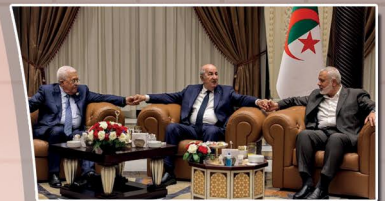


The Palestine Strategic Report 2022 – 2023



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Chapter One

The Internal Palestinian Scene

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Introduction

In various metrics, the years 2022 and 2023 are consistent with the period since the Palestinian schism began in 2007: The Palestinian internal landscape remains in a deadlock. The Palestinian Authority (PA) continues its policies, despite the formation of the most extremist government in Israel's history, led by Benjamin Netanyahu and his coalition allies in the Religious Zionist parties. The PA faces a blocked political horizon and a crippling economic crisis, primarily due to Israeli control over Palestinian economic resources.

These trajectories have profound implications for the internal situation, remaining on course despite the growing resistance in the West Bank (WB) since early 2022, the series of Israeli assaults on Gaza Strip (GS) in 2022 and 2023, and the Israeli genocidal war on GS erupting in late 2023, lasting for an unprecedented length of time and inflicting unprecedented death and devastation, deliberately targeting civilian life. None of this has had any immediate impact on the behavior of the PA or on improving intra-Palestinian relations, even in the face of the greatest challenge the Palestinians have faced since the defeat of the 1967 war.

This chapter unpacks and analyzes all aspects of the internal Palestinian situation, including the PA and its institutions, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), national activities in the public sphere, intra-Palestinian relations, the status of Palestinian parties and security coordination.

First: Overview of the Two Years

The year 2023 ended with an epic transition into 2024, with an unprecedented war with Israel in the history of the region. For Israel, this marks its longest war in its history, which began when Hamas initiated from GS Operation al-Aqsa Flood on 7/10/2023, posing a significant challenge to Israel's security, military capabilities, and its ongoing presence in the region. This manifested in a ferocious war described as genocidal, marked by deliberate starvation. By the end of 2023

and the beginning of 2024, Operation al-Aqsa Flood evolved into an Israeli war on GS. This transformation sparked discussions on major issues such as the potential displacement of Palestinians from GS, the future of Hamas and the role of the PA. The issue of Palestinian statehood has resurfaced in the regional and international political discourse. As the war extends into the new year with uncertainty about its endgame and potential outcomes, this chapter will focus on the trajectories of 2022 and 2023, following the approach used in previous years' chapters. While considering the war's ultimate impact, which dominates the last quarter of 2023, in the chapter's conclusions.

This chapter is structured into several sections, starting with a section that tackles the PA institutions and performance with emphasis on the government of Mohammad Shtayyeh, its political context and overall performance. This government serves as the executive arm of the policies set by the presidency in internal matters. After the consolidation of powers within the presidency institution, the Palestinian President now oversees all Palestinian affairs without exception across government, the PLO, Fatah movement, internal national relations and security coordination.

The policies of Shtayyeh government are reviewed within the broader framework, taking into account its political context, economic performance, administrative trends, and plans to address associated challenges. These include addressing economic crises linked, to some extent, to the political situation, particularly Israel's control of Palestinian clearance funds, and the implications of these issues in the public sphere. Notably, union movements have been the most prominent manifestations of public activity, amidst the closure of the public sphere under the PA ever since the so-called Palestinian schism.

Given this context, it was pertinent to allocate a section to discuss the presidency within the discussion of the PA institutions and performance given the centrality of this institution. Indeed, it has expanded its influence in both legislative and judicial domains, not only due to the dissolution of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) after first paralyzing the latter, using executive decrees by President Mahmud 'Abbas to legislate in its stead, but also due to a series of legal and structural amendments that, according to many jurists and human rights institutions, compromised the judiciary's independence in favor of the executive authority with implications across various labor, security and political files.

The current situation of the public sphere's closure, the blocking of general elections, and the concentration of Palestinian institutions within the presidency institution prompt an examination of Palestinian activity within the public sphere. This includes assessing indicators of popular support for Palestinian factions. After discussing the cancellation of the general elections planned for 2021, the chapter explores the second phase of local elections held in March, followed by union and student elections. It traces the trajectory of these activities over previous years to establish the overarching pattern governing activities in the Palestinian public sphere and link the years covered in the chapter with those preceding it, while analyzing the political, professional and tribal motives and implications of such elections, and the surrounding security and political conditions. Additionally, this chapter addresses the debate surrounding the significance of these elections in GS, particularly regarding local and student elections.

This necessitates examining popularity indicators through means other than elections. Local, union and student elections are affected by security obstacles and non-political considerations, rendering their indicators of limited relevance. Therefore, to gauge the popularity of influential actors, especially Hamas and Fatah, involves relying on prominent surveys conducted by relevant research centers. After analyzing surveys to understand how public opinion is influenced by general events and trends, or the influence of political actors and evaluating of their performance, popularity indicators which are given a special importance can be compiled and taken into account in the remaining sections of the chapter, which should be read as a cohesive whole, complementing each other.

Discussion of Palestinian institutions involves examining the PLO conditions. The PLO's Palestinian Central Council (PCC) convened in February 2022, then held in May 2022, an emergency consultative session limited to its members in Palestine. However, these sporadic meetings deviate from the council's bylaws. Similarly, the PLO's Palestine National Council (PNC) has not convened since 2018, indicating a pattern of irregularity in its operations. This prompts an examination of the frequency of these sessions, the implications of their irregularity, and the political circumstances surrounding the activation of the PLO, particularly regarding the organization of Fatah's internal affairs, subsequent escalations, appointments and the stance of national forces on these matters. Additionally, it's important to assess the status of the PLO in connection to the PA, particularly the PLC whose general secretariat was made subordinate to the PNC.

The situation of the PLO necessitates exploring alternative efforts aimed at addressing its disruption, either to benefit the PA or for functional purposes, while excluding key forces from joining the PLO and marginalizing Palestinians in the diaspora. We thus review the prominent attempts to establish large popular frameworks seeking to advance the Palestine issue and revitalize the public sphere. This includes the second conference of the Popular Conference for Palestinians Abroad (PCPA) held in February 2022, the 20th European Palestinians Conference held in May 2023, and the Palestinian Popular Conference – 14 Million held for the first time in November 2022. Reviewing these three events requires an examination of their history, organizing principles, decisions, achievements, challenges, and the stance of the PLO leadership, Fatah movement and the PA towards them.

Discussion of these events brings attention to the situation of Palestinian forces, particularly in terms of intra-Palestinian relations, and notably the reconciliation issue, which has been stalled since the cancellation of the general elections scheduled for May 2021. The only steps in this regard were the “Reunification Conference for Achieving Palestinian National Unity,” held in Algeria October 2022, and the meeting of the general secretaries of these factions in Egypt in July 2023. However, such conferences have not translated into tangible results, necessitating a study of their contexts, motives and surrounding circumstances.

The issue of Palestinian forces and intra-Palestinian relations prompts next examining their internal conditions. This includes the postponement of the Eighth Conference of the Fatah movement, the alternatives sought by Fatah in managing its internal contradictions, and the PLO’s position on this matter. Internal elections were held by the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine (PIJ), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) held its eighth national conference, while the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) held organizational workshops and regional conferences, paving the way for its eighth national conference. The Palestinian National Initiative (PNI) convened its national conference. As for Hamas, its regular elections are not yet due.

The final section reviews the PA security coordination policies, as a consistent policy, unaffected by various changes from the Bennett-Lapid government to the Netanyahu government, described as the most extreme in the history of Israel. This review addresses inactive decisions to halt security coordination, prominent aspects of coordination, its political implications, and its impact on the Palestinian situation overall.

The Palestinian situation in the years 2022 and 2023, like the preceding years, was marked by entrenched stagnation, especially in internal national relations and PA policies. The conflict remained deadlocked, except for the escalation of resistance in WB at the beginning of 2022, followed by two Israeli wars on GS in August 2022 and May 2023. However, Operation al-Aqsa Flood on 7/10/2023, and its aftermath of an Israeli genocidal war on Palestinians in GS, may lead to a fundamental transformation in the Palestinian internal situation, if not in the near future, then possibly in the medium and long terms.

Second: The PA Institutions and Performance

1. Mohammad Shtayyeh Government

Mohammad Shtayyeh government took the oath before Palestinian President Mahmud ‘Abbas on 13/4/2019, and remained until early 2024. This continuity over the five years represents one of the expressions of what is known in the Palestinian lexicon as the “Palestinian schism,” as this government, in particular, embodies the depth of that division. Indeed, the prime minister is a member of the Fatah Central Committee, meaning it is a Fatah government, not a nonpartisan government. Moreover, the government represented since formation an official declaration to annul a series of agreements between Hamas and Fatah, starting with Al-Shati’ Agreement of 23/4/2014, which led to the formation of the Consensus Government headed by Rami Hamdallah, then the subsequent Cairo Agreement of 25/9/2014, which defined the tasks of this government and resolved disputes over pending issues, and finally the Cairo Agreement of 12/10/2017, which was supposed to regulate the work mechanisms of the Consensus Government in GS. Afterwards, and since the Palestinian schism and the paralysis of the PLC at the time, followed by its dissolution on 23/12/2018, this government has not sought any votes of confidence from the PLC.

The political backdrop surrounding Mohammed Shtayyeh government’s ascent to power vividly reflects the schism within PA institutions. This backdrop persisted throughout the government’s tenure, spanning even the months of the GS war, the most protracted and intense war in the history of the Israeli occupation. The PA maintained a consistent stance toward Hamas, displaying reluctance to adopt

tangible measures in support of Palestinian resistance or adopt rhetoric aligning closely with Hamas. This stance naturally extended to Shtayyeh government. However, the economic role entrusted to Shtayyeh government was considered the most prominent challenge for the PA, revealing the depth of the Palestinian economic crisis, which has become linked to the Israeli policies regarding Palestinian clearance revenues.

The Shtayyeh government inherited the “clearance” crisis from the Hamdallah administration. This crisis, characterized as “Israeli blackmail and pressure tactics,” has persistently troubled the PA, even during the peak of the schism years.¹ However, it has since developed into a more profound political impasse. For the Israeli Knesset approved, in both first and second readings on 2/7/2018, to deduct from the tax revenues transferred by Israel to the PA the money that the Palestinians allocate to prisoners, others killed by Israeli forces, and their families.² This crisis escalated to a new level with a political dimension linked to the war on GS, when Israel decided to withhold the entire GS’s share of the “clearance” funds. Subsequently, discussions veered toward compromise solutions, such as transferring the “clearance” funds into a third party instead of the PA directly, thus allowing Israel to monitor and supervise the payments.³ The Knesset eventually approved the transfer of these funds to the Norwegian government, leaving GS’s monthly share, amounting to 275 million shekels (about \$73 million) out of 800 million shekels (about \$213 million) in total, deposited with Norway.⁴ Reports suggest that the PA consented to this proposal, intending to allocate payments for retirees and needy families in GS from the WB’s share.⁵

This issue carries grave political implications as it cements Israel’s absolute economic dominance over the Palestinian economy, including control over citizens’ funds. The Israeli tax collection through the “clearance” mechanism functions as a levy on Palestinian trade activities. Combined with direct Israeli actions, such as raids on money exchange shops in WB and the confiscation of their funds—a pattern also seen during the war on GS⁶ with the recent seizure of 200 million shekels (about \$54 million) from the Bank of Palestine in GS⁷—this underscores this ongoing economic crisis facing the PA. The crisis is further exacerbated by the prevention of Palestinian workers from WB from accessing employment in the 1948 occupied territories. These workers’ incomes, along with PA salaries, are crucial components of WB’s economic cycle.

The issue extends beyond the PA's ability to continue paying salaries fully or even partially. This problem became evident when the PA disbursed only 60% of its employees' salaries for December 2023 in February 2024.⁸ However, the ongoing crisis dates back to November 2021, when the PA began paying reduced salaries to its employees.⁹ Beyond its immediate implications, this crisis highlights the PA's inability to confront Israeli policies aimed at controlling and manipulating Palestinian finances, including direct encroachments on individuals' funds. Moreover, it exposes the PA to Israeli extortion, reducing it to a mere security façade that cannot protect its citizens or their assets, bolster Palestinian resilience, or fulfill its economic responsibilities, ultimately undermining its legitimacy. Neither the PA's institutions, including the government led by Shtayyeh, are the result of an electoral democratic process, nor can the PA produce a new political trajectory after the demise of the peace project. Additionally, the PA is unable to provide an independent economic base capable of confronting Israeli policies.¹⁰ This is despite Shtayyeh's affirmation of the goal to sever economic ties with Israel during his tenure as chairman of the Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction (PECDAR).¹¹

This issue is rooted in the economic policies of the Shtayyeh government. The Shtayyeh government approved the 2022 budget with a deficit of \$558 million.¹² Similar to all budgets approved since 2008, it was not presented to the PLC, resulting in a lack of transparency in Palestinian official policy. This opacity is due to the concentration of powers in the hands of the Palestinian president, who issues laws as presidential decrees, while the Palestinian government published the general budget in a brief and non-detailed manner. Additionally, a summary of the budget proposal was not published or discussed with civil society, further undermining the legislative institution. The semi-annual report, which should analyze the performance of the first half of the year and outline policies for the remaining half, was also not released.¹³ Based on this budget, it was evident that the PA's revenues from internal tax collections it manages, and external taxes collected by Israel, have increased compared to all previous years since 2014. This rise is due to improved tax collection capabilities and increased prices resulting from the Russian-Ukrainian war, which has boosted customs revenues. However, the PA has only been able to pay employees 80% of their salaries throughout the year, with an additional 5% for past dues.¹⁴ This situation indicates that the PA relies heavily on Palestinian citizens for its revenues, but due to the significant rise in prices, it



is unable to pay full salaries to its employees. This raises questions about the PA's ability to strengthen the resilience of Palestinians, especially considering that it operates in a context of national schism and lacks renewed popular legitimacy through elections or national consensus.

