

## THE YEAR THAT WAS

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The year 2017 was a year of painful anniversaries for Palestinians. It commemorated 120 years since the First Zionist Congress and the founding of the World Zionist Organization (Basle, 1897); 100 years since the British government's "Balfour Declaration" (2 November 1917); 95 years since the British government obtaining a mandate from the League of Nations (June 1922); 80 years since the Peel (or Palestine Royal) Commission published its report, for the first time recommending partition of Palestine stating that the League of Nations Mandate had become unworkable (7 July 1937); 70 years since the UN General Assembly's Partition Plan was enshrined in Resolution 181 (29 November 1947); 50 years since the 1967 War and 50 years of Israel's subsequent illegal occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza Strip (June 1967); 35 years since Israel's organization and supervision of the Sabra and Shatila Massacre (16-18 September 1982); 30 years since the first Palestinian *intifada* started (8 December 1987); 25 years since the Oslo negotiations began (December 1992); 20 years since the Hebron Protocol was signed (January 1997); and 10 years since the Hamas-Fatah infighting resulted in the Palestinian split with Hamas' taking over Gaza and in the beginning of Israel's blockade on the Gaza Strip (June 2007).

2017 began with a glimpse of hope resulting from the December 2016 American non-veto of UN Security Council Resolution 2334 declaring the status of the settlements in the Occupied Territories null and void, from European peace-making efforts pushing for the Paris Peace Conference, which on 15 January brought over 70 countries together attempting to salvage the two-state solution (though in vain), and from a new round of Hamas-Fatah reconciliation talks that began the same day in Moscow and ended with an agreement to establish a unity government and have Hamas and the Islamic Jihad join the PLO.

However, the first dampers were not long in coming: on 17 **January**, the Knesset passed a controversial bill that would allow verdicts from military court proceedings in the occupied West Bank to be submitted as evidence in Israeli civilian courts, a move which critics claim is another step aiming to illegally annex the West Bank by applying Israeli domestic laws in the occupied territory. On 6 February the Knesset



passed into law the so-called outpost "Regularization Bill", which allows Israel to retroactively expropriate private Palestinian land on which settlements and outposts have been built (though the High Court of Justice issued an injunction freezing its implementation in August). And on 12 February, an amendment to the contested "Muezzin Bill" was approved, which seeks to impose limits on the Muslim call to prayer in Israel and in occupied East Jerusalem, paving the way for the bill to be voted on in the Knesset.

Similar unpromising sign came from Washington, where President Donald Trump, during his first press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu on 15 **February** radically departed from the US' long-held position in favor of a two-state solution, saying he could "live with either" a one- or two-state solution, adding that "if Bibi, if Israel and the Palestinians are happy."

Thus, when a week later the PA launched its new National Policy Agenda for the next five years, seeking to achieve Palestinian national unity, economic independence, social justice and rule of law, the end of the occupation and realization of Palestinian independence, it was widely received with doubtful reactions over the feasibility of its ambitious goals.



**March** began with another discriminatory law passed in the Knesset, banning entry of foreign nationals and of Palestinians if they or the organizations they belong to publicly expressed support for a boycott against the State of Israel or against Israeli settlements. Meanwhile, the Israeli NGO Yesh Din revealed that Israeli authorities have served indictments in only 8.2% of cases of Israeli settlers committing anti-Palestinian crimes in the West Bank in the past three years. In mid-March, a UN ESCWA report concluded that Israel was guilty “beyond a reasonable doubt” of imposing apartheid policies against Palestinians and urged the international community to abide by its “legal obligation” to punish such discriminatory measures. In response, Israeli officials compared the report to Nazi propaganda and called for UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to publicly reject it. When Guterres subsequently asked ESCWA Under-Secretary General Rima Khalaf to withdraw the report she refused and resigned from her post. On 24 March, the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva adopted resolutions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, *inter alia* condemning settlements and calling on states and firms to avoid ties with them as well as hold Israel accountable for its human rights violations in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem.



**April** was dominated by three main events and their repercussions: the forced shut down of the Gaza Power Plant on 16 April due to a lack of fuel, which brought yet more hardships and suffering to the coastal strip’s population; the PA decision to impose drastic salary cuts for its employees in Gaza, which led thousands of them to demonstrate in protest; as well as the launching of an open-ended hunger strike on 17



April under the banner of "Freedom and Dignity" by over 1,500 Palestinians in Israeli prisons seeking better conditions. During the second half of the month a general strike and several protests took place across the territories in solidarity with the prisoners (who ended their mass hunger strike only after 40 days after reaching an agreement with the Israel Prison Service).

