseirat and Bureij RCs, sparking clashes in which 15 Palestinians were killed. The same day, PLF leader Mohammed Abbas (Abul Abbas), the mastermind of the 1985 Achille Lauro hijacking, died while under US custody in Baghdad. Locally, the PLC elected Rawhi Fattouh as its new speaker on 10 March,



while the widespread anti-separation barrier protests involving hundreds of Palestinians and foreign peace activists continued at various locations throughout the month. Violence intensified after a double joint Fateh-Hamas suicide bombing at Ashdod Port on 14 March, which left ten people dead.



Rawhi Fattouh

In response to the attack and a foiled twin attack at the Erez crossing of a day earlier, Israel vowed to step up the offensive against Hamas. Three days later, Israeli forces killed five Palestinians in Rafah RC and demolished six homes. On 18 March, Jordan's King Abdullah 'secretly' visited PM Sharon at his Negev ranch, the assumption being that the two leaders met to discuss the Disengagement Plan, which

Jordan feared would result, if implemented, in large numbers of Palestinians migrating to Jordan. On 22 March, Israeli forces assassinated Hamas founder and leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin in Gaza City, along with seven others. A day later, Abdel Aziz Rantisi was named the new 'general commander' of Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Khaled Masha'al

Hamas' overall leader. On 25 March, some 60 prominent Palestinian officials and intellectuals published an advertisement urging the public to refrain from seeking revenge for Sheikh Yassin's death and igniting a new round of bloodshed that would only hurt Palestinian aspirations regarding independence.



Sheikh Ahmed Yassin

The same day, the US vetoed a UNSC resolution condemning Israel for the assassination.



In Jerusalem, Israeli forces continued demolishing houses – this month at least five in addition to several other structures – and clashing with demonstrators protesting against the construction of the separation barrier. Also in March, the preparations for UAE-funded repairs at the Dome of the Rock were completed, causing protests among Jewish extremists. On 19 March, a Palestinian Christian - George Khouri - was shot dead while jogging in the French Hill area by Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades activists who mistook him for a Jew. At the end of the month, yet another group of settlers moved into two buildings in Silwan, sparking clashes between Israeli forces and Palestinian residents.

April began with PM Qrei'a and Ministers Erekat and Sha'ath meeting with US envoys Stephen Hadley, Elliott Abrams, and William Burns in Jericho and requesting US assurances that the Gaza pullback plan would not prejudice future talks on a permanent settlement. Yet another diplomatic setback occurred when Pres. Bush, during a meeting with PM Sharon in Washington on 14 April, endorsed the Gaza pullout plan and passed a letter to Sharon in which he assured him, *inter alia*, that Israel could keep some West Bank settlement blocs and would not have to absorb Palestinian refugees under a final status agreement. A day later, the Disengagement Plan was published, stating, amongst other things that "There will no longer be a basis for the claim that the Gaza Strip is occupied territory... Thus Israel releases itself from legal-political, moral, and economic responsibility for the Strip and transforms it into an independent entity." On 17 April, Israeli forces – in another blow to the Hamas movement - assassinated Hamas leader Abdul Aziz Rantisi along with his driver and a bodyguard. Later in the month, Mahmoud Zahhar was named as Rantisi's successor. During several raids on Beit Lahia and Beit Hanoun on April 20-21, Israeli forces shot dead 14 Palestinians and destroyed a number of buildings. Jerusalem in April witnessed the issuance of tenders to construct over 1,000 new housing units in the settlements of Har Homa, Ma'ale Adumim, and Adam. Israeli authorities also demolished three houses and a cement factory and handed numerous additional demolition orders to the owners of houses that lacked building permits or that were in the path of the planned route of the separation barrier.



Abdul Aziz Rantisi



The violence continued throughout **May**, beginning on 2 May with a Palestinian attack on a settler car in Gaza's Gush Katif Bloc in which all five passengers were killed. On 5 May, Israel's State Comptroller's Report caused an outcry when it revealed that millions of dollars had been funneled via the Ministry of Housing to settlement construction, including the construction of outposts that

Israel had pledged to remove. On 11 May, tensions ran high when Hamas activists withheld the remains of six Israeli soldiers it had blown up with a bomb placed under their armored personnel carrier in Gaza City and the Israeli army responded with raids that left eight Palestinians dead and over 120 injured. A day later, another attack – this time on the Philadelphi Route – resulted in five Israeli troops being killed, while continuous fighting elsewhere left at least six more Palestinians dead.