Although the government had included an economic reform plan in its budget with aimed at reducing wage costs, it approved the appointment of 1,500 new security personnel across all security forces.¹⁵ This indicates an increasing reliance on security forces, which currently employ 52 thousand individuals, compared to 88 thousand civilian employees. Among these civilians, 55 thousand work in the education sector, 15 thousand in health, and 18 thousand in the administrative apparatus of the PA.¹⁶ The budget of the Ministry of Interior and National Security was 3.6 billion shekels (about \$970 million), excluding direct external support, representing 23% of the total expenditure on PA departments, making it the largest share of the budget.¹⁷

In 2023, the government approved an emergency budget, with disbursements based on available treasury cash flows. The estimated deficit was \$360 million without Israeli deductions, and \$610 million with them.¹⁸ The financial policy that year, and the challenges it faced, continued the previous trend of failing to meet commitments, particularly towards public sector employees, and issues in the approval and management of financial policy. The Shtayyeh government was criticized for not adhering to the Law of the Organization of the General Budget and Public Finances No. 7 of 1998, and for a lack transparency, consultation and inclusivity, ignoring taxpayers' rights to participate in shaping public spending priorities. Moreover, the Decision by Law on the Budget for 2023 granted extensive powers and discretionary authority to both the Minister of Finance and the Prime Minister. This was seen "in contravention with Article 61 of the Basic Law, and the Law of the Organization of the General Budget and Public Finances No. 7 of 1998, which asserted that PLC, the legislature, which has the power of issuing laws, has the power to take decisions on shifting between budget items and expenditure appropriations."¹⁹

The performance of the Shtayyeh government can be viewed as a compounded institutional void, with power concentrated in the presidency amid deep national divisions and a political environment where the occupation weaponizes financial leverage to disable the political effectiveness of the PA, including the Shtayyeh

government. In response to the PA's initiative of forming two legal teams, locally and internationally, to follow up on the General Assembly's decision to refer the issue of Israeli occupation to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for a legal opinion on the occupation and its presence in the "Palestinian territories,"²⁰ Israel enacted a series of punitive measures against the PA. These measures included new financial deductions,²¹ and the revocation of "VIP cards" from Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki and three Fatah leaders.²² The PA, as articulated by Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh, viewed these policies as efforts to undermine it and push it towards collapse, particularly in light of the ongoing financial deductions from the PA's funds.²³

The financial crisis of the PA and the government's policies towards it are closely tied to the trade union movement, which has at times been the sole manifestation of public action in WB. Consequently, the PA has responded to trade unionism by employing various strategies, including weaponizing the judiciary to delegitimize union strikes. One notable example is the urgent decision by the Supreme Administrative Court in March 2023, which ordered the cessation of the open strike by government school teachers organized by the "Teachers' Movement," following a lawsuit filed by the Ministry of Education.²⁴ The Human Rights Observatory in the Palestinian Bar Association criticized this decision, stating it "lacked the essential elements of a judicial ruling, such as the right to a defense, and failed to ensure a fair trial."²⁵ This was not the first instance of the judiciary being used to halt union strikes. The same court issued a decision in August 2022 to stop the Palestinian Engineers Association's (PEA's) strike,²⁶ and another in September 2023 to stop the Medical Association strike,²⁷ with a similar ruling against the latter in February 2024.²⁸ Other unions, such as the Palestinian Bar Association²⁹ and the Palestinian Federation of Health Professions Association, also engaged in strikes.³⁰

The PA response to these strikes also involved security and political interventions. This included summoning and suspending teachers who were members of the "Unified Movement,"³¹ a parallel union body opposing the General Union of Palestinian Teachers accused of colluding with the government and used by factions within Fatah for internal score-settling.³² The head of the Palestinian Federation of Health Professions Association, who also served as an assistant undersecretary in the Ministry of Health,³³ was suspended. Additionally,

President ‘Abbas issued a decree dissolving the Medical Association and forming an alternative council.³⁴

The Palestinian Bar Association’s strikes were also influenced by these judicial policies. Their core grievance during the July 2022 strike was against the “decree laws amending procedural and enforcement laws” issued by President ‘Abbas, which they viewed as undermining the right to litigation. They also protested against increased litigation fees, highlighting broader issues within the PA’s judicial and legal system.³⁵

In the same context, the Shtayyeh government concluded agreements with several unions, including the General Union of Palestinian Teachers, Medical Association, PEA, Agricultural Engineers Association, Palestinian Federation of Health Professions Association, and Agricultural Engineers Association, to pay them bonuses.³⁶ However, many unions, including the Medical Association, the General Union of Palestinian Teachers, transport workers and the Pharmacists Association, have since stated that the government is either renegeing on these agreements or delaying their implementation.³⁷

2. The PA Presidency and Judiciary

After Operation al-Aqsa Flood on 7/10/2023, the United States (US) renewed its focus on the PA, having previously prioritized Arab-Israeli normalization projects over directly addressing the Palestine issue. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with President Mahmud ‘Abbas multiple times, urging the revitalization of the PA to enable it to govern WB and GS.³⁸ Observers interpreted this as a push to reform the PA’s security forces to be more compliant with Israeli security needs, despite existing accusations that these forces already serve this role.³⁹

There was also talk of US proposals conveyed to President ‘Abbas in light of Operation al-Aqsa Flood, suggesting the need to “inject new blood” into the PA. Reports indicated that US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan proposed that President ‘Abbas appoint a deputy and transfer some of his powers to them. Other sources mentioned that the US aimed to transform the PA elite, possibly making President ‘Abbas an honorary president.⁴⁰

The PA then indeed began discussing a reform plan covering the “judicial, security, administrative and financial systems,” which was presented to various countries and donors, according to Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh in late

January 2024.⁴¹ This indicates that the plan is primarily intended for international stakeholders and is linked to the post-war situation in GS, rather than responding to internal Palestinian needs. President ‘Abbas initiated measures within this framework, such as the unexpected dismissal of 12 out of 16 governors, an action described by observers as a significant shake-up within the PA and Fatah.⁴² ‘Abbas followed this with statements about his intention to “inject new blood” into the PA.⁴³

Given the absence of the PLC as a legislative body, all powers within the PA have thus become concentrated in the presidency. The presidency has effectively assumed legislative powers, issuing over 400 presidential decrees from 2007 to August 2022.⁴⁴ Some of these decrees have fundamentally reshaped the judicial system, part of an ongoing process since the Palestinian schism, exemplified by the establishment of the Supreme Constitutional Court in 2016. This move was criticized by the Palestinian Human Rights Organizations Council and the Palestinian NGOs Network, which deemed the court’s formation a violation of the Basic Law, the court’s own law, and the Judicial Authority Law, thus breaching the principle of the Supreme Constitutional Court’s independence and neutrality.⁴⁵ The court later ruled to dissolve the PLC.

The concentration of power within the presidency proceeded from the dissolution of the PLC in 2018 to the dissolution of the Supreme Judicial Council in 2019.⁴⁶ This was followed by a series of decrees in 2020 that reorganized the judiciary, including amendments to the Judicial Authority Law and the establishment of regular and administrative courts. The National Coalition for Judicial Reform and Protection and the Independent Commission for Human Rights (ICHR) said these decrees undermine any efforts “to reform the judiciary, subordinating it to the executive authority” and that they “contained legislative texts that fundamentally affect the independence of individual judges. They also stripped judges of the most important guarantees of their independence.”⁴⁷ This trend continued in 2021, with the Palestinian Bar Association criticizing these measures as a manifestation of the “thirst for power” driven by personal interests, posing a threat to civil and social peace and the democratic process, and marking this period as the worst for the Palestinian judiciary.⁴⁸

This policy persisted through 2022 and 2023. In 2022, President ‘Abbas issued a series of decrees regulating judicial affairs and procedures. The ICHR described

these as violating the Basic Law and establishing conditions for violations that would affect the right to a fair trial.⁴⁹ President ‘Abbas also issued a decree reconstituting the Supreme Judicial Council under his chairmanship, naming it the Supreme Council of Judicial Bodies and Authorities (SCJBA). This council included the presidents of the Supreme Constitutional Court, High Judicial Council – Cassation Court, Supreme Administrative Court, Security Forces Judicial Authority, the Sharia Judicial Council, the Minister of Justice, the President’s Legal Advisor and the Attorney General.⁵⁰

Thus, it is evident that power in the PA has become concentrated in the executive branch following the suspension and subsequent PLC dissolution. The judiciary has been consistently subordinated to the executive branch, centered around the presidency, which also oversees the Prime Minister’s Office, whose policies align with President ‘Abbas’s directives. This centralization extends to the security forces, which receives special attention from President ‘Abbas. An example of this is the amendment to the law regarding the head of the General Intelligence Service (GIS), stipulating that the head’s tenure is no longer limited by the previously applicable legal retirement age and that the position holds the rank of minister.⁵¹

President ‘Abbas’ administration was marred by internal conflicts within the Fatah movement or the PLO. This included expelling Fatah members who participated in local elections outside the movement’s official lists and revoking diplomatic passports from former officials, such as former PLO Executive Committee secretary and member Yasser ‘Abed Rabbo and his wife, writer Liana Badr.⁵² ‘Abed Rabbo was once a close associate of President ‘Abbas but was relieved of his duties in 2015. Similarly, President ‘Abbas revoked the diplomatic passport of Bassam Abu Sharif, who was a senior advisor to the late President Yasir ‘Arafat.⁵³ Conversely, President ‘Abbas issued a decree expanding the categories eligible for a Palestinian diplomatic passport, including heads and secretaries-general of PLO factions and members of its leadership bodies, both current and former members of the PLO Executive Committee, and the PNC president. However, the decree did not extend this privilege to leaders of factions not part of the PLO, such as Hamas and PIJ, and it excluded the PLC members elected in 2006 and their predecessors due to the council’s dissolution.⁵⁴

President ‘Abbas also issued a decree reorganizing the Board of Trustees of Al-Istiqlal University—The Palestinian Academy for Security Sciences, previously

chaired by Fatah Central Committee member Major General Tawfiq al-Tirawi. Following this, security guards assigned to protect al-Tirawi were withdrawn. According to media leaks, this decision came after severe disagreements between al-Tirawi and Hussein al-Sheikh.⁵⁵

President ‘Abbas’s policies permeate every aspect of the current Palestinian political, institutional and party landscape. This influence is evident in the administration of the Shtayyeh government, the performance of security forces, the conditions within Fatah and the PLO, national relations with other Palestinian factions, and the management of relations with the Israeli occupation. This comprehensive impact is reflected in various spheres, as detailed in specific sections on these topics. Incidentally, between 73% to 88% of Palestinians consistently called for President ‘Abbas’s resignation throughout 2022 and 2023.⁵⁶

Third: Popularity Indicators and Public Action

1. General Elections

The previous agreement for comprehensive national elections (PLC, Presidency and PLO) was nullified after President ‘Abbas in April 2021 cancelled⁵⁷ the elections that were scheduled sequentially for May 2021 (PLC), July 2021 (Presidency), and August 2021 (completing the formation of the PNC).⁵⁸ Although the cancellation was officially framed as a postponement, citing the Israeli occupation’s refusal to permit elections in Jerusalem—a move that could have galvanized a national push to assert Palestinian options against Israeli control—the matter of elections has not been addressed seriously, resulting in a stalemate in national relations ever since.

2. Local Elections

Other forms of elections did occur in the Palestinian sphere, such as local elections. The first phase began on 11/12/2021, following a decision by the Shtayyeh government on 6/9/2021. Despite objections from Hamas and PIJ stemming from the earlier cancellation of general elections and their criticism of unilateral national decision-making, Hamas informally engaged in some local bodies through its members and associates. Independent lists won 71% of the local bodies during this phase. In the subsequent phase in March 2022, Hamas’s participation in major

local bodies became more apparent, albeit still operating under independent lists. Independent lists secured 64.4% of the seats, while party lists captured 36.6%. Lists supported by Hamas, either independently or in collaboration with the PFLP, secured victories in municipalities such as Hebron, al-Bireh, Tulkarm and Qalqilya. Meanwhile, Fatah emerged victorious in cities like Ramallah, Jenin and Nablus.⁵⁹

Hamas participated in these elections through independent lists, alliances with the PFLP, and collaborations with national and public figures, while the PIJ boycotted them. Despite Fatah claiming victory in these elections,⁶⁰ the Central Elections Commission (CEC) clearly announced that independent lists won 64.4% of the seats.⁶¹ This outcome underscores the complexities of local elections in Palestinian society, where tribal and personal considerations often outweigh political ones. This situation suggests a potential decline in Fatah's influence, despite its significant penetration into Palestinian society in WB as the ruling party and its role as a mediator between the PA and civil society, free from persecution by either the occupation or the PA itself. Additionally, President 'Abbas expelled several Fatah members who participated in these elections outside the party's official lists.⁶²

Local elections were not held simultaneously in GS and WB due to Hamas's objections to the unilateral decision made by the leadership of the PA and Fatah.⁶³ However, in the second phase, Hamas sent a letter to the CEC demanding "written guarantees to hold the elections as previously decided," and other guarantees related to the election law, "more specifically the cancellation of forming the Election Court and returning the mandate of adjudicating appeals to the courts of First instance in the West Bank and Gaza." The CEC chairman saw these as political demands that "require addressing the political level, and that the CEC does not have any mandate to decide on any of the matters."⁶⁴ However, Hamas's stance on holding local elections began to change in the last third of 2023. In August 2023, Hamas invited party figures and civil society representatives to a consultative meeting on holding local elections in GS.⁶⁵ This was followed by a meeting between the CEC chairman, Hanna Nasir, and representatives of Palestinian factions in GS.⁶⁶ They entrusted Nasir with a message to Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh, demanding a decision to hold local elections in GS as soon as possible.⁶⁷ Hamas had declared its readiness for these elections, but the subsequent Israeli war on GS left no room for such elections.

3. Trade Unions

The PEA elections in August 2021 saw Fatah lose the position of the PEA head to an alliance of Hamas and the PFLP, although Fatah secured most of the PEA's seats.⁶⁸ In December 2022, Fatah won the elections for engineering offices and companies. These elections receive little media coverage because many engineers do not work in engineering offices or in the engineering field at all. Additionally, some offices do not participate in these elections, and there is often no competition, making the voter preferences apparent since voting is office-based, revealing the office's political leanings.⁶⁹ This situation highlights the intersection of professional and economic considerations with electoral voting in professional association elections.

While Fatah also won Palestinian Bar Association elections in May 2022,⁷⁰ it lost the Medical Association elections in WB to a bloc supported by Hamas, the left and independents. Fatah similarly lost the Pharmacists Association elections in GS to an alliance of Hamas, PIJ and the PFLP.⁷¹ In WB, Hamas often presents its members on independent lists or support independent lists, reflecting the complex security environment there. Indeed, Hamas is a banned organization by the Israeli occupation, which prosecutes its members simply for their affiliation, let alone for their activities within its frameworks or in its name. This applies to student blocs as well.

