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2005-The Year That Was

In many regards, the year 2005 did not bring changes. There were some hopes for improvement in the aftermath of the Sharm Esh-Sheikh Summit and the announcement of the planned Israeli pullout from the Gaza Strip. However, these hopes soon faded as it became clear that Israel was neither giving up its settlement enterprise in the West Bank nor the construction of the controversial separation barrier and instead, was continuing with its grave breaches of International Law, including military incursions into towns and camps, attacks against Palestinian civilians, the applying of collective punishment measures, and the restricting of people's movement through curfews, closures, checkpoints, and the confiscating of land, etc.

January began as violently as 2004 had ended. On 4 January, Israeli shelling in northern Gaza left at least 11 Palestinians dead, incl. five children from one family. However, the dominant event of the month was the election of a successor to the late Yasser Arafat, which ended with the expected victory (62.5% of the vote) for Mahmoud Abbas on 9 January and the raising of (unfulfilled) hopes for renewed contact between Israel and the PA. The month also witnessed a great deal of destruction, especially of Palestinian houses in the Gaza Strip, and continued suffering. On 21 January, Pres. Abbas ordered PA security forces to take up positions in northern Gaza to curb "attacks" on Israelis as part of his plan to revive peacemaking efforts. Israel reopened the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt - closed since 12 Dec. 2004, at which time thousands of Palestinians found themselves stranded on the Egyptian side



New Palestinian President: Mahmoud Abbas

Palestinian Presidential Elections



- in one direction, enabling Palestinians to return to their Gaza homes but not to leave. The month was also busy with factional meetings as part of Abbas' effort to reach a ceasefire and to bring Hamas into a future government. His first trip abroad as President took him to Amman, where he discussed ways to resume the stalled Middle East peace talks, Cairo, where talks focused on the meeting of Palestinian factions, and Moscow, where the issues of Middle East democratization and reforms were on the agenda. At the end of the month, the first municipal elections were held in ten local councils in the Gaza Strip; Fateh

was defeated, winning in only three districts, while Hamas claimed a sweeping victory, having won in seven districts. In Jerusalem meanwhile, press reports in the middle of the month suggested that thousands of Palestinians holding Jerusalem ID cards were returning every month from the West Bank to live within the city's municipal borders because of the separation barrier. On 30 Jan., the decision to enable the Israeli Govt. to sell or lease Palestinian property in East Jerusalem confiscated under the Absentee Property Law caused an uproar, especially among Palestinians. (The decision was overturned shortly afterwards by Israel's Attorney General Menachem Mazuz.) In the global arena, US Secretary of State nominee Condoleezza Rice vowed on 18 January to make ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a personal priority, but whilst saying that peace was ultimately up to the parties in the region, though adding that a future Palestinian state cannot be "so broken up that it can't function as a state." Meanwhile, UN Sec.-Gen. Kofi Annan announced that UNRWA head Peter Hansen would not be reappointed, which was widely regarded as the result of pressure from the US and the Israeli demands for Hansen's removal.

Following their summit in Sharm Esh-Sheikh on 8 **February** - the highest-level meeting between the sides since Sept. 2000 - Israeli PM Sharon and Pres. Abbas announced a cessation of hostilities and agreement on more security coordination and a coordinated effort on the disengagement from Gaza and the northern West Bank. Pres. Mubarak and King Abdullah also attended the summit, and both Egypt and Jordan later announced that they would send ambassadors back to Israel. The international community welcomed the announcement of