Over the following week, ongoing Israeli operations in Rafah RC left over 50 Palestinians dead and more than 190 homes destroyed. Amidst this violence, Palestinian-Egyptian talks on security arrangements after a possible Gaza withdrawal resumed. Internationally, Palestinians received another blow when Pres. Bush stated on 8 May that the establishment of a Palestinian state by 2005 was "not realistic" due to increased violence and the replacement of Mahmoud Abbas as PM. On 19 May, US Ambassador James Cunningham abstained from voting on a

UNSC resolution, which was passed by a vote of 14-0, demanding that Israel halt the demolition of Palestinian homes and condemning the killing of Palestinian civilians in Rafah RC. In Jerusalem, Israeli authorities demolished three houses during May, handed over several evacuation orders to make way for the separation barrier, and razed tens of dunums of land in the Dahiet Al-Barid and Ar-Ram areas for the same purpose (with construction beginning there on 24 May). Jewish extremists also made the news - on 3 May when four Jewish families moved under heavy police protection into two homes in Abu Dis, and on 19 May when they staged a provocative march through East Jerusalem to celebrate 'Jerusalem Day' (the anniversary of the capture of the Old City and East Jerusalem during the War of 1967).



The beginning of **June** witnessed unprecedented chaos caused by members of the PA security forces in Gaza taking over police posts and engaging in other protest actions in order to pressure for reforms, fight against corruption, and condemn the dismissal of certain personnel. On 6 June, a Tel Aviv Court sentenced Tanzim leader Marwan Barghouthi, who insisted that, because he was a PLC member, the court had no authority to try him, to five consecutive life sentences and 40 additional years in prison. That same day, the Israeli Cabinet passed Sharon's revised Disengagement Plan by a vote of 14-7, foreseeing a four-stage evacuation by the end of 2005 of all 21 settlements and military installations in the Gaza Strip, plus four settlements in the northern West Bank as well as compensation for settlers. Palestinian factions dismissed the plan and Egypt's role in its implementation, referring to it as a policy of deception with the goal of imprisoning Palestinians in a giant Gaza jail while controlling the sea, air, and borders and widening



Marwan Barghouthi

the occupation in the West Bank with settlements and the separation barrier. In the meantime, weeklong demonstrations against the separation barrier began in the village of Az-Zawiyeh near Salfit. Towards the end of the month, Israel scored another point when the US House of Representatives passed a resolution endorsing the principles laid down by Pres. Bush in his 14 April letter to Sharon, backing Israel's demand that it be allowed to retain some of the West Bank and keep out Palestinian refugees. Also during June, Israeli forces demolished some 16 houses in Jerusalem, razed tens of dunums of agricultural land there, and uprooted hundreds of trees



to make way for the construction of the separation barrier, which caused widespread protests involving Palestinians and foreign peace activists, mainly in Ar-Ram. Further unrest was caused on 11 June by news reports concerning a private initiative for constructing a new settlement - 'Givat Yael' - on land belonging to the village of Walaja near Bethlehem, and on 14 June by Jewish settlers taking over a house in the Musrara neighborhood, claiming that it was 'Absentee property.' Additional discouraging news involved the erection of a military watch tower near the separation barrier at Qalandia checkpoint on 17 June and the destruction of



a new cemetery in Jabal Mukabber (after access to the traditional burial site had been impeded by the construction of the separation barrier). A piece of good news came at the end of the month when Israel's High Court of Justice ruled on 30 June that 30 km of a 40-km section of the separation barrier north of Jerusalem (running near the settlements of Givat Ze'ev, Har Adar, and Ramot as well as Mevasseret Zion) had to be rerouted as the original route caused "severe injury" to Palestinian lives.