4. Student Councils

The Islamic Bloc at Birzeit University, known as the Islamic Loyalty Bloc, affiliated with Hamas, consecutively won in the 2022 and 2023 elections. In the 2022 elections, the Islamic Bloc won 28 out of 51 seats, which constitute the seats of the university's student council, compared to 18 seats for the Martyr Yasir 'Arafat Bloc, the student framework of Fatah, and the Democratic Progressive Student Pole, the student framework of the PFLP, won 5 seats. The Progressive Student Union, the student framework of the Palestinian People's Party (PPP), and the Student Unity Bloc, the student framework of the DFLP, did not secure any seats.⁷²

This result is the best in the history of the Islamic Bloc at Birzeit University. Its previous highest results were in 2015 with 26 seats and in 2004 with 25 seats. Notably, the Islamic Bloc regained its strength in 2015 with that significant

outcome. The bloc, which won most of the elections from 1996 to 2007, began to suffer after the Palestinian schism, and it boycotted the elections in 2010 and 2011. It returned to victory in 2015, a testament to its perseverance and ability to confront the security harassment campaigns of both Israel and the PA. This resurgence in 2015, and the subsequent increase in seats in 2022, cannot be viewed separately from the 2014 war on GS and the Sword of Jerusalem Battle (dubbed by Israel Guardian of the Walls) in 2021, indicating the impact of the resistance in GS on the general mood of the Palestinian society in WB.⁷³

In 2023, the Islamic Bloc won 25 seats, while the Martyr Yasir ‘Arafat Bloc secured 20 seats, and the Democratic Progressive Student Pole won 6 seats. The Unified Left Bloc did not win any seats.⁷⁴ These results indicate the main competition is between the two primary factions, Hamas and Fatah, throughout the years in which elections were held and both blocs participated, regardless of the circumstances faced by these factions. From 1996 to 2023, the lowest number of seats won by the Islamic Bloc was 19, and the highest was 28, which is an exceptional result that defies the norm. The lowest number of seats won by the Student Youth Movement, later named the Martyr Yasir ‘Arafat Bloc, was 17, and the highest was 26. The years 2010 and 2011 are excluded from this comparison because the Islamic Bloc did not participate in those elections. Additionally, no elections were held at Birzeit University in 2020 and 2021.⁷⁵

Birzeit University elections have always garnered special attention due to several factors, including their relative independence from the PA policies, which lends their results a representative significance. This significance is further supported by the university’s central location in WB and its liberal nature.

The 2023 student elections at An-Najah University yielded a surprising outcome. The Islamic Bloc, operating under the name “Muslim Palestine Bloc,” won 40 out of 81 seats, compared to 38 seats won by the Student Youth Movement, known as the Martyrs Bloc. The Student Work Front Bloc, affiliated with the PFLP, obtained 3 seats, while the Democratic Pole Alliance failed to secure any seats.⁷⁶ These elections were particularly significant as they marked the first time since 2017, when the Martyrs Bloc (Fatah) claimed 41 seats, the Muslim Palestine Bloc (Hamas) attained 34 seats, and the Leftist Student Bloc secured 6 seats.⁷⁷

An-Najah University has been described as a security stronghold run by former Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah,⁷⁸ facing severe security challenges, including the

repression of students by the university guards and security forces. In June 2022, Lawyers for Justice described the suppression of student protesters at the university as “bloody events,” stating that it involved “beatings of dozens of university security staff, reaching the point of serious harm.” They reported the use of “sharp tools.... pepper gas [spray] in the face of the students, and the beating of one of the university lecturers while he was among the students,” also they reported the “chasing students in the public streets and shooting from weapons and guns.” They claimed that “the university has become a place of human rights violations and attacks on human dignity.”⁷⁹ Despite the formation of an investigation committee by the university’s Board of Trustees and its recommendations, which the board accepted, including the decision to relieve the security director of his duties, put him on open-ended leave, and dismiss six university security staff members,⁸⁰ the persecution of students by the university administration continued. The university administration expelled a student for a Facebook post.⁸¹ In early 2024, university security again assaulted protesting students.⁸² In July 2022, gunmen shot Nasser al-Din al-Shaer, a lecturer at An-Najah University, after the university security assaulted him the previous month.⁸³ Nasser al-Din al-Shaer had previously served as deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education in Isma‘il Haniyyah’s tenth government and as Minister of Education in the subsequent Unity Government. The shooters were never apprehended.⁸⁴

Moreover, following the Birzeit University elections, the PA security forces arrested the newly elected student council president,⁸⁵ who was later detained by Israeli forces along with several other students from the university.⁸⁶ The president of An-Najah University’s student council was also detained by Israeli forces.⁸⁷ Israel continued to pursue members of the Islamic Bloc in Palestinian universities, as the bloc is considered a banned organization by Israel.

Elections were also held in March 2023 at Hebron University, where the Martyr Yasir ‘Arafat Bloc won 25 seats compared to 16 seats for the Islamic Bloc, with no other blocs achieving any results.⁸⁸ The last elections at Hebron University had been held in 2019, where the Student Youth Movement won 30 seats compared to 11 seats for the Islamic Bloc.⁸⁹ Elections at the Palestine Polytechnic University in March 2023 saw the Student Youth Movement win 21 seats, the Islamic Bloc 19 seats, and the leftist Student Pulse Bloc win 1 seat.⁹⁰ The last elections at the Palestine Polytechnic University before these, were held in 2019, and the last



elections in which the Islamic Bloc participated were in 2017. While the Student Youth Movement lost the 2022 elections at Bethlehem University to the PFLP with 17 seats to 14,⁹¹ they won the 2023 elections with 17 seats to the PFLP's 14.⁹² As for Al-Quds University, the last elections were held in 2019, which the Islamic Bloc boycotted.⁹³ The Islamic Bloc returned in 2023, demanding that elections be held at the university.⁹⁴

The obstacles facing student elections and activities in WB universities include the pursuit of Islamic Bloc activists by both Palestinian and Israeli authorities across all universities without exception,⁹⁵ the delay and prevention of elections for consecutive years in some universities, and accusations of bias against the Islamic Bloc by some university administrations. Despite these challenges, the question of why university elections have not been held in GS universities has persisted. Elections are regularly held at The Islamic University and the University College of Applied Sciences using an individual voting system, with the Islamic Bloc winning unopposed due to boycotts by other blocs. However, elections have been suspended at al-Azhar University since 2007, as well as at al-Aqsa University and al-Quds Open University. The issue of university elections in GS seems to be tied to several complexities, the most significant being the lack of agreement on the criteria for a proportional representation system to be applied across all universities. The Islamic Bloc demands that this system include al-Azhar and al-Aqsa Universities, not just The Islamic University and the University College of Applied Sciences. Meanwhile, leftist forces demand a zero percent electoral threshold, which the major blocs reject. Additionally, the conflict between the faction of the former Fatah leader, Muhammad Dahlan, and the faction of President Mahmud 'Abbas plays a significant role in the refusal of universities dominated by Fatah in GS to hold elections.⁹⁶

Nonetheless, after its victory in the Birzeit University elections, Hamas announced its readiness to hold elections in all GS universities based on a proportional representation system and urged Fatah to agree.⁹⁷ Student blocs were prepared to sign an agreement to hold these elections in all GS universities according to proportional representation. These elections were scheduled to take place over four consecutive weeks in the spring of 2024. The first week was set for The Islamic University and the University College of Science and Technology, the second week for al-Azhar University and its branches, the University College

of Applied Sciences, and the Arab College of Applied Sciences. The third week would involve al-Aqsa University and its branches, Palestine University and Gaza University. The fourth week⁹⁸ was reserved for Israa University, al-Quds Open University and its branches, and the Palestine Technical College. However, the war on GS that began on 7/10/2023, created new circumstances that prevented these elections from happening.

5. Popularity Indicators Based on Opinion Polls

Hamas experienced a surge in popularity following the Sword of Jerusalem Battle in May 2021. A poll conducted on 15–19/9/2021, showed that 71% believe that Hamas came out a winner in its last war with Israel. Two-thirds believe that the launching of rockets by Hamas at Jerusalem and Tel Aviv came in defense of Jerusalem and *al-Aqsa* Mosque, and 45% thought Hamas was the most deserving of representing and leading the Palestinian people, compared to only 19% who thought that Fatah under President ‘Abbas is more deserving.⁹⁹

Ten months following the war, in March 2022, the popularity of the Fatah movement experienced a resurgence. Concerning the suitability of representing the Palestinian people, the majority (31%) stated that Hamas is more deserving of representing and leading the Palestinian people compared to 29% who chose Fatah, led by President ‘Abbas. However, support for Fatah increased notably concerning legislative elections, with survey participants anticipating Hamas to secure 36% of the vote, while Fatah was projected to garner 42%.¹⁰⁰

Throughout 2022, public opinion polls indicated a balance between the two movements, Hamas and Fatah. In June 2022, 33% said that “Hamas is more deserving of representing and leading the Palestinian people and only 23% say Fatah under ‘Abbas’ is more deserving.” This time, Hamas was expected to win the PLC with 36% of the popular vote compared to 35% for Fatah.¹⁰¹ In September 2022, Hamas maintained its status as the most deserving representative of the Palestinians, although Fatah edged ahead by two points regarding the likelihood of winning the PLC.¹⁰² By the end of 2022, Hamas continued to be perceived as the foremost candidate for representing and leading the Palestinians, with similar prospects for winning the PLC elections as Fatah.¹⁰³

The findings of the opinion polls in March 2023 closely mirrored these fluctuating percentages, with Hamas being slightly favored as the representative



and leader of the Palestinians over Fatah. Fatah was anticipated to secure victory in the legislative elections by a narrow margin.¹⁰⁴ However, a significant shift occurred in a June 2023 poll by the same pollster, which showed that 31% believed Hamas was worthy of representing and leading the Palestinian people, compared to 21% for Fatah. The poll also predicted that Hamas would secure victory in the legislative elections with 34% of the vote, surpassing Fatah's 31%.¹⁰⁵ This shift was likely influenced by the victory of the Hamas student bloc in the elections at Birzeit and An-Najah universities, as well as the Israeli aggression on the GS in May 2023, which gave Hamas an advantage. However, this gap narrowed again in a September 2023 poll, with Hamas remaining the most deserving of representing and leading the Palestinian people according to 27% of respondents, compared to 24% for Fatah. Fatah was again expected to win the legislative elections with 36% of the vote compared to 34% for Hamas.¹⁰⁶ The significant surge in support for Hamas came after Operation al-Aqsa Flood. In a December 2023 poll, 54% viewed Hamas as the most deserving of representing and leading the Palestinian people, compared to 13% for Fatah. If legislative elections were to be held, Hamas was projected to secure 51% of the vote compared to 19% for Fatah.¹⁰⁷

6. Summary of Popularity and Public Action

The outcomes of elections and opinion surveys indicate a relative equilibrium between Hamas and Fatah. Despite the developments in the Palestine issue and the endeavors of both movements, these two groups maintain dominance over the Palestinian populace, with no third party significantly impacting this dynamic. Palestinian public sentiments fluctuate in response to evolving events and circumstances, such as increased backing for Hamas following major wars, like those in 2014, 2021 and the 2023 Operation al-Aqsa Flood. Notably, Operation al-Aqsa Flood precipitated a notable surge in support for Hamas. However, this endorsement is tempered by the ongoing war in GS and the dire humanitarian crisis stemming from Israeli aggression against Palestinians in GS. Indeed, while the execution of Operation al-Aqsa Flood by Hamas' military wing, Al-Qassam Brigades, initially appeared as a significant triumph in the history of the conflict with the occupation, it cannot singularly dictate support for the movement or serve as the sole determinant in evaluating the various actors and their roles. The true impact will unfold post-war, contingent upon its resolution and the subsequent trajectory of Hamas.

While Hamas continues to be seen as deserving to represent and lead the Palestinian people in public opinion polls, it does not receive the same level of expectation for winning legislative elections. It nearly matches or slightly lags behind Fatah in this regard, highlighting the difference between abstract support for Hamas and the objectives of voting for it, which include various motivations, such as economic concerns. This disparity is also evident in municipal election results, where influential factors are not limited to political aspects but also include tribal and personal factors.

Another factor is the influential actors within the Palestinian forces, as the Palestinian public differentiates between Fatah led by President ‘Abbas and Fatah without his leadership. Indeed, in all the aforementioned opinion polls over two years, the percentage demanding President ‘Abbas’ resignation ranged from 73% at the beginning of 2022 to 88% at the end of 2023. Additionally, the chances of Fatah in any presidential election vary depending on who represents the movement. In all the cited polls, Haniyyah outperforms both President ‘Abbas and Mohammad Shtayyeh if elections were held between Haniyyah and either of them. However, Haniyyah loses to Marwan Barghouthi. This indicates the negative evaluation by the Palestinian public of both President ‘Abbas and Mohammad Shtayyeh, reflecting a negative assessment of the PA itself. It also suggests a personal dimension in this evaluation, as the public attributes the failures of the institution or Fatah to the policies of its leaders without delving into the structural issues of these entities. Therefore, the public’s hope rests on Marwan Barghouthi, who is imprisoned by Israel and not held accountable for the failures of the PA and Fatah.