The month of **May** began with Hamas announcing its revised “charter”, which accepts a Palestinian state along the 1967 "Green Line" border, while rejecting any legitimacy of “the Zionist entity,” followed by the movement’s Shura Council electing Ismail Haniya as new head of the politburo, succeeding Khaled Mashaal, and Yahya Sinwar as head of Hamas in the Gaza Strip. On 7 May, Israel presented yet another controversial proposed legislation, the "nation-state bill", claiming that "the right to realize self-



determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people" and pushing for Hebrew to become the lone national language, thus downgrading Arabic to "a special status in the state". Palestinian suffered another setback when on 11 May the FIFA, at a conference in Bahrain, cancelled a final vote on a Palestinian resolution to prohibit FIFA games from being played on illegal Israeli settlements - a move strongly condemned by human rights organizations which had backed the motion.

On 13 May, municipal council elections took place in 145 West Bank municipalities (electoral lists in another 181 municipalities won automatically after running unopposed, and 65 localities had no nominated electoral lists at all). Lists not officially tied to a party won 65% and official party lists 35% of the seats, while Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and PFLP boycotted the vote. On 21 May, a Peace Now report revealed, *inter alia*, a 34% increase in illegal Israeli settlement construction in 2016,



with almost 70% of the new housing were in areas that are highly problematic in terms of a two-state solution. In light of such numbers, President Trump's statement after briefly meeting President Abbas in Bethlehem, saying that "Abbas assures me he is ready to work toward that goal in good faith, and (Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin) Netanyahu has promised the same. I look forward to working with these leaders toward a lasting peace" could not really be taken seriously.

**June** started with more regional turmoil when Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, Egypt, Yemen and Libya severed their ties with Qatar in a dispute over Doha's alleged support for Islamist groups, in particular the Muslim Brotherhood, and its perceived tolerance of Saudi Arabia's arch-rival, Iran. Not surprising for many observers, the row came only two weeks after President Trump's Middle East visit, which included a major defense contracts with Saudi Arabia.

However, more than anything else, the month of June was marked by the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, with Palestinian officials



and rights groups denouncing half a century of "oppression and subjugation" amid international inaction. Meanwhile, during a Knesset plenary session to mark the 50-year anniversary of the Six-Day War, a number of far-right Israeli parliamentarians called for the permanent annexation of the occupied Palestinian territory. On 11 June, Prime Minister Netanyahu went as far as calling for the dismantling of UNRWA and saying that it "by its very existence, perpetuates - and does not solve - the Palestinian refugee problem," and on 20 June he announced the construction of the first West Bank settlement in 25 years, called Amichai and located north of Ramallah. A further peace-rejecting stance was presented by Israeli Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who at the annual Herzliya conference on 23 June bluntly rejected the UN Resolution 194, saying, "We will not agree to the return of a single refugee to within the '67 borders."

Palestinians had reason to rejoice when on 7 July and despite intensive diplomatic efforts waged by Israel and the US, UNESCO voted to recognize Hebron's Old City and the Tomb of the Patriarchs as Palestinian heritage site and as world heritage site in danger. Israeli leaders responded with scorn, accusing UNESCO of anti-Semitism.



Strong concerns about citizens' rights to privacy and freedom of expression were raised with the 9 July enacting of the PA's new Cybercrime Decree Law, based on which numerous websites were banned and several people detained (for being critical about the PA or spreading information that "threatens the state").

The remainder of the month, however, was dominated by tensions around the Al-Aqsa compound which began on 14 July after a shooting incident at the site that killed two Israeli police officers and in response to which Israeli authorities installed metal detectors at the entrances to the Mosque, causing large Palestinian protests and an upheaval in the Arab-Muslim world. Insisting that the detectors constituted a change in the *Status quo* and must be removed immediately, worshippers henceforth refused to enter the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound and prayed in the surrounding streets instead. On 25 July the Israeli Cabinet voted to remove the metal detectors and replace them with surveillance cameras, but Palestinians rejected these on the same grounds. Two days later, Israel removed all new security measures and Islamic leaders in Jerusalem called on the people to return to and pray at the Mosque. During the crisis Palestinian activists in Jerusalem had largely displayed non-violent civil protests but Israeli security forces using lethal force against demonstrators across the territories escalated the violence which resulted in the death of at least 20 people and the injury of over 100 others.