The first news in **July** concerned PM Sharon ordering the rerouting of a 30-km stretch of the separation barrier that the High Court of Justice had declared illegal and his call for examining whether other parts of the fence should also be rerouted in light of the ruling. That same day, the Israeli army killed nine Palestinians in separate incidents in Gaza, while in the international arena, Democratic US presidential candidate John Kerry promised not to negotiate with Pres. Arafat and expressed support for Israel's right to defend itself by attacking 'terrorist' organizations. On 9 July, Palestinians scored a victory when the ICJ in The Hague determined the legal consequences of the construction of Israel's separation barrier, ruling that the wall contravenes International Law, that it must be dismantled, and that compensation must be paid to the Palestinian owners of property confiscated for its construction.



A new phenomenon that emerged in July was the use of kidnappings to put pressure behind demands: the first of these were the 16-17 July seizing of Gaza's police chief Ghazi Jabali by Fateh activists demanding his removal and the kidnapping of four French aid workers by activists from Khan Younis demanding sweeping reforms by Pres. Arafat. Amidst such turmoil, PM Qrei'a submitted his resignation to Pres. Arafat, who refused to accept it. Arafat himself tried to calm the mood by replacing senior security officials but then reconsidered the move after thousands marched in Gaza to protest against the appointments. Internal unrest continued with armed Palestinians setting fire to the Military Intelligence HQ in Khan Younis on 18 July and the shooting of former PA Information Minister Nabil Amr, whose leg was consequently amputated, in his Ramallah home on 19 July. The attempts to facilitate internal reform continued when on 21 July the PLC urged Pres. Arafat to accept PM Qrei'a's resignation and appoint a new cabinet to carry out reforms and stop the current unrest. A few days later, PM Qrei'a began asserting authority over the security forces, a concession





he won from Arafat after a ten-day standoff in the Palestinian leadership. There were a few more incidents of armed Palestinians torching or taking over governmental buildings or kidnapping foreigners, all of which were aimed at drawing attention to the demands for reforms, jobs, and financial help. On the international level, the UNGA voted on 20 July with 150:6 (10

abstentions) to demand that Israel obey the ICJ ruling and tear down its separation barrier. (The US once again used its veto while all 25 EU countries voted in support of the resolution.) On 21 July, the Knesset extended the Citizenship Law by another six months, further undermining family unification between Israeli Arabs and Palestinians from the Territories, including Jerusalem. The same day, Israel announced at a meeting with World Bank representatives that by 2008, no more Gazan workers would be allowed into Israel. In Jerusalem, the month began with an interim injunction by the Israeli High Court of Justice ordering that work on the separation barrier near the Har Homa settlement be halted and a hunger strike by dozens of protesters, including PLC members and MKs, in a tent in Ar-Ram to protest against Israel's construction of the barrier. Israel however continued to raze trees and land in Sawahreh Ash-Sharqiyya, Al-Izzariyya, Abu Dis, and Sheikh Sa'ed, demolished seven barracks in the Mt. of Olives area, and handed evacuation orders to three Jahalin Bedouin families.

Internal unrest continued in **August** with Fateh activists breaking up a ministerial news conference on the fifth, gunmen ambushing General Intelligence Commander Tareq Abu Rajab, wounding him and killing two bodyguards on the 25th, and the PLC voting 31-12 for an anti-corruption reform package, also on the 25th. On 6 August, Israel finally reopened the Rafah border crossing, allowing some 1,500 Palestinians to head home after being stranded on the Egyptian side for three weeks. A few days later, the EU's anti-fraud office announced that its investigation, opened in Feb. 2003, had found no evidence that EU aid to the PA had been used to finance



illegal activities such as terrorism. On 11 August, a car bomb apparently intended for a target in Jerusalem, exploded prematurely at Qalandia checkpoint, killing two Palestinian bystanders and triggering new raids on Jenin, from where the driver had been dispatched. In mid-August, thousands of Palestinian prisoners began a hunger

strike, the goal of which was to secure better conditions, that lasted for 18 days, after which Israel agreed to meet key demands. On 23 August, an Israeli team appointed by Atty.-Gen. Menachem Mazuz to examine the implications of the ICJ ruling surprisingly recommended that the government should "thoroughly examine" the possibility of formally applying the Fourth Geneva Convention to the Territories in a way that would allow Israel to exert its right to assume security responsibility there. The team also recommended that Israel change its approach to UN rapporteurs in the Territories and to the ICJ and further suggested that the route of the separation barrier should be reconsidered, as should the way in which Israel operates in the Territories. A day later, the special UN rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian Territories, South African Law Professor John Dugard, stated in a report to the UNGA that there is "an apartheid regime" in the Palestinian Territories "worse than the one that existed in South Africa." Towards the end of the