Fourth: The PLO

The PNC internal regulations stipulate that the council convenes “regularly at the invitation of its president once a year, or in extraordinary sessions at the invitation of its president based on a request from the Executive Committee or from a quarter of the council members.”¹⁰⁸ Despite this, the last sessions of the council were held on 30/4–1/5/2018, after a nine-year gap since the previous session, which was described as a special meeting, held on 26–27/8/2009.¹⁰⁹

Since the PA establishment and its entry into the occupied territories in GS and Jericho in 1994, the PNC has convened only three times, in 1996, 2009 and 2018.¹¹⁰

The purpose of the 1996 session was to amend the provisions of the Palestinian National Charter “by canceling the articles that contradicted the exchanged letters between the PLO and the Government of Israel on 9 and 10 September 1993.”¹¹¹ The 2009 session aimed to fill vacancies in the PLO Executive Committee due to the deaths of six of its members, to prevent the loss of its legitimacy in case of the death of one more member, as stated by President ‘Abbas at the time.¹¹² The 2018 session was particularly significant, as it was convened to reject the US President Donald Trump’s plan for the Palestine issue, commonly known as the “Deal of the Century,” and his actions such as recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, moving the US embassy there, and closing the PLO office in Washington. Apparent important decisions were made, such as declaring that the transitional period stipulated in the agreements signed in Oslo, Cairo and Washington, along with all their obligations, was no longer valid. The PLO Executive Committee was mandated to suspend recognition of Israel, implement the PCC decisions to cease all forms of security coordination, and liberate from the economic dependency established by the Paris Protocol.¹¹³ However, none of these decisions were implemented. Additionally, the session aimed to renew legitimacy for President ‘Abbas and the PLO Executive Committee by re-electing President ‘Abbas and electing a new PLO Executive Committee.¹¹⁴ This session was boycotted by Hamas and PIJ because it contradicted the preparatory committee meetings of the PNC in Beirut,¹¹⁵ and also by the PFLP because it violated the agreements signed regarding the formation of a unifying PNC.¹¹⁶

These events highlight the ongoing disruption of the PNC since the PA establishment. This indicates that leveraging the PLO to benefit the PA policies and its powerful elite predates the current PA leadership. However, this issue has taken on a different dimension since the Palestinian schism in 2007. Furthermore, the numerous decisions made in PLO institutions (PNC, PCC, and PLO Executive Committee) over the past years regarding the reassessment of the relationship with Israel have not been implemented, undermining the credibility and seriousness of these decisions among various partisan and popular factions.

The PCC situation is similarly troubling, despite convening three times in 2018. Indeed, it met in 2018 after a three-year hiatus following its 2015 session, and then twice in 2022, once on 6–7/2/2022 and once in an emergency consultative session with only its Palestine-based members on 9/5/2022. This was all contrary

to the PCC internal regulations of the council, which state that “the council shall meet regularly at the invitation of its president once every three months, or in extraordinary sessions at the invitation of its president based on a request from the PLO Executive Committee or a quarter of the council members.”¹¹⁷ The PNC did not convene for the first time following the establishment of the PA until 1996. Similarly, the PCC did not meet until 1999,¹¹⁸ and its sessions have remained irregular since then. This indicates that the transformation of the PLO into an institution for the emergency use of the PA’s elite began with the establishment of the PA.

The PCC meetings in 2018 were subjects of divisive debate, with some boycotted by Hamas, PIJ and the PFLP, while others saw additional boycotts by the DFLP and PNI.¹¹⁹ The same situation occurred at the PCC meeting held on 6–7/2/2022. Hamas boycotted this meeting, claiming it was convened “unilaterally, away from national consensus,” and was absent along with “the majority of factions and significant and influential Palestinian components.” Hamas rejected any claim of representation of the Palestinian people “without popular mandate through ballot boxes,” and called for the formation of “a single front that prioritizes the reform, rebuilding and activation of the PLO, to be the guardian of the national project in all its components.”¹²⁰

The PIJ also boycotted the meeting for the same reasons, with its leader Muhammad al-Hindi stating that it “does not represent the Palestinian people, nor even the PLO.” According to him, it “only represents those present: Fatah and its affiliated factions, which collectively secured only two out of 132 seats in the PLC elections (last held in 2006),” adding that the meeting was convened “for factional and personal interests within the PA to arrange positions for its men within the PLO institutions.”¹²¹

The PFLP also boycotted the meeting, stating that convening it was a step that “deepens the division and fragmentation within the Palestinian arena and reinforces the approach of exclusivity and dominance within this national institution.” They further asserted that it “bypasses previous national agreements to organize the Palestinian home and conduct comprehensive elections, blocking efforts to end the division and restore unity.”¹²² The PNI also boycotted the meeting “out of respect for the popular will aspiring to reform the PLO,” and called for it to be convened only after a national dialogue.¹²³

The PPP withdrew from the council meetings after participating in the opening session, citing objections to the agenda.¹²⁴ It demanded that the PCC sessions “implement the decisions of previous councils,” arguing that “the Palestinian arena does not need new decisions; what is needed is the implementation of what was agreed upon in the PNC and PCC and the decisions of the meeting of the general secretaries.” Additionally, the PPP objected to the decisions to elect the PNC president and to make the Executive Committee independent of PNC, stating that these actions contradicted the internal regulations of both the PCC and PNC.¹²⁵

The insistence of the DFLP leadership and political bureau to participate in the PCC meetings led to the resignation of dozens of its members in WB. The resigning members viewed the DFLP’s participation as “granting unwarranted legitimacy to President Mahmud ‘Abbas’s policy and strengthening his unilateral control, especially after many previous PCC decisions were not implemented.” While the DFLP in Syria and Lebanon supported participation, opposition was concentrated among its members in WB and GS “due to the practices of the PA and because the Oslo project, which has not ended, is evolving into a security project.” Furthermore, it was mentioned that the DFLP received a commitment from President Mahmud ‘Abbas to pay part of its allocations from the Palestine National Fund (PNF), which had been previously suspended, with a commitment to start monthly payments from the beginning of 2022, amounting to approximately \$70 thousand per month.¹²⁶

The decisions made by the PCC in this session clearly reflect the internal dynamics within the Fatah movement. Hussein al-Sheikh, a member of Fatah Central Committee and the head of the General Authority of Civil Affairs (GACA) in the PA, was promoted to the PLO Executive Committee, replacing Saeb Erekat, who passed away two years earlier. Mohammad Mustafa, chairman of the Palestinian Investment Fund (PIF) and former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National Economy (2013–2015), was elected as an independent member of the PLO Executive Committee. Ramzi Rabah was elected to the PLO Executive Committee for the DFLP, replacing Taysir Khaled, who had resigned. Ramzi Khoury was elected as the PNF Chairman, making him a member of the PLO Executive Committee according to its regulations.¹²⁷ Previously, Khoury served as Director General of the office of the late President Yasir ‘Arafat.

During this PCC session, Rawhi Fattouh was elected as the PNC speaker, alongside ‘Ali Faisal and Musa Hadid as deputy speakers and Fahmi al-Za‘arir as secretary. These elections followed the resignations of the previous PNC Speaker Salim Za‘nun, Deputy Speaker Constantine Qarmash, and Secretary Mohammed Sobaih, all tendered during the same session.¹²⁸ The rationale behind these elections was grounded in the assertion that the PNC, during its May 2022 session, had delegated its authority to the PCC. While this claim was reported by news outlets, and it was not explicitly stated in the PCC’s decisions during the aforementioned session.¹²⁹

Regarding the stance towards Israel, the PCC resolved that, in accordance with the conclusion of the transitional phase outlined in signed agreements, including the obligations imposed on the PLO and the PA, all commitments to the occupying state would be terminated. This encompassed the withdrawal of recognition of Israel until it recognizes the State of Palestine within the borders of 4/6/1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital, and ceases all settlements activities and forms of security coordination.¹³⁰ Nevertheless, similar to previous resolutions, such as the 2015 decision to halt security coordination, these resolutions remained unimplemented.¹³¹ President ‘Abbas’s demands regarding Hamas have consistently contradicted these PCC resolutions. Even during the Israeli war on GS, he demanded that Hamas recognizes what he referred to as “international legitimacy decisions” and fully adhere to them, asserting that “no faction can be part of the organization [PLO] if it rejects international legitimacy.”¹³² These stipulations were reiterated by Riyad al-Maliki, the PA’s Foreign Minister, as prerequisites for Hamas’s inclusion in the PLO,¹³³ suggesting a lack of seriousness in the PCC’s decisions to rescind recognition of Israel. Not only did the leadership of the PA/ PLO fail to implement these decisions both in practice and in principle, but they also continued to act counter to them. Furthermore, they imposed conditions on Hamas for its PLO membership that ran contrary to these decisions, even amid the Israeli war on GS, where some within the PA viewed this war as Hamas’s isolated struggle rather than a collective Palestinian endeavor. At the onset of the war, President ‘Abbas stated, “Hamas’s policies and actions do not reflect the will of the Palestinian people,” although these remarks were later amended by the official Palestine News and Information Agency (WAFA) to omit reference to Hamas.¹³⁴ Similar statements were echoed by the Palestinian presidency spokesperson, Nabil Abu Rudeineh,



who said, “What is happening between Hamas and Israel has nothing to do with us... The coup that occurred removed Hamas from Palestinian legitimacy,”¹³⁵ although he later withdrew these statements.¹³⁶

The PCC session held on 9/5/2022, was termed as an urgent consultative meeting, attended solely by the members present in Palestine. PNC Speaker Rawhi Fattouh called for the session to address “strategies to confront and respond to the aggression on Jerusalem and its holy Islamic and Christian sites, notably *al-Aqsa* Mosque and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.” While no extraordinary resolutions were passed, the PCC notably urged the PLO Executive Committee to execute the decisions of both the PNC and PCC, particularly those made during the previous session in February 2022.¹³⁷ These decisions encompassed halting security coordination and rescinding recognition of Israel, underscoring a recurrent rhetorical renewal of such decisions devoid of tangible outcomes, as acknowledged by the councils themselves.

The primary objective of these sessions was mainly to formally renew the legitimacy of PLO institutions, serving the interests of the PA elite amidst internal competition within the Fatah movement, and ongoing rivalry with Hamas. With no legislative body in either the PLO and the PA, power in Palestinian institutions is heavily concentrated in President ‘Abbas’ hands, further compounded by overlapping roles between the PLO and the PA. Illustrating this concentration of power is the decree-law issued by President ‘Abbas, leaked to the media, making the PLO a department of the state.¹³⁸ This decree-law was not published in the official gazette because the leaked version was retracted. Instead, an amended version of the decree-law was later published.¹³⁹ The legal advisor to President ‘Abbas clarified that the decision was made due to misunderstanding circulating on social media regarding certain phrases in the decree-law related to state stipulations, which was not published in the official gazette and is not in effect. The President reissued the decree-law with clarified and rephrased ambiguous phrases to address this.¹⁴⁰ This implies that the leaked version may have been intentionally released to assess public reaction. If officially approved and not retracted, this decree-law would undermine the representative status of the PLO as “the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people,”¹⁴¹ effectively placing the PLO under the authority of the PA. Indeed, the term “state” in this context refers to how the PA institutions designate themselves, following a decree-law issued by President

‘Abbas in February 2022 and published in the official gazette in March 2022. This decree-law mandates that “the term ‘Palestinian National Authority’ wherever it appears in the original law is to be replaced with ‘State of Palestine,’ and the term ‘President of the Palestinian National Authority’ wherever it appears in the original law is to be replaced with ‘President of the State of Palestine.’”¹⁴²

On another front, President ‘Abbas officially abolished the PLC as an institution, following its prior dissolution. He issued a presidential decree in April 2022, published in the official gazette in May 2022, stating that the “General Secretariat of the Legislative Council, with all its employees, components and facilities is placed under the direct responsibility of the President of the Palestinian National Council,” until a new PLC is elected.¹⁴³ This effectively makes the PNC president simultaneously the head of the non-existent PLC, potentially providing a legal cover for temporarily assuming the presidency after President ‘Abbas’s departure. Indeed, the Basic Law of the PA stipulates that if the position of President of the PA becomes vacant, “the President of the Palestinian Legislative Council shall assume the duties of the President of the [Palestinian] National Authority temporarily for no more than 60 days, during which free elections shall be held to elect a new president in accordance with the Palestinian Electoral Law.”¹⁴⁴ If the PA becomes the Palestinian state, the PLO will transform into one of its departments, and the PLC is subordinated to the PNC, an institution of the PLO. This sequence of decisions seems to aim at establishing a legal framework for organizing the succession of President ‘Abbas after his departure by reverting to the PLO institutions that have replaced the PLC. Consequently, this might be a mechanism being explored within the Fatah elite to manage their differences and find an alternative to holding general elections. This mechanism was previously used by the PA in 2009, by renewing the legitimacy of President ‘Abbas and the PLC through the PCC.¹⁴⁵ Since the PLO established the PA, the principle of using the PLO to provide legal cover as an alternative to elections has been on the mind of the PA and Fatah elite, even if the form of legal manipulation changes.

Confirming this context for this sequence of actions—holding PCC sessions and the laws and decrees issued by President ‘Abbas regarding the PLO—is the appointment of Hussein al-Sheikh to the position of secretary-general of the PLO Executive Committee.¹⁴⁶ This position had been vacant since the death of Saeb Erekat in November 2020. Subsequently, in the distribution of tasks within the



PLO Executive Committee, Hussein al-Sheikh was assigned the role of head of the Negotiations Department, a position previously held by Saeb Erekat.¹⁴⁷ These are significant positions within the PLO Executive Committee, although the effectiveness of its departments has diminished since the establishment of the PA. However, assigning Hussein al-Sheikh as secretary-general increases his chances of competing to succeed President ‘Abbas, and the Negotiations Department has remained active. By adding the Negotiations Department to the GACA, al-Sheikh consolidates political and administrative institutions entrusted with communication with the Israelis. Except for the PNF, which was assigned to Ramzi Khoury, the other PLO Executive Committee departments have no actual function.

The effort to deploy and highlight the PLO in the first half of 2022 can be seen as a response to renewed activities perceived by the PLO elite as attempts to challenge the organization’s representative status. These activities include calls to form a national front,¹⁴⁸ a movement that gained momentum after President ‘Abbas cancelled the general election project agreed upon in 2021.¹⁴⁹ Other activities include the PCPA and the Palestinian Popular Conference – 14 Million.

In this context, the statements from the PLO leadership rejecting “undermining the organization and creating alternative entities” and condemning “the movements aimed at undermining the legitimacy of the organization, advocated by parties that do not believe in the organization but work to undermine it” should be understood.¹⁵⁰ These statements were repeated in 2023 by President ‘Abbas¹⁵¹ and Fatah,¹⁵² as 2023 did not witness significant movements from PLO institutions, unlike 2022, which began with the aforementioned PCC session.

Fifth: Other Palestinian Activities

1. Popular Conference for Palestinians Abroad

The PCPA convened in Istanbul on 26–27/2/2022. This conference had initially launched on 25–26/2/2017. In its concluding statement, it declared its establishment with the aim of activating the role of Palestinians abroad in the Palestinian national struggle; reaffirming the call for the right of return to the entirety of the historic, usurped land of Palestine; addressing the severe repercussions resulting from the catastrophic Oslo Accords, which were concluded without the Palestinian people’s

input; and calling on various segments of the Palestinian people, with their diverse perspectives and activities, to convene for a comprehensive popular conference.