**August** saw the electricity crisis in Gaza deteriorate further as the Gaza power plant was forced to turn off one of its two operating turbines due to a fuel shortage, extending power cuts up to 22 hours per day in the midst of the summer heat. After having been closed since May, the Rafah crossing between Egypt and Gaza was exceptionally opened for four days to allow Palestinians to travel to Mecca for the annual Hajj pilgrimage.

Inside Israel, a court in Haifa revoked in an unprecedented move, the citizenship from Alaa Zayoud from Umm Al-Fahm for "breach of loyalty," after he was sentenced to 25 years in prison for driving a car into a soldier and attacking others with a knife in October 2015.

After two days of Hamas-Fatah talks in Cairo, Hamas announced on 17 **September** its readiness to dissolve its administration in Gaza, hold general elections and immediately begin direct reconciliation talks with Fatah.

On the diplomatic front, Palestinian human rights organizations (Al-Haq, PCHR, and Al-Mezan Center) submitted on 20 September a 700-page document to the International Criminal Court (ICC), providing evidence of Israeli war crimes and crimes against humanity in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. President Abbas, meanwhile, addressed the 72<sup>nd</sup> UN General Assembly meeting in New York, slamming Israel's half-century occupation and the international community's complicity with the "settler colonial process," and saying that only an independent Palestinian state or "equal rights for all inhabitants of the land of historic Palestine" would bring the occupation to an end. On 27 September, Interpol's General Assembly, at its annual session in Beijing, voted to admit the "State of Palestine" as a new member country, despite adamant opposition by Israel.



Following progress in the rapprochement with Hamas, the Palestinian cabinet, headed by Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah, held its weekly meeting in Gaza for the first time in three years on 3 **October**. On 12 October, two days of Egypt-brokered unity talks resulted in the signing of a reconciliation agreement in Cairo, according to which the PA would take over Gaza institutions and both factions would jointly manage the border crossings. While the international community welcomed the deal, Israel announced it will not engage in political negotiations with a Palestinian government supported by Hamas.



Also in October, the US and Israel announced their respective withdrawals from the UNESCO World Heritage Committee for its alleged "anti-Israel bias," and eight EU countries (Belgium, France, Spain, Sweden, Luxembourg, Italy, Ireland and Denmark) signed an unprecedented official protest letter to Israel, demanding over €30,000 in compensation for confiscating and demolishing structures and infrastructure which they had built in Area C. The month ended with the killing of at least seven Palestinians when Israeli forces blew up a tunnel in southern Gaza.

**November** began with Hamas handing over the Gaza border crossings to the PA as part of their unity deal and with the Israel Prison Service reporting 6,154 security prisoners (almost all of them Palestinians), including 453 administrative detainees. Also in November, Peace Now warned that Israel had taken a "quantum leap" towards a *de facto* annexation of the West Bank, having accelerated the





pace of settlement construction to the point that a two-state solution might no longer be viable. In fact, 2017 saw unprecedented settlement expansion with over 6,700 new housing units for Jewish settlers, while Israeli authorities destroyed at least 159 homes (61 of which in Jerusalem) and lots of other Palestinian property, forcibly hundreds of people. The Bedouins in the Jerusalem area remain a particular target of Israel, which intends to "transfer" them away from the so-called E1-corridor.

2017 ended with the demise of the US-led or dominated so-called "peace process", as President Trump recognized, in defiance of international law, Jerusalem as Israel's capital on 6 **December**. In the subsequent two weeks alone, Israeli forces detained some



490 Palestinians, including 148 minors, during protests against this announce-



ment, which was also condemned by the international community, as reflected in the 22 December UN General Assembly vote in favor of Resolution ES-10/L.22, which declared the status of Jerusalem as Israel's capital as "null and void" (despite prior threats by Trump and his UN ambassador Nikki Haley that Washington would remember – and take action accordingly - which countries "disrespected" America by voting against it).

On 31 December, Likud's Central Committee unanimously passed a resolution to extend Israeli sovereignty to all West Bank settlements, to end the difference between the legal situations for Jewish settlers living on occupied territory and Israelis who live inside Israel proper, thus effectively annexing them to Israel.

The year came to a close with a growing support for the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement - met by a strong Israeli-US push back to punish its supporters. Israel continued to maintain its decade-long effective closure of Gaza, where close to two million people depend on humanitarian assistance and still wait for tangible results from the Hamas and Fatah unity agreement. 2017 also revealed the unprecedented levels of cooperation Israel is currently enjoying with old (Jordan, Egypt) and new Arab allies (Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain) and that their shared concern about Iran outweighs the struggle for Palestinian rights.