Arafat and Arun Gandhi

month, visiting Arun Gandhi, the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, urged Palestinians to rise up peacefully to demand an end to occupation, saying freedom was close and that Israel and the Palestinians had no alternative other than to partition the land. The month ended with a double Hamas suicide attack in Beersheba in which 16 people were killed and over 100 wounded. The razing of land in the Jerusalem area to make way for



the separation barrier continued throughout the month of August, which also witnessed approval being given to the plan to construct 600 new housing units in the Ma'ale Adumim settlement. In addition, Israeli bulldozers demolished ten Palestinian homes in Jerusalem due to their having been built without a license while the owners of several other properties were handed demolition orders.

September began with more PA reform efforts, including the launching of a voter registration drive, and more demolitions and raids in the Gaza Strip, including the raid on a Hamas training camp in Gaza City that resulted in the killing of 14 activists. With regard to the Disengagement Plan, Israel's Security Cabinet approved on 14 September the creation of a special evacuation authority, a draft compensation scheme, and a budget. That same day, PM Sharon publicly threatened to expel Arafat "at a convenient time," saying that there was



no difference between him and top Hamas leaders killed by Israel in recent months. Another ten Palestinians were killed during raids in Nablus and Jenin on 15 September. On 23 September, US Secretary of State Powell urged Pres. Arafat to step aside for the sake of achieving his lifetime goal of a Palestinian state and cede control of his security



forces, warning that international aid could be jeopardized if he did not. On 30 September, two days after Palestinians marked the fourth anniversary of the *Intifada* and mourned the loss of over 2,800 of their fellow countrymen, the Israeli Security Cabinet responded to the firing of a Qassam rocket from Gaza and the consequent killing of two Israeli children in Sderot by approving Operation 'Days of Penitence,' the aim of which was to secure Israeli control over northern Gaza. During battles in the area, especially in Jabalia, 25 Palestinians - at least eight of them children - were killed and over 100 injured, all in one day. The voter registration drive for the presidential election, due to take place in

January, was disrupted in Jerusalem by the Israeli police, which at one point closed down voter registration centers in the city. Israeli forces also continued razing lands in the Ar-Ram area in preparation for the construction of the separation barrier and began to erect a 5-m-high wall on the road between Dahiet Al-Barid and the Qalandia checkpoint. The tension in the city increased when on 14 September, Israeli settlers took over a Palestinian house in the Old City and then again, on 22 September, when a female suicide bomber blew herself up at the French Hill junction hitchhiking post, killing two policemen.

By 4 **October**, Operation 'Days of Penitence' had claimed the lives of over 75 Palestinians and caused widespread destruction in the northern Gaza Strip (by the time the offensive ended on 15 October, over 100 people had been killed, over 200 injured, and dozens of homes demolished). On 5 October, Sharon aide Dov Weisglass caused an outcry when he was quoted as having said



that the main significance of the Disengagement Plan was that it would freeze the peace process, which in turn would prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state. On 18 October, a group of Egyptian doctors arrived at the Muqata'a in Ramallah to examine Pres. Arafat, who was said to be suffering from a severe case of the flu; concern

increased when six Tunisian doctors arrived on 23 October, two days before Israel announced that it would allow Arafat to leave his compound for the first time in two and a half years to receive medical treatment in Ramallah. Amidst the concern about the Pres.'s health, Israel continued with its attacks against the Palestinians, assassinating Hamas co-founder Adnan Al-Ghoul on 21 October and killing at least 16 Palestinians in a series of air strikes on Khan Younis RC on 25 October. On 26 October, PM Sharon won a major victory for the Disengagement Plan when a Knesset majority of 67 to 45 voted in its favor (seven abstentions).