Although the conference did not position itself as an alternative to the PLO, it emphasized that “the mission of developing the national role of Palestinians abroad and involving them in Palestinian political decision-making should be based on restructuring the PLO as the legitimate representative of all Palestinians.”¹⁵³ However, Fatah criticized the conference, describing it as divisive and “a continuation of the division led by Hamas,” and “an attempt to circumvent and undermine the status of the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.” Fatah claimed that Hamas and the parties involved in organizing the conference had initially proposed themselves as alternatives to the PLO and warned that it would “firmly and strongly confront any attempts to undermine the status of the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.”¹⁵⁴

Certainly, the threat of countering the PCPA has indeed resulted in a weakening of the outcomes of the conference during the five years between its first and second sessions. This challenge is compounded by the difficulty of organizing Palestinian activities in many countries worldwide, where such activities are often unwelcome, particularly in Arab countries. Furthermore, the conference has become a focal point of polarization due to attacks from the Fatah movement and the leadership of the PLO, leading many individuals and groups to hesitate in participating. Nonetheless, the conference successfully convened over a thousand delegates from fifty countries and elected Munir Shafiq as its chairman. Additionally, a new general assembly, comprising 333 members was elected, headed by Simán Khoury. Subsequently, the general assembly elected Ahmad Muhaisen as chairman of the new secretariat consisting of 45 members.¹⁵⁵

The closing statement of the PCPA second conference called for “the formation of a united national front of Palestinian forces, factions and personalities to assume national responsibility,” citing “the failure of all attempts to end the schism and rebuild Palestinian national institutions and references for more than fifteen years.” The statement criticized President ‘Abbas’s decision, which was perceived as turning the PLO into a department affiliated with the PA, considering it a “diminution of the PLO, a persistence in marginalizing its role and status, and deepening of division and disagreements in the Palestinian arena.”¹⁵⁶



The idea of establishing a national front remained a recurring theme in the PCPA speeches throughout the subsequent period.¹⁵⁷ One of its notable activities was the launch of a forum for Palestinian national dialogue in Beirut on 20/5/2023. This event saw participation of prominent Palestinian figures from abroad, attendees from inside Palestine, and representatives of Palestinian institutions and resistance factions. The Secretary-General of the conference, Ahmad Muhaisen, called for “building a united national front to coordinate Palestinian efforts, enhance coordination between internal and external entities, support the resilience of the Palestinian people, and strengthen Palestinian cohesion in various regions.”¹⁵⁸

2. European Palestinians Conference

The European Palestinians Conference held its twentieth session on 27/5/2023 in the city of Malmö, Sweden, under the slogan “75 Years On... We Will Return.” The inaugural conference took place in 2003 in London, and the nineteenth session was held online in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The conference typically features cultural, artistic, political and folkloric events, aimed at connecting Palestinians in Europe with Palestine and advocating for the right of return. It organizes convoys from various European countries to the conference venue, and includes parallel conferences such as the Palestinian Engineers in Europe, the Palestinian Women in Europe and other related activities.

This conference was also criticized by the Fatah movement, which stated that it “works to divide the Palestinian ranks.. and bypass legitimate Palestinian frameworks, in a transparent attempt by some to revive plans to dismantle the PLO.”¹⁵⁹ The PLO, through its Secretary-General Hussein al-Sheikh, also condemned the conference as suspicious. Al-Sheikh said, “This conference aims to undermine the unity of the Palestinian people’s representation through the PLO, the sole legitimate representative of our people, and to fracture the Palestinian ranks and divide our communities abroad.”¹⁶⁰ Despite these criticisms, the conference’s closing statement, affirmed that the PLO is one of the most significant achievements of the Palestinian people, and that it belongs to the Palestinian people. It stated, “It is not permissible to confiscate or empty it of its content,” and called for “reforming it on democratic bases to truly be the umbrella under which all Palestinians can unite.”¹⁶¹

The twentieth session of the conference faced criticism from Swedish media, which linked the conference to Hamas and criticized some Swedish politicians who participated. The conference refuted these accusations in a detailed press

conference,¹⁶² emphasizing that “the conference operates within the framework of European laws and is not affiliated with any institution, entity, or faction,” and accusing Swedish media affiliated with the Israel lobby of orchestrating the campaign against it.¹⁶³ Subsequently, in June 2023, Dutch authorities arrested Amin Abu Rashed, president of the European Palestinians Conference Foundation. The foundation accused the Dutch authorities of acting on malicious Israeli information linking Abu Rashed to Hamas, suggesting it was an attempt to hinder humanitarian activities supporting the Palestinian people and political events opposing the occupation.¹⁶⁴

3. Palestinian Popular Conference – 14 Million

The Palestinian Popular Conference – 14 Million emerged as an independent initiative comprising activists, organizations and personalities from both inside and outside Palestine, aiming to restore the prominence and vitality of the Palestine issue by renewing the PLO and electing new Palestinian leadership. The first session of the conference was held on 5/11/2022, in Gaza City. However, the PA security forces, acting on orders from the Minister of Interior, prevented it from being held in Ramallah. They surrounded the headquarters of the Popular Coalition in the city and detained ‘Umar ‘Assaf, the coordinator of the Palestinian Popular Conference – 14 Million, for several hours. The Palestinian Human Rights Organizations Council and the NGO’s Network considered this a “very dangerous step for the future of the existing Palestinian political system and social fabric, and it damages Palestine’s image internationally.”¹⁶⁵

The preparatory committee of the conference issued a statement condemning this arrest and demanding his immediate release. Meanwhile, the PNC speaker criticized the conference organizers, accusing them of bypassing the PLO.¹⁶⁶ In contrast, the conference affirmed in its closing statement that it “aims to rebuild, develop and activate the PLO to restore its leadership role in the national struggle to save the national liberation project.” The conference formed a national guidance committee comprising members from the WB, GS, the 1948 occupied territories and the diaspora regions to work on achieving its demands and goals. This required the conference to emphasize “holding national and popular activities to reignite the national liberation movement in Palestine and the diaspora and creating a popular pressure bloc to push towards changing the reality of the Palestinian leadership, both in approach and form, to lead its national struggle.”¹⁶⁷



The experience of the Palestinian Popular Conference – 14 Million with the PA in the WB was repeated the following year (2023). On 1/3/2023, the Palestinian security forces prevented the conference from holding a meeting aimed at calling for Palestinian elections by announcing a memorandum signed by 150 political and social figures calling for the convening of the PNC and conducting comprehensive elections, including for the PNC. They closed the office of the Popular Coalition where the conference was supposed to be held. After the closure of the coalition headquarters, the organizers moved to the offices of Wattan TV in Ramallah, but the security forces followed them and prevented them from meeting there. This action was condemned by the ICHR.¹⁶⁸ Following the Israeli war on GS after Operation al-Aqsa Flood, Israeli forces arrested ‘Assaf,¹⁶⁹ on 24/10/2023, as part of a wide and open-ended arrest campaign aimed at curbing the popular uprising of Palestinians in WB in support of the resistance in GS. ‘Assaf was one of the prominent figures in popular activities opposing the Israeli war and supporting Palestinians in GS.

It is observed that at the level of reviewing these three important activities—the level of Palestinians in Europe, the level of PCPA, or the general level embodied by the Palestinian Popular Conference – 14 Million—that the leadership of the PA, the PLO, and the Fatah elite oppose these activities. They work to thwart and prevent them, accusing them of circumventing the PLO and seeking to create an alternative leadership. Regardless of the motives, this results in weakening Palestinian effectiveness, imposing stagnation on the Palestinian scene, and aligning with Israeli efforts to counter such activities. For example, the Netherlands arrested Amin Abu Rashed, head of the European Palestinians Conference Foundation, based on Israeli information, and the Israeli occupation arrested ‘Umar ‘Assaf, coordinator of the Palestinian Popular Conference – 14 Million. This is despite these activities affirming their commitment to the PLO as a crucial achievement for the Palestinian people that must be revived and activated based on elections and a new struggle-oriented foundation to eliminate the Oslo Accords and their repercussions. When considering all of this, along with the disruption of the general elections agreed upon in 2021, the boycott of major national forces of the PCC session in 2022, and the concentration of the Palestinian institution in the presidency after dissolving the PLC and annexing it to the PNC, and restructuring the judiciary, it divides the Palestinian scene beyond

the typical bifurcation between Hamas and Fatah to a broader level. This places the leadership triangle (PLO, PA and Fatah) against a wide spectrum of Palestinians, which became sharply evident in the Israeli war on GS since 7/10/2023.

Sixth: National Internal Relations and the Internal Conditions of Palestinian Factions

1. Palestinian Reconciliation... Two Isolated Steps

The intra-Palestinian national relations and the internal conditions of each faction intricately linked to the broader internal Palestinian situation. There is significant overlap between the policies of the PA with its various institutions, the instrumentalization of the PLO as mentioned in all previous files, and security coordination as will be discussed, and the internal national relations and conditions of Palestinian factions. Therefore, the stagnation characterizing the Palestinian national situation across all these areas, remaining unchanged, with apparent efforts by the elite of the triangle (PLO, PA and Fatah) to suppress any public activity aimed to breaking the stagnation and revitalizing the Palestinian struggle, has inevitably manifested as stagnation in internal national relations.

The Istanbul dialogues on 22/9/2020, and the subsequent discussions were the last seemingly fruitful talks between Hamas and Fatah. After several rounds, both parties agreed to hold general elections, including legislative and presidential elections, and a reformation of the PNC. Hamas conceded its demand for simultaneous elections and accepted Fatah's requirement for elections "according to a unified list and full proportional representation, considering the nation as a single electoral district."¹⁷⁰ There were even political rumors at that time that Hamas and Fatah were considering running in the elections with a joint list.¹⁷¹ However, this entire trajectory ended abruptly with President 'Abbas's decree in late April 2021,¹⁷² canceling the elections under the pretext of postponement due to the Israeli occupation's prevention of holding elections in Jerusalem.

Since April 2021, the reconciliation issue had been dormant until Algeria extended an invitation to convene a national conference for the factions involved. Algeria began publicizing this initiative towards the conclusion of 2021. On 6/12/2021, Algerian President 'Abdelmadjid Tebboune, during a press conference

with President ‘Abbas, announced his country’s intention to host a comprehensive conference for Palestinian factions.¹⁷³ Subsequently, on 16/1/2022, Algeria hosted representatives of six Palestinian factions— Hamas, Fatah, PIJ, PFLP, DFLP and PFLP–General Command (PFLP-GC)—for separate discussions aimed at exploring the potential for progress in the Palestinian reconciliation efforts.¹⁷⁴

Algeria’s efforts yielded results after a considerable period, marked by the convening of the “Reunification Conference for Achieving Palestinian National Unity,” on 11–12/10/2022. The conference involved 12 factions from the PLO, along with Hamas and PIJ.¹⁷⁵ Ultimately, on 13/10/2022, the “Algiers Declaration” concluded these discussions, following disputes arising from President ‘Abbas’s insistence, conveyed through Fatah’s representative in the dialogue, ‘Azzam al-Ahmad, on mandating the proposed national unity government in the draft “Algiers Declaration” to adhere to the so-called “international legitimacy resolutions.” Hamas, PIJ and PFLP-GC objected to this demand, resulting in the complete removal of the national unity government clause to resolve the impasse.¹⁷⁶

The “Algiers Declaration” provisions were notably vague, aligning them more closely with general principles that are theoretically undisputed. These principles underscored the significance of national unity, political collaboration through electoral processes, the implementation of unspecified practical measures to reconcile divisions, the empowerment and activation of the PLO, the restructuring of the PNC via elections based on full proportional representation wherever feasible, the consolidation of Palestinian institutions, the activation of the mechanism involving general secretaries, and the urgent organization of general presidential and legislative elections in GS and WB, including Jerusalem, the recognized capital of the Palestinian state, in accordance with established laws, with a timeframe of one year from the date of signing.¹⁷⁷ Notably, this latter clause was the most specific, establishing a deadline of one year for these elections, a provision consistent with previous agreements among national stakeholders. Furthermore, the Constitutional Court, in its ruling to dissolve the PLC, urged President ‘Abbas to declare legislative elections within six months of the decision’s publication in the official gazette.¹⁷⁸

Despite the Algiers Declaration, which outlined the establishment of a joint Algerian-Arab team to oversee the implementation of the agreement’s provisions in collaboration with the Palestinian side, there has been no tangible progress on a practical level. Prior developments indicated that achieving success in this

regard was improbable, particularly following President ‘Abbas’s cancellation of elections, unilateral convening of PCC sessions, and restructuring of the frameworks and structures of the PLO without regard for previous national agreements. Subsequent decrees and laws altered the status of the PLO and PLC. Furthermore, President ‘Abbas’s insistence on imposing his political preferences by requiring national forces participating in authority institutions to adhere to what he terms “international legitimacy” contradicts the reviews that PLO institutions are supposed to conduct regarding recognition of Israel, security coordination and commitment to agreements with Israel. This indicates that the failure to achieve reconciliation over recent years stems not from lack of ideas, understandings, or agreements—of which the Palestinians have signed many—but rather due to a lack of political willpower.¹⁷⁹

It was apparent that neither Fatah nor Hamas could reject the Algerian invitation. This was not only to avoid the accusation of obstructing reconciliation but also to demonstrate respect for Algeria. Algeria, which, despite its deep-rooted ties to the Palestinian struggle, has its own dispute with Morocco concerning Western Sahara. Morocco’s normalization agreement with Israel led to US recognition of its sovereignty over Western Sahara. In 2021, Algeria was the only Arab state to support the PA’s budget, providing 53% of external aid. Other contributors included the World Bank, the US (for supporting Jerusalem hospitals), and the Palestinian-European Socio-Economic Management Assistance Mechanism (*Mecanisme Palestino-Européen de Gestion et d’Aide Socio-Economique*—PEGASE).¹⁸⁰ Therefore, Algeria stood as the sole Arab state to offer support to the PA during that period. Moreover, President ‘Abbas is committed to maintaining positive relations with Arab states, while Hamas viewed the Algerian invitation as a significant opportunity to enhance its Arab relations with a prominent Arab country that has a historical connection to the Palestine issue.

The second step commenced with a gathering of the secretaries-general of the Palestinian factions in the newly established city of El Alamein, Egypt. President Mahmud ‘Abbas presided over the meeting, which was convened at his invitation following consultations with Cairo.¹⁸¹ Eleven Palestinian factions, along with the PNC speaker, participated in the event. Notably, Hamas was represented by a sizable delegation led by its leader Isma‘il Haniyyah. However, the PIJ abstained from attendance, citing the PA’s refusal to release its detainees as the reason for their boycott.¹⁸²



The circumstances surrounding the meeting in Egypt did not suggest the likelihood of significant breakthroughs this time. Held amidst a backdrop of heightened political arrests in WB, a situation the PIJ's decision to boycott the conference underscored the tense atmosphere. The PIJ, perceiving itself as a prominent figure in resistance efforts, particularly in Jenin Refugee Camp (RC) and other northern WB regions, reacted to the PA's crackdown on its members in these regions.¹⁸³ Consequently, the meeting of the secretaries-general ended without issuing a formal statement. Instead, President Mahmud 'Abbas delivered a speech advocating for the establishment of a committee to sustain "dialogue on the various issues and topics that were addressed."¹⁸⁴

Previously, 'Abbas met with Hamas leader Isma'il Haniyyah in Ankara on 26/7/2023, where he declined to release Palestinian detainees held by the PA in the WB.¹⁸⁵ Following the factions' meeting, 'Abbas and Haniyyah had a phone call to emphasize the "prompt formation of the follow-up committee for the meeting of the secretaries-general,"¹⁸⁶ Musa Abu Marzuq, a member of Hamas' political bureau, stated that 'Abbas intended for the meeting to be purely ceremonial, devoid of any substantive outcomes. Hamas' participation, according to Abu Marzuq, was in response to the Egyptian invitation,¹⁸⁷ signifying Hamas' desire not to upset Egypt, particularly in light of Algeria's assumption of the lead role in the reconciliation project the previous year, a role traditionally held by Egypt.

The idea of holding a meeting of the secretaries-general of the factions was proposed by President 'Abbas amid rising resistance in WB, particularly in its northern areas, where the PA was targeting resistance cadres. This tension risked igniting a broader conflict in WB, underscored by the expulsion of senior Fatah leaders, including Deputy Fatah Chairperson Mahmud al-'Aloul, Sabri Saidam and 'Azzam al-Ahmad, by Palestinian youth during the funeral of 12 killed in Jenin RC. Eight of these belonged to the Jenin Brigade of al-Quds Brigades, the PIJ military wing,¹⁸⁸ and were killed during the largest Israeli invasion of the camp since the second *Intifadah* (uprising) on 3/7/2023. In response, some factions within Fatah blamed Hamas for the expulsion of their leaders and criticized some of its members and their business interests.¹⁸⁹ This situation prompted President 'Abbas to visit the RC for the first time in 11 years.¹⁹⁰ 'Abbas's call for the meeting of the secretaries-general can be seen as an attempt to defuse the unprecedented popular anger towards Fatah and the PA, as vividly demonstrated by the expulsion of Fatah leaders from the funeral procession in Jenin RC.

2. Fatah Movement.. Incomplete Arrangements

In November 2021, Fatah, through Central Committee member Jibril Rajoub announced, that its eighth conference would be held on 21/3/2022.¹⁹¹ However, the conference did not take place and was postponed several times. Initially rescheduled for the second half of May 2022 by President Mahmud ‘Abbas,¹⁹² it was delayed again without a set date.¹⁹³ The latest proposed date, suggested by President ‘Abbas and unanimously adopted by the Revolutionary Council of Fatah, was 17/12/2023.¹⁹⁴ This decision was described by some Fatah leaders as decisive and strategic, highlighting ‘Abbas’s commitment to renewing the movement’s leadership and continuing its historical role in leading the Palestinian people towards independence and statehood.¹⁹⁵ However, on 31/1/2024, the movement announced another postponement of the eighth conference due to the Israeli war on GS, which prevented participation from GS.¹⁹⁶

Various sources indicate that Fatah’s failure to adhere to the scheduled dates for the eighth conference stems from internal power struggles. These conflicts are evident in efforts by some factions to exclude Marwan Barghouti, a current Fatah Central Committee member and prisoner in Israeli jails, whose supporters, both inside and outside the prisons, were denied important positions within Fatah’s structure. Additionally, some individuals, including Fadwa Barghouti, Marwan Barghouti’s wife, were not invited to attend the Revolutionary Council meetings despite being council member.¹⁹⁷ Certain power centers within Fatah opposed the representation of prisoners at the conference citing logistical difficulties as a pretext.¹⁹⁸

Unlike other Palestinian organizations, Fatah does not have a fixed schedule for its general conferences or internal elections. According to Fatah’s internal charter, the general conference should be convened every five years by the invitation of Fatah Central Committee. This schedule can be postponed due to compelling circumstances by a decision of the Revolutionary Council. Additionally, an extraordinary session must be called within two weeks upon requests by more than one-third of its members, more than half of the Revolutionary Council members, or the Fatah Central Committee.¹⁹⁹ However, Fatah has historically not adhered to this regular schedule. For instance, the sixth conference in 2009 occurred 21 years after the fifth conference in 1988. This period saw significant regional transformations and changes in the conflict with the Israeli occupation,



including Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait and Fatah’s position on it, Fatah’s participation in Madrid Peace Conference, the signing of the Oslo Accords, the establishment of the PA, and the death of President Yasir ‘Arafat. Despite these major events, Fatah did not convene its general conference until 2009, amidst a conflict with Hamas and under new policies towards the occupation established by President ‘Abbas, which redefined Fatah as a party of the PA. This shift became more evident in the seventh conference held in 2016.²⁰⁰

Fatah’s internal arrangements were reflected in those within the PLO, as previously mentioned. Among the key actions was the elevation of Hussein al-Sheikh to the PLO Executive Committee, his appointment as the secretary-general of the Committee, and the head of the Negotiations Department, while Rawhi Fattouh was appointed as the PNC head. Additionally, Fatah assigned Muhammad al-Madani, a Fatah Central Committee member, as the General Commissioner for Mobilization and Organization in the northern regions (WB), succeeding the late leader Jamal Muhaisen, who passed away after a period of illness.²⁰¹ Al-Madani also chairs the “Committee for Interaction with Israeli Society,” a PLO offshoot, from which he submitted his resignation to President ‘Abbas in 2020 in protest against accusations by Fatah leaders of encouraging normalization with Israel. However, President ‘Abbas did not accept his resignation.²⁰²

Later, Fatah tasked Mahmud al-‘Aloul, the deputy head of the movement, with the Mobilization and Organization department, while al-Madani was given the Popular Organizations portfolio, succeeding Tawfiq al-Tirawi.²⁰³ In 2022, Fatah experienced deep internal conflicts, highlighted by al-Tirawi’s dismissal as the head of the Board of Trustees of Al-Istiqlal University—The Palestinian Academy for Security Sciences. The security guards assigned to protect him were withdrawn,²⁰⁴ and he was also removed from his responsibility over the Popular Organizations within the movement. Media sources reported that these actions were driven by rival factions within Fatah seeking to exclude al-Tirawi in the context of the struggle for President ‘Abbas’s succession.²⁰⁵ This coincided with the leak of documents from the committee investigating the death of former President Yasir ‘Arafat, which was led by al-Tirawi.²⁰⁶ Concurrently, there were leaks attributed to al-Tirawi attacking Fatah Central Committee members Hussein al-Sheikh²⁰⁷ and Jibril Rajoub, and General Intelligence Service (GIS) Chief Majid Faraj.²⁰⁸ Other leaks attributed to Hussein al-Sheikh criticized President ‘Abbas.²⁰⁹ Observers saw

these incidents as reflections of the internal power struggle within Fatah over the leadership and succession.

Over the past two years, Fatah has faced confrontations with national factions, reflecting the PA's response to the resistance in WB. This was exemplified by the expulsion of senior Fatah leaders from a memorial of those killed during the Jenin RC invasion in July 2023,²¹⁰ which escalated tensions between Fatah and Hamas in WB.²¹¹

Earlier, various factions had expressed their disapproval of the participation of PA leaders in the 'Aqaba security summit in February 2023, attended by Egyptian, Jordanian and Israeli officials. The Palestinian delegation included Secretary-General of the PLO Executive Committee Hussein al-Sheikh, GIS Chief Majid Faraj and President 'Abbas's diplomatic advisor Majdi al-Khaldi. The primary goal of the meeting was to implement a Palestinian security plan devised by US Security Coordinator General Michael Fenzel, aimed at "restoring PA control over the northern West Bank," pursuing Palestinian armed groups, and dissuading the PA from presenting a Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlements.²¹²

The participation of Palestinian representatives in this meeting was widely criticized by the resistance factions, including Hamas, PPP, DFLP, the resistance factions in Jenin,²¹³ PNI, PFLP²¹⁴ and PIJ.²¹⁵ This disapproval was reiterated in March 2023 concerning the Sharm El-Sheikh summit, a continuation of the 'Aqaba security summit, involving the same countries and aiming to de-escalate the WB.²¹⁶ This summit was also condemned by Palestinian factions including Hamas, PIJ, PFLP, DFLP, PPP and the Palestinian Democratic Union (Fida).²¹⁷

Following Operation al-Aqsa Flood and the subsequent Israeli war on GS, factions such as Hamas, PIJ, PFLP, DFLP and PFLP-GC formulated a national solution initiative in Beirut, in December 2023. This initiative called for "rejecting all solutions and scenarios regarding GS's future, and presenting a national Palestinian solution based on forming a national unity government stemming from comprehensive national Palestinian consensus."²¹⁸ This initiative was endorsed by 12 Palestinian factions, but observers noted that Fatah's leadership seemed distant from this consensus.²¹⁹

The strife within Fatah extended to the Lebanese arena, where Hamas accused elements of the National Security affiliated with Fatah in the WB of opening fire at the funeral of its member Hamza Shahin, who was said to have died in the

line of duty.²²⁰ The shooting during Shahin’s funeral in the Burj al-Shamali RC near Tyre, Lebanon, resulted in three fatalities,²²¹ marking the beginning of 2022. Hamas demanded the surrender of those responsible for the shooting,²²² and Fatah later agreed to Hamas’s demands, including “condemning the crime at Burj al-Shamali RC, recognizing the three deceased as martyrs of the Palestinian people, determining criminal responsibility based on Lebanese judicial findings, and facilitating the work of the judiciary by both movements to uncover the truth.”²²³

In ‘Ain al-Hilweh RC in southern Lebanon, clashes erupted between Fatah and elements of extremist Islamist organizations, excluding ‘Osbat al-Ansar, as they announced.²²⁴ The clashes were later contained after 11 people were killed and 40 others injured.²²⁵

3. Hamas.. Nothing New Except Operation al-Aqsa Flood

Hamas conducted its periodic elections in 2021, which are held every four years. Consequently, there was no significant internal activity within the movement throughout 2022 and 2023. However, one of the challenges faced by the movement, besides the ongoing tension with Fatah, was two Israeli assaults on GS, the first in August 2022 and the second in May 2023. PIJ was at the forefront of these confrontations, while Hamas did not participate in the wars, raising questions among skeptics about the movement’s commitment to its resistance program,²²⁶ its relationship with PIJ, and whether it was aiming to improve the economic conditions for Palestinians in GS or entrench itself as the governing authority in the Strip under implicit agreements with Israel. Nonetheless, it became clear that Hamas was preparing for a major operation characterized by strategic deception, which it executed on the morning of 7/10/2023, naming it Operation al-Aqsa Flood and linking it to the Sword of Jerusalem Battle. The movement’s military spokesperson for Al-Qassam Brigades stated that preparations for October 7 had begun at the end of that battle.²²⁷

Operation al-Aqsa Flood, followed by an unprecedentedly intense and prolonged Israeli war on GS, placed Hamas at the forefront of the Palestinian scene and atop the regional and international political agenda. As the war, described as a genocide, continued for an unprecedented duration in the history of Israeli wars, and as Hamas persisted, the movement continued to hold a significant number of Israeli captives as a result of Operation al-Aqsa Flood. The war created a humanitarian catastrophe inflicted by Israel on Palestinians,

resulting in tens of thousands of deaths and injuries, internal displacement of the entire population of GS, and imminent starvation for the northern residents who remained in their areas. A serious project for the transfer of Palestinians from GS also emerged. The most pressing plan on the international, especially US, and regional agenda became “the day after” and “Gaza without Hamas.” Meanwhile, Hamas sought to build national consensus to thwart such projects,²²⁸ while the PA and Fatah appeared to be awaiting the outcome of the war. Elements within the PLO, Fatah and the PA expressed unsympathetic views towards Hamas in its confrontation with the Israeli war on GS. President ‘Abbas was quoted saying that Hamas does not represent the Palestinian people, and similar statements were made by Palestinian presidency spokesperson, Nabil Abu Rudeineh. Additionally, they demanded adherence to “international legitimacy decisions.” Hussein al-Sheikh vowed to hold Hamas accountable after the war,²²⁹ and Chief Justice and Presidential Advisor Mahmud al-Habbash said that President ‘Abbas condemned Hamas in all his calls and meetings with world leaders and that the PA was ready to manage GS post-war, even accepting the presence of an international or Arab force to assist in this.²³⁰ Al-Habbash also pledged to hold Hamas accountable,²³¹ while PLO Executive Committee member Ahmad Majdalani described Hamas as a “terrorist organization.”²³² These statements were often retracted or modified to soften problematic phrases.

Experts argue that it is impossible for Israel to eliminate Hamas, as its existence is not tied to governing GS or maintaining large military formations. However, the movement’s position within the Palestinian national movement, its popular support, and its regional and international relations will depend on how the Israeli war on GS concludes and Hamas’s ability to secure a prisoner exchange deal that could impact the national elite, especially Fatah. Indeed, Hamas aims to secure the release of prominent prisoners like Marwan Barghouti, a Fatah Central Committee member, and Ahmad Sa‘adat, the PFLP Secretary-General.²³³

At the level of Hamas’s internal structure, Israel assassinated Hamas’ deputy head and the head of its WB region, Saleh al-‘Aruri, in Lebanon, along with military leaders of the movement in Lebanon.²³⁴ This left Zaher Jabarin, al-‘Aruri’s deputy, in charge of the WB region. Israel announced a joint intelligence mission among its various security arms to pursue Hamas leaders abroad.²³⁵ In any case, the Israeli war on GS will likely lead to extensive internal discussions within Hamas about its structures, frameworks, internal organization and decision-making processes.