The news, however, was overshadowed by Pres. Arafat's deteriorating health condition and with the news that the Israeli army was reportedly beginning to prepare for the possibility of his death on 27 October. A day later, the arrival of Arafat's estranged wife Suha in Ramallah added to the rumors about the severity of his condition. News reports suggested that he was suffering from a potentially fatal blood disorder, possibly leukemia, and needed further treatment in a French hospital. On 29 October, while prayers and rallies took place all over



the Palestinian Territories, Pres. Arafat left his Ramallah HQ to be flown via Amman to the Percy Military Hospital in Clamart, outside Paris. Over the next few days, people all around the world remained glued to TVs as they waited for news about the Pres.'s health. In Jerusalem, during Ramadan, tens of thousands of Muslims attended the weekly Friday prayers at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, which was repeatedly closed to worshippers under the age of 40. Later in the month, amidst the confusion about Pres. Arafat's health, Israeli officials stressed that they would not allow Arafat to be buried in the Al-Aqsa compound and that a burial plot in Abu Dis was being considered as a suitable option.



Yasser Arafat (1929-2004)

The month of **November** was dominated and overshadowed by news surrounding the deteriorating health and eventual death of Pres. Yasser Arafat. On 2 November, a statement by French doctors treating Arafat indicated that his condition was improving and ruled out a diagnosis of leukemia. The next day, however, it was reported that the Pres.'s condition had deteriorated, that he had been placed in intensive care, and that no visitors

except his wife were allowed to visit him. On 4 November, by which time the Pres. was said to have lapsed into a coma, the Fateh Central Committee held an emergency meeting while efforts were also exerted to ensure that quiet was maintained. That evening, the Israeli Channel 2 TV station, citing French sources, said that Arafat had been declared clinically dead, although Percy Hospital spokesman Estripeau denied that this was true. Back in the West Bank and Gaza, on 5 November, Palestinian faction leaders attempted to maintain a united front during the crisis surrounding Arafat's health. Meanwhile in Clamart, PLO spokesperson Leila Shahid announced that Arafat was "between life and death" and in a reversible coma. A day later, Presidential Sec-Gen. Tayyeb Abdel Rahim announced that Arafat's authorities had been divided between Mahmoud Abbas and PM Ahmed Qrei'a, who pleaded with Hamas to refrain from launching attacks and causing Israel to retaliate, thereby giving the PA leadership an opportunity to stabilize the situation. On 8 November, Arafat's wife Suha lashed out at Palestinian leaders (Abu Ala', Abu Mazen, and Nabil Sha'ath) on Al-Jazeera TV, accusing them of traveling to Paris with plans "to bury Arafat alive" in order to inherit his power, adding, "Abu Amar is alive and is returning to the homeland."



The next day in Ramallah, Tayyeb Abdul Rahim struggled with tears as he told a press conference that "all the necessary arrangements" would be made at the Muqata'a, which the leadership had decided to turn into a mausoleum for Arafat, should the Pres. die, making it his final resting place until circumstances would allow him to be buried in Jerusalem. Palestinian officials FM Nabil Sha'ath, PM Qrei'a, Mahmoud Abbas, and PLC Speaker Rawhi Fattouh arrived in Paris and met with Arafat's doctors who ruled out cancer or poisoning as the reason for his decline. Sha'ath later put an end to speculation by declaring that Arafat was still alive but "very poorly" and that his life was "now in the hands of God." On 10 November, the Palestinian leadership decided to split powers, should Arafat die, with Mahmoud Abbas becoming head of the

PLO's Executive Committee, Ahmed Qrei'a PM and head of the PA security services, and PLC speaker Rawhi Fattouh temporary PA chairman until new elections could be held, while Israel agreed to Arafat being buried at the Muqata'a. Meanwhile in Paris, Sheikh Taysir At-Tamimi, the PA's chief Islamic judge, stressed after visiting Arafat that it was illegal under Islamic Law to remove life support "as long as there are any signs of life in the body," and Leila Shahid told the media that Arafat was "in the final phase of his life." The next day, Yasser Arafat's death at Percy Military Hospital in Clamart at 2.30 am GMT was announced; the PA declared a 40-day mourning period and Israel sealed off the Territories, fearing an explosion of Palestinian protest. Arafat's body was later carried by French Republican Guards during a ceremony at the Villacoublay



Military Airport before being transported to Cairo. On 12 November, the Pres.'s coffin was carried by a horse-drawn gun carriage in a funeral ceremony in Cairo attended by world leaders before being flown to Ramallah, where Pres. Arafat was laid to rest at his battered Ramallah HQ. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians gathered at the Muqata'a, while mock funerals were held all over the WBGS.