4. PIJ's Elections... For the Second Time

PIJ completed its internal elections in March 2023, marking the second such experience since its founding, following the 2018 elections, which were the first in the movement's history.²³⁶ These elections occurred after the former Secretary-General Ramadan Abdullah Shallah fell into a coma and was unable to lead. The recent elections reconfirmed Ziad Nakhleh as the Secretary-General by acclamation and renewed Akram al-'Ajouri's responsibility for the movement's military operations from Damascus. Representing GS, the elected political bureau members were Nafeth 'Azzam, Yusuf al-Hasayneh, Muhammad Hamid, Walid al-Qutati and Ahmad al-Mudallal. Representing the diaspora, alongside al-'Ajouri, were Muhammad al-Hindi, 'Ali Shahin and Ihsan 'Ataya. However, the movement did not announce the election results for the WB due to the security conditions there. This raises questions about the ability of resistance movements to establish leadership structures in a highly complex and sensitive security environment like the WB and the effectiveness of the organizational alternatives adopted by some resistance movements to address this issue. The most recent PIJ elections went through several stages, with the first stage concluding in GS in June 2022.²³⁷

PIJ led two significant battles from GS. The first called Unity of the Arenas Battle, occurred in August 2022. This battle followed a series of events triggered by the Israeli forces' arrest of the movement's leader in Jenin, Bassam al-Saadi, on 1/8/2022, in a deliberately humiliating manner.²³⁸ Given that PIJ's projects in WB included establishing the Jenin Battalion in Jenin RC, which had become a symbol of resistance in the northern WB after the Sword of Jerusalem Battle, the Unity of the Arenas Battle aimed to protect and strengthen this experience.

The second battle led by PIJ took place in May 2023 and was called the Revenge of the Free Battle. It was a response to Israeli aggression on GS, and in both battles, several senior military PIJ leaders were killed.²³⁹ There was debate surrounding Hamas's decision not to directly participate in these battles, but rather to operate through the joint operations room of the resistance factions and provide logistical support. This sparked controversy regarding the relationship between the two movements. This issue was clarified during Operation al-Aqsa Flood, carried out by Hamas. Prior to this operation, Hamas aimed to streamline the numerous military groups in GS, which had numbered 40, into 10 cohesive military factions.

This strategy was articulated by Ayman Nofal, a member of the military council of Al-Qassam Brigades,²⁴⁰ who later was killed in the war during Operation al-Aqsa Flood.

5. PFLP... Reappointment of the Secretary-General

The PFLP concluded its Eighth National Conference in May 2022, under the slogan: “The Eighth National Conference – A Significant Step Towards Strengthening Internal Unity, Unity of Will and Action, Democracy, Reviving the Front and Enhancing its Popular, National and Struggle Presence.” PFLP held its eighth conference nine years after its seventh national conference in 2013, despite internal regulations stipulating that the national conference should be held every five years. According to these regulations, the national conference is the highest authority in the party, tasked with discussing and deciding on reports from the General Central Committee and the central control committee, approving and amending the party program and internal regulations, addressing all major issues concerning the party, the revolution and the nation, and electing the General Central Committee and the central control committee.²⁴¹

In its eighth conference, the PFLP re-elected its Secretary-General Ahmad Sa’adat for an exceptional third term, honoring the sacrifices of prisoners, as the internal regulations do not allow for a third term.²⁴² Jamil Mezher was elected as Sa’adat’s deputy, replacing Daud Muragha (aka Abu Ahmad Fuad), and the political bureau was elected. The renewal rate in the General Central Committee was 53%, and in the political bureau, it was 75%, with many leaders stepping down from their positions in adherence to the internal regulations and prioritizing democratic practices.²⁴³ The PFLP emphasized the unique challenges faced by WB, which endures ongoing persecution. Therefore, the conference directed the elected leadership to take necessary actions to ensure full representation of WB in all elected leadership bodies.²⁴⁴

The General Central Committee is the highest organizational body after the National Council and the Party Conference (the General National Council), acting on behalf of the National Conference between its sessions, meeting every four months at the invitation of the political bureau, and electing the Secretary-General, the deputy Secretary-General, and the political bureau. The political bureau is responsible for the party’s duties between the General Central Committee sessions.²⁴⁵

Since its inception, the PFLP adopted Marxist-Leninist ideology, aiming to evolve into a Marxist-Leninist party. However, following global shifts, particularly the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the PFLP's commitment to Marxist-Leninist ideology gradually waned. In its recent eighth conference, the PFLP adopted the following statement to define its ideological foundation in its internal regulations: "The PFLP is guided by Marxist thought and its core, the dialectical materialist historical method, alongside all progressive, democratic and humanistic elements within the intellectual and cultural heritage of our Palestinian people, the Arab nation, and humanity at large."²⁴⁶ This formulation expands the movement's ideological framework, positioning Marxism as just one aspect of its broader reference.

Politically, the PFLP has reverted to its earlier literature advocating for a "democratic state of Palestine across the entire national Palestinian land" within the context of "liberating all of Palestine from the river to the sea."²⁴⁷ This stance omits the establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, which it had endorsed at the 19th PNC session in Algiers in 1988 and had remained present in the PFLP's subsequent conferences.²⁴⁸

6. The DFLP Conferences and Resignations

In 2018, the DFLP held its Seventh General National Conference, the highest political and legislative authority within the organization. This session resulted in the election of a new Central Committee, which subsequently elected a new political bureau. This bureau is headed by Secretary-General Nayef Hawatmeh, with Qais 'Abdul Karim and Fahd Suleiman serving as his deputies, and includes 25 members representing the Front's regions and organizations across WB, GS, Lebanon, Syria, Europe, the Americas, Arab countries, Asia and Africa.²⁴⁹ According to the Front's internal regulations, the eighth conference is to be held every 4–5 years.

The DFLP Tenth National Conference in GS was held in July 2023, preparing for the Eighth General National Conference. Delegates from the GS region were elected for the upcoming event.²⁵⁰

Similarly, the DFLP's organizations in Syria held the first session of the Eighth General National Conference and voted on candidates for the DFLP Central Committee, which will be elected in the upcoming sessions. The DFLP's organizations in Syria also held their 21st regional conference, electing a new leadership for the Front's organizations in Syria and a daily executive leadership.²⁵¹

The DFLP in Lebanon concluded its 15th conference, electing a new leadership, which in turn elected a regional leader, a deputy and a daily executive leadership.²⁵²

Previously, in April 2022, Qais ‘Abdul Karim “Abu Leila” resigned from his position as the Secretary-General of the DFLP in WB, while retaining his position as Deputy Secretary-General to Nayef Hawatmeh, and head of the political bureau and DFLP Central Committee in WB. Majida al-Masry, a member of the political bureau, was elected to fill the position of Secretary-General of the region.²⁵³ Later, in February 2023, Qais ‘Abdul Karim resigned from all his leadership positions while maintaining his DFLP membership.²⁵⁴ It was previously noted that dozens of members of the DFLP in WB resigned due to the leadership’s insistence on attending the PCC session of the PLO held in February 2022. The DFLP also witnessed resignations in March 2021 due to disagreements over the Front’s list for the legislative elections,²⁵⁵ which were later cancelled by President ‘Abbas.

7. The PNI... The General National Conference

The PNI concluded its General National Conference on 14/1/2023, electing its general leadership body and Secretary-General Mustafa Barghouti. Leadership bodies in all governorates were also elected after holding 61 branch conferences, including governorate and sector conferences for women and youth.²⁵⁶

Secretary-General Mustafa Barghouti highlighted the PNI new programs, which include the national liberation program, the strategy of struggle and resistance to end the occupation and apartheid system, the democratic program advocating for the separation of powers and democratic elections for the PNC, PLC and the presidency, as well as the social justice program, national resilience, defense of women’s rights, and combating poverty and discrimination in all its forms.²⁵⁷

Seventh: Security Coordination – A Constant in PA’s Policies

The Bennett-Lapid government, which lasted from 13/6/2021 to 29/12/2022, placed special emphasis on continuous security and economic coordination with the PA through then-Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz, without any political component. This reminds us of a series of decisions taken by various PLO institutions to halt security coordination without adhering to them, recalling



President ‘Abbas’s declaration on 19/5/2020, of the PLO and the State of Palestine withdrawing from all agreements and understandings with the US and Israeli governments, including security commitments.²⁵⁸ This stance appeared rhetorical during the strained relationship between the PA and the Trump administration but was later reversed on 17/11/2020, by Hussein al-Sheikh, the GPCA head in the PA, who announced the resumption of relations with Israel.²⁵⁹

The PA continued this path with the Bennett-Lapid government, as explained by then-Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, who stated that 90% of the relationship with the PA concerns security coordination.²⁶⁰ This is consistent with the security perspective expressed by the Israel Security Agency—ISA (*Shabak*) through its then-head Nadav Argaman, who said, “The stability of the PA is an Israeli interest to ensure continued security coordination and to keep Israel from managing and funding the needs of millions of Palestinians.”²⁶¹ The PA maintained this course throughout 2022 under the Bennett-Lapid government, without any practical effects of the PCC’s decision in February 2022 to halt security coordination.²⁶² President Mahmud ‘Abbas declared towards the end of 2022 that “the agreements with Israel are in place and will not be withdrawn,” and announced at the same time that the PA would also deal with Benjamin Netanyahu.²⁶³

The PA began 2022 with meetings at various levels with Israeli officials, including a meeting between Hussein al-Sheikh and Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid in January.²⁶⁴ These meetings prompted a statement from then-Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz, emphasizing the importance of maintaining such dialogues with PA leadership, including President Mahmud ‘Abbas. Gantz expressed his concern that weakening the PA could result in Hamas gaining strength.²⁶⁵ He clearly stated that his government had decided “to strengthen ties with the Palestinian Authority, thus also weakening Hamas.”²⁶⁶

Despite Israeli incursions into Palestinian city centers leading to numerous casualties, security meetings between the PA leadership and Israeli security services continued. The Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades – Nidal al-Amoudi Brigade blamed Israel’s ability to reach its fighters in Nablus on this security coordination.²⁶⁷ Media sources reported a meeting between Hussein al-Sheikh, Maayan Israeli (Israeli Defense Minister’s chief of staff), and Ghassan Alian (Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories—COGAT),²⁶⁸ and another meeting in Tel Aviv with Omer Barlev (Israeli Minister of Public Security). These sources indicated that

one of the goals of these meetings was to prevent escalation during Ramadan at *al-Aqsa* Mosque.²⁶⁹ Israeli media claimed that President ‘Abbas instructed Fatah activists in Jerusalem to prevent any escalation at *al-Aqsa* Mosque, even with their bodies.²⁷⁰ The month of Ramadan in 2022 posed a significant challenge to Israeli plans for *al-Aqsa* Mosque, especially with Religious Zionism parties’ plans coinciding with Jewish Passover. Israeli forces and settlers’ incursions into *al-Aqsa* Mosque continued throughout the month, some of which were violent. For instance, the incursion on 15/4/2022, resulted in over 160 injuries and more than 400 Palestinians arrested.²⁷¹

The events at *al-Aqsa* Mosque in 2022 were reflected in security-related meetings, such as President Mahmud ‘Abbas’s meeting with the new Shabak Chief Ronen Bar, in Ramallah. Israeli media claimed the meeting was “in the context of recent events at *al-Aqsa* Mosque and the security tension in the West Bank.”²⁷² This was the second meeting of its kind between President ‘Abbas and Ronen Bar, the first being in Ramallah in November 2021 to discuss the PA’s economic conditions and security coordination.²⁷³

Meetings related to economic facilitations and security arrangements continued at other levels, such as President ‘Abbas’s meeting in Ramallah with then-Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz in July 2022. “The two agreed to continue security coordination and to avoid unilateral measures,” Gantz’s office said.²⁷⁴

Security coordination persisted despite a severe economic crisis for the PA, which struggled to pay its employees’ salaries in full. This crisis was partly due to Israel’s periodic deductions from Palestinian clearance funds. As Israeli incursions into WB areas escalated, both the PA and the Bennett-Lapid government sought middle-ground solutions. These efforts represented a continuation of policies initiated by the Bennett-Lapid government since its formation. Such policies included economic and logistical facilitation, highlighted by a meeting between Gantz and President ‘Abbas at the end of 2021.²⁷⁵ In a related development, it was revealed that Israeli security agencies managed a financial fund to transfer money to the PA in coordination with the Israeli Civil Administration or COGAT, and with the agreement of the Israeli Ministry of Finance.²⁷⁶ This action reflects the Israeli security establishment’s view that maintaining the stability of the PA is beneficial and necessary to circumvent measures imposed by Israeli politicians on the PA. However, this also undermines the PA in the eyes of Palestinian society.



Despite the Israeli security establishment's keen interest in the stability of the PA and viewing its support as an Israeli security interest, as stated by the head of the Israeli Military Intelligence Directorate (Aman),²⁷⁷ it remains stringent in retaining unrestricted control over the PA's vital areas. Indeed, the Israeli Shabak has consistently refused to reduce the Israeli army's powers within Area A, which should be under the PA's sole security responsibility. Ariel Sharon effectively annulled this during Operation Defensive Shield in 2002. Since then, Israeli forces have had free movement in Area A for raids, arrests and assassinations, while some Israeli circles believe that the PA can be relied upon for part of the tasks carried out by the Israeli army.²⁷⁸ This has been a longstanding position of the Shabak, which proposed imposing a blockade on the northern WB as resistance there increased in 2022.²⁷⁹

This Israeli approach places the PA in a complex situation. The entities most involved with it, such as the security establishment, are characterized by extremism and intolerance in strategic security issues or addressing immediate security pressures that the PA cannot handle promptly. Meanwhile, Israel continues its open operation to eliminate resistance in WB, dubbed "Break the Wave," which began on 31/3/2022, following a series of significant operations in March that resulted in the deaths of 11 Israelis and the injury of 27 others.²⁸⁰

These circumstances necessitated attempts to devise approaches to reduce Israeli security pressure in favor of giving the PA a chance to contain the growing armed resistance in the northern WB. One proposal by the PA was to halt Israeli incursions into Area A for four months as a "testing period to calm the situation," which Israel did not accept.²⁸¹ However, Israel indicated it was considering limiting its operations in WB and seeking other steps to enhance the Palestinian security forces' capabilities. This included allowing military training for Palestinian forces in Jordan under US supervision, and approving the transfer of weapons and ammunition to Palestinian forces to strengthen their power against armed resistance factions, including the possibility of forming special Palestinian forces trained and armed to operate in the northern WB.²⁸² Additionally, Israel agreed to let the PA own two helicopters for senior officials' travel.²⁸³

These approaches continued through direct communication between PA officials and Israeli security officials,²⁸⁴ under clear US management.²⁸⁵ The political promise from the Bennett-Lapid government conveyed through Israeli

Defense Minister Gantz, who had extensive contact with the PA leadership, was limited to recognizing a Palestinian entity that falls short of statehood.²⁸⁶

These arrangements led the PA to attempt to dismantle armed resistance formations in the northern WB, achieving notable success against the “Lions’ Den” formation based in Nablus. These efforts included persuasive measures to encourage members of the formation to surrender to the PA security forces,²⁸⁷ as well as more aggressive actions such as the arrest of key leaders, particularly those associated with Hamas, such as Mus‘ab Shtayyeh.²⁸⁸ These actions led to confrontations with the public and local residents in Nablus,²⁸⁹ while the Israeli forces targeted and killed many fighters from the formation.²⁹⁰ The management of the “Lions’ Den” formation served as a prototype for assessing its applicability to broader resistance groups in the northern WB,²⁹¹ especially in Jenin RC. Reports indicated that the PA developed a strategy to contain the armed formations in Jenin RC²⁹² and successfully thwarted several operations planned by the PIJ against the Israeli occupation.²⁹³ Thus, 2022 ended with over 500 political arrests and summons issued by the PA targeting activists from various resistance factions in WB.²⁹⁴

Israeli security policies towards the WB continued in 2023, marked by extensive incursions and significant casualties among residents and resistance fighters. These actions prompted President ‘Abbas to publicly announce the cessation of security coordination in response to a massacre committed by the Israeli occupation in January 2023, which claimed the lives of nine Palestinians from the Jenin RC alone.²⁹⁵ However, this declaration had little practical effect, as reports indicated that President ‘Abbas privately informed the US administration that parts of the security coordination between the PA and Israel remained ongoing without interruption.²⁹⁶ Leaked US documents confirmed that the PA indeed maintained security coordination with the occupation during the period it publicly announced its cessation.²⁹⁷

Since President ‘Abbas announced the cessation of security coordination in January 2023, US efforts to draw the PA and Israel closer have been ongoing and overt, according to sources within the PLO.²⁹⁸ A security plan from the Biden administration presented to President ‘Abbas by Secretary of State Blinken proposed “training a special Palestinian force to confront militants.”²⁹⁹



The PA's contacts with the Benjamin Netanyahu government, which succeeded the Bennett-Lapid government, continued despite Netanyahu's declared intentions to annex parts of WB. This intention took on a practical dimension with his government that included religious Zionist parties and the appointment of Bezalel Smotrich as an additional minister in the Ministry of Defense, in addition to his role as Minister of Finance. Smotrich was granted extensive authority over numerous responsibilities of COGAT and the Civil Administration, the executive tool managing Palestinian affairs in WB, which is subordinate to the Ministry of Defense, and led by a military-ranked official. As part of the new arrangement, a Settlements Administration will be established within the Defense Ministry under Smotrich's authority, who would have control over enforcement of "illegal construction" in WB.³⁰⁰ According to Israeli researchers, this effectively means annexing the WB by transferring parts of the responsibility from the army and its Civil Administration to a civilian authority. This civilian authority, led by Smotrich, is responsible for Israeli settlers in WB, while Palestinians would remain under Israeli military rule.³⁰¹

Despite Israel's practical shift towards annexing the WB and Netanyahu's persistent anti-PA rhetoric, which includes accusations of the PA failing to "fulfil its security role" and his commitment to maintaining Israeli security responsibility over WB,³⁰² sources indicate there were early sustained secret contacts between the PA and the Netanyahu's government. A clandestine communication channel was established between Netanyahu's office and the PA leadership. This initiative began with a letter from PLO Executive Committee Secretary-General Hussein al-Sheikh to Netanyahu's office, delivered through the US administration weeks before Netanyahu's sixth government was formed, indicating that "despite deep differences, the PA is ready to work with the new Prime Minister." Netanyahu appointed his National Security Advisor, Tzachi Hanegbi, to oversee the Palestinian file and authorized him to conduct talks aimed at preventing escalation during the early weeks of the government's tenure through regular contacts. These discussions resulted in actual meetings between al-Sheikh and Hanegbi and led to the postponement of a UN Security Council vote on a resolution condemning settlements in WB.³⁰³

The clearest embodiment of continued security coordination and US plans to develop this coordination was the 'Aqaba security summit held on 26/2/2023, in 'Aqaba, Jordan, with the participation of PA, Israel, the US, Jordan and Egypt,

followed by the Sharm El-Sheikh summit in Egypt on 19/3/2023, involving the same parties to further the understandings reached in ‘Aqaba. These discussions centered on an American security plan overseen by US General Michael Fenzel, aimed at training Palestinian forces to regain control over the Jenin and Nablus areas. Under this plan, five thousand Palestinian security personnel serving in the National Security Force would receive training in Jordan through a specialized program supervised by the US.³⁰⁴

After a major Israeli army invasion of Jenin RC on 3/7/2023, President ‘Abbas re-announced the cessation of security coordination.³⁰⁵ However, this announcement contradicted the actual security and political practices of the PA in reality. Following the invasion, the PA targeted PIJ cadres with widespread arrests in Jenin governorate.³⁰⁶ The events in the camp and the expulsion of some Fatah leaders from the RC’s funerals escalated tensions with Hamas, under the guise of formations attributed to Fatah.³⁰⁷ The focus then shifted to an Israeli-Palestinian agreement to suspend Israeli military operations in Jenin to give the PA an opportunity to impose its control there.³⁰⁸ These understandings align somewhat with the security views of some levels within the Israeli establishment. The Israeli Security Cabinet adopted a proposal from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to prevent the collapse of the PA in exchange for several conditions, including stopping “incitement” in Palestinian media and education systems, halting accusations against Israel in international courts and organizations, cutting salaries to families of martyrs and prisoners, and preventing construction in Area C.³⁰⁹ This aligns with the Israeli security vision expressed by Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, who stated that when the PA is effective and the Palestinian security forces do their job, it is considered an Israeli security interest.³¹⁰

The situation remained unchanged, with continued security coordination governed by an exclusively Israeli security vision and no real political horizon. According to the “Lawyers for Justice” group, the total number of political arrests by the PA from the beginning of 2023 until August of the same year reached 726 cases.³¹¹ Despite the Israeli war on GS after 7/10/2023, political arrests continued,³¹² and the PA suppressed some demonstrations supporting Palestinians in GS,³¹³ who were experiencing an unprecedented Israeli war in the conflict’s history. The PA’s suppression of these demonstrations resulted in the deaths of several protesters.³¹⁴ Thus, amidst the unprecedented violence, brutality and genocidal intent of the war on GS, and the PA’s adherence to its approach, particularly security coordination,

Palestinians transitioned into 2024 in the same situation while entering an entirely new phase, the features of which will become clear only after some time following this war.

Conclusion

In 2022 and 2023, internal Palestinian stagnation and deadlock persisted, despite the significant challenge posed by Benjamin Netanyahu’s government, reinforced by religious Zionist parties. This government maintained a declared ideological stance against any political representation for Palestinians, including at the level of the PA. Efforts were made to transform the occupation into civilian form implicitly, exacerbate the PA’s economic crisis, deprive it of economic revenue capabilities, and deny it a political project. The PA evolved into a totalitarian security authority centered around the presidency, relying on security forces for its maintenance. Despite this, the PA retained a political stance that made it useful to regional and international powers, including many Israeli circles that advocate for maintaining the PA for Israeli security purposes and to create the illusion of a political process.

Despite the escalating challenges in WB, and the Israeli wars on GS in August 2022 and May 2023, the year 2023 ended with an unprecedentedly destructive war that included genocidal practices against Palestinians, displacing them and destroying urban life in GS. Despite these immense challenges, which necessitate a fundamental change in the positioning and performance of the PA, it remained committed to its security agreements and did not implement any of the decisions made by PLO institutions to stop security coordination.

The only effectiveness in national relations was the reconciliation conference in Algeria in October 2022 and the meeting of faction secretaries-general in Egypt in July 2023, both of which failed to produce any tangible results. The PCC convened in February 2022 in a divisive context, opposed by Hamas, PIJ and some PLO factions. Meanwhile the PLO leadership criticized any popular attempts to mobilize Palestinians abroad or fill the gaps created by the PLO’s inactivity. The PA’s leadership continued to consolidate power in the presidency through decrees and judicial amendments, using the PLO as needed to manage internal contradictions within Fatah or to prevent vacancies that might undermine the legal “legitimacy” of the organization’s institutions.

Given all this, no positive changes in the internal Palestinian situation were expected, as in previous years, until the Israeli war on GS began. Characterized by genocidal intent, destruction, displacement and deliberate starvation, with unprecedented levels of violence and duration, and its repercussions on Jerusalem and WB, the occupation immediately activated all its checkpoints in WB, complicating Palestinian movement, and intensified its bloody incursions into WB areas. The number of killed in WB from 7/10/2023 to 18/2/2024, was nearly 400.³¹⁵ The number of detainees in WB since the beginning of the war until 3/2/2024, exceeded 6,500 Palestinian detainees,³¹⁶ which still had no impact on the political directions or security behavior of the PA. It continued its same approach of political arrests and clashes with the public, whether with armed formations in the northern WB or with demonstrations in support of GS, resulting in Palestinian casualties.

On the other hand, the exceptional nature of the Israeli war on GS might change the internal Palestinian situation, depending on how the war ends, without expecting significant changes in the current PA elite. A large prisoner exchange deal, if Hamas secures the release of prominent organizational figures, this could affect the Fatah elite and renew Hamas's popularity. As this chapter is being written during the war, future projections are based on the general trajectory of the previous period, including the two years under review, and the war and its outcomes. The following general frameworks can be considered:

First: Hamas recognizes that continuing to manage GS alone will not be feasible, regardless of how the war ends, due to the need to lift the blockade and undertake reconstruction. This requires an agreement on a national mechanism, such as a technocratic government or a national unity government, to counter Israeli plans to impose a client administration in GS or an administration of families and clans, similar to the village leagues attempted in WB in the 1970s.

Second: Hamas understands that the significant results it achieved in Operation al-Aqsa Flood are now being countered by an Israeli war aiming to nullify those results, shift turns Hamas from an offensive strategic position to a defensive one, and raise questions among the Palestinian and Arab public about the operation's usefulness. Therefore, Hamas needs to restore its popularity, which could happen through a large prisoner exchange deal or changes in the course of the war.

Third: Hamas and its allies in the resistance factions might work on developing a national front to counter the policy of monopolizing the PLO and using it to

serve the PA elite, excluding Hamas and PIJ. This effort could be reinforced if the PA remains negative towards post-war requirements and if Hamas succeeds in achieving a large prisoner exchange deal.

Fourth: The release of Marwan Barghouthi, a member of Fatah Central Committee could influence the current Fatah elite's structure and positions, improving relations between the two movements. Similarly, the release of the PFLP Secretary-General Ahmad Sa'adat could strengthen Hamas-PFLP relations, establishing Hamas as a leading movement in the Palestinian national movement.

Fifth: The apparent outcomes of this war will not be its final ones, regardless of how it ends. The performance of the resistance in GS and the genocide committed by the Israeli occupation will destabilize the situation in WB, if not in the short term, then in the medium term, especially given the PA's weakness and its refusal to renew its legitimacy either popularly, nationally, or through collective national positions. Ongoing challenges and radicalization factors in WB, such as settlements, *al-Aqsa* Mosque, multiple Israeli violations, and the conditions of prisoners in jails, reinforce this instability.

Sixth: There is vague US talk about activating the PA to be ready to take over GS after Hamas, primarily focusing on security rehabilitation. This is accompanied by vague discussions about recognizing a Palestinian state and efforts aimed at imposing a "reasonable" Palestinian alternative acceptable to the West, suitable for Fatah and the PA leadership. This alternative is intended to fit the post-war phase and is covered with political legitimacy by reopening the blocked peace process without a serious final horizon, despite opposition from the Netanyahu government to these US proposals.

Seventh: The PA is not expected to remain unchanged, considering President 'Abbas's health, the complete blockage of its economic capacity in WB, and the facts imposed by the war on GS. Therefore, there will be escalating power struggles within the PA between the Fatah elite, with the immediate result being the dismissal of the Shtayyeh government. The level of transformation depends on the war's outcomes, which may lead to recalling the PLO, engaging in a political conference or plan proposed by the US for the post-war period or to resume the political process, or proposing a technocratic or national unity government, with potential overlaps between all these steps, without overlooking the Israeli stance on all this.

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- ³¹⁴ Site of 7iber, 24/10/2023, <https://www.7iber.com>
- ³¹⁵ Site of Al-Qahera News, 18/2/2024, <https://alqaheranews.net>
- ³¹⁶ Anadolu Agency, 3/2/2024. (in Arabic)

This Report

Al-Zaytouna Centre is pleased to present The Palestine Strategic Report (PSR) 2022–2023, now in its 13th consecutive edition. This report provides an academic, objective and comprehensive analyses of the developments related to the Palestine issue across various dimensions. It offers up-to-date and accurate information and statistics through the end of 2023, complemented by analytical insights and forecasts.

This PSR, prepared by 12 specialized professors and researchers, consists of eight chapters that explore various aspects of the Palestinian situation. It examines the internal Palestinian scene, demographic and economic indicators, and the status of Jerusalem and its holy sites. The report also analyzes the courses of aggression, resistance and the peace process, while providing insights into the Israeli political, demographic, economic and military landscape. Furthermore, it discusses Palestinian, Arab, Islamic and international relations. Notably, Operation al-Aqsa Flood has significantly influenced the report's findings and perspectives.

The PSR has consolidated its position as an essential reference in Palestinian studies, serving as an indispensable resource that provides invaluable insights for those interested in Palestinian affairs. Al-Zaytouna Centre aspires for this PSR to make a significant qualitative contribution to the field of Palestinian studies.

Prof. Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh

The Palestine Strategic Report 2022 – 2023



Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies & Consultations

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