On 14 November, Interim Pres. Rawhi Fattouh announced that a presidential election would be held on 9 January 2005. Hamas and the Islamic Jihad responded by saying that they would not participate in the election. Later in the month, the Fateh Central Committee named Mahmoud Abbas as its presidential candidate. On 22 November, Secretary of State Powell met with Abbas, Fattouh, and Qrei'a in Jericho, hailing what he referred to as a "moment of opportunity." At the same time, in Paris, Arafat's nephew and PLO representative to the UN, Nasser Al-Qidwa, told the press that although medical records had failed to give a definite cause for his uncle's death, he refused to rule out the possibility that he had been



Nasser Al-Qidwa

poisoned. The month ended with Mustafa Barghouthi of the Palestinian National Initiative Al-Mubadara announcing his decision to run in the presidential election and the PA urging donor countries to reject an Israeli request for financial aid for the establishment of an alternative West Bank road network for Palestinians.



Mustafa Barghouthi

Throughout the month, Israeli forces continued work on the separation barrier in and around the city of Jerusalem and destroyed at least two Palestinian homes in the east of the city.

December began with the surprising last-minute decision of the imprisoned Marwan Barghouthi to run in the presidential election. The move was condemned by Fateh, and Barghouthi withdrew his candidacy later in the month as the result of internal pressure. At the end of the nomination period for the presidential election on 1 December, it was announced that ten candidates were actually running. Meanwhile, Yasser Arafat's brother Fathi, a physician and the founder of the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, died from cancer in a hospital in Cairo. On 6 December, PLO Chairman Mahmoud Abbas, PM Qrei'a, and FM Sha'ath commenced a regional tour with a visit to Syria to discuss bilateral relations and mend fences between the two sides. They later traveled to Lebanon for the first high-level talks since the Israeli invasion in 1982 and in a bid to turn over a new leaf in Palestinian-Lebanese relations, as well as to Kuwait for

the first official visit since the 1990-91 Gulf War. Palestinians and international peace activists continued demonstrating at the various separation barrier construction sites throughout the month with the major protests taking place in Beit Ula and Idna near Hebron and Budrus. On 9 December, the campaign for the first municipal elections since 1976 began in 26 West Bank councils. Three days later, Palestinian activists blew up an Israeli army post in Rafah, killing five soldiers and wounding at least ten others; the Israeli army retaliated by closing the main road in Gaza and destroying some 18 houses in Khan Younis RC, as well as two buildings in Gaza. At the annual Herzliya Conference in mid-December, Sharon, after praising his



Disengagement Plan, reiterated his commitment to a two-state solution and said that 2005 would provide an historic opportunity for Israel to change its strategic situation with regard to its regional and international relations as well as *vis-à-vis* the Palestinians. On 17-18 December, Israeli raids on Khan Younis RC left at least 11 Palestinians dead, dozens more injured, and nearly 40 homes reduced to rubble. On 21 December, PLO Chairman Abbas – at a ceremony attended by thousands of Palestinians - marked the

end of 40 days of mourning with lavish praise for the "eternal" Yasser Arafat, vowing to uphold his struggle for a state in all of the Palestinian Territories and that Arafat would one day be buried in his beloved Jerusalem. On 23 December, Palestinians in 26 West Bank locations cast their ballots in the first Palestinian municipal elections since 1976, with a voter turnout of

81%; while Fateh won most seats (136 of a total of 306 seats), Hamas won a majority in 13 municipalities (Fateh only in ten). On 26 December, some 560 prominent Palestinians appealed in a newspaper advertisement for an end to violence and a push for democratic reform to advance the quest for a state. In the international arena, a donor conference took place in Oslo on 7 December, and PLO Chairman Abbas told the media on 14 December that the use of weapons in the four-year-long *Intifada* had been a mistake and should end, as should the chaos in the Palestinian security apparatus. On 21 December, British PM Tony Blair arrived for meetings with Israeli and Palestinian leaders; in Ramallah, he discussed with Abbas and Qrei'a his initiative for a conference in London, the focus of which would be the strengthening of the new Palestinian leadership and the consolidating of support for a plan to rehabilitate Gaza and the Palestinian economy. The year ended with Mahmoud Abbas lighting a torch during a rally to mark the 40th anniversary of the foundation of Fateh.