Sharon-Abbas meeting, Sharm Esh-Sheikh



the ceasefire. In line with the agreements, Israel's Cabinet approved a list of 500 Palestinian prisoners to be released within a short period and promised to ease restrictions. A few days later, at a security policy conference in Munich, NATO Sec.-Gen. Jaap de Hoop Scheffer said that NATO should prepare for a role in supporting any future agreement to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and should not rule out a possible peacekeeping role. On 14 February, a car bomb blew up the motorcade of former Lebanese PM Rafiq Hariri, killing Hariri and 11 others and sending shockwaves throughout the region with many fingers pointing at Syria and Israel. In Jerusalem, meanwhile, the Knesset approved the 'Evacuation and Compensation Law' in a first step towards implementation of the Disengagement Plan, and a few days later, the Israeli Cabinet voted for evacuating all the Gaza settlements as well as four in the northern West Bank beginning in late July. Also approved was the revised route for the separation barrier, some 20% of which would follow the Green Line. Protests against the barrier continued unabated throughout the West Bank, though Bil'in near Ramallah became the focal point and a symbol of the widespread resistance. In a show of solidarity, the World Council of Churches in Geneva encouraged its members to sell

off investments in companies profiting from Israeli control of the WBGS. On 21 February, US Pres. Bush, speaking in Brussels, placed achieving Israeli-Palestinian peace at the top of NATO's list of priorities and called for the establishment of a democratic Palestinian state with territorial contiguity in the West Bank and an end to Israeli settlement activity. A new 24-member cabinet was approved by the PLC on 24 February, but any hopes for an improvement in the situation were dashed the next day by a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv that left four Israelis dead and for which the Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility.



New Palestinian Cabinet

March began with the Meeting on Supporting the PA convening in London at the invitation of the UK, and the clarifying of the participants' political vision, the PA's reform plans, and the international community's commitments in regard to their support of the PA. On 8 March, Hamas announced that it would take part in the upcoming PLC elections, contrary to initial statements from the movement's outside leadership. Attorney Talia Sasson submitted her report on the outposts, commissioned by PM Sharon, on 9 March, stating that many of the outposts had been established on land that was not owned by the state and accusing numerous governmental bodies of committing blatant offenses in order to establish outposts, particularly the Min. of Construction and Housing, which planned and funded illegal outposts in the absence of a decision to do so on the part of the Israeli Cabinet. In mid-March, UN Sec.-Gen. Kofi Annan visited Ramallah and told the Palestinian leadership that the world was determined to nurture Middle East peace moves after years of stagnation. The Israeli army withdrew from Jericho (16 March) and Tulkarem (22 March), handing over security responsibility to the PA. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of Israeli rightwing activists and settlers protested in Tel Aviv against the planned pullback from Gaza and the northern West Bank. An Arab League summit, convened in Algiers on 23 March, revived the 2002 Beirut peace initiative. The month showed that internal problems were still a priority, with Pres. Abbas threatening to resign unless Fateh helped him to accelerate



The Separation Barrier (The Wall) at Abu Dis

PA reforms. As further proof of the spreading dissatisfaction, members of Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades attacked the Muqata'a and restaurants in Ramallah, and gunmen marched in Tulkarem, Jenin, and Nablus as well as in Gaza. In Jerusalem, meanwhile, further land was confiscated for the construction of the separation barrier in Sawahreh, Izzariyya, Abu Dis, and near At-Tur, while tenders for additional housing in

the Har Homa settlement were issued and proceedings began to raze 88 buildings in Silwan in order to establish a national park there. Further discontent was caused by the revival of the 'E-I Plan,' the purpose of which is to facilitate the development of the area between the eastern settlements of East Jerusalem and Ma'ale Adumim and the news reports about Patriarch Irineos' alleged link to a scandal that divided the Greek Orthodox Church, at the center of which was an illegal land deal.

Construction next to Ma'ale Adumim



April saw Pres. Abbas taking several measures as part of his security reforms, which included forcing hundreds of security officials over the age of 60 into retirement, combining the then 11 PA security apparatuses under the Interior Minister into three (National Security, General Security, and General Intelligence), and appointing new key security services personnel. Israel planned legislative amendments to make it more difficult for non-Jews - i.e., mainly Palestinians - to obtain Israeli citizenship or permanent resident status in Israel. Settlers and rightwing activists staged several anti-disengagement protests throughout the month, while the Israeli army began removing non-essential

equipment from its bases in Gaza on 20 April. Protests at various construction sites for the separation barrier continued throughout the month. The EU established a Coordinating Office for Palestinian Police Support (EU COPPS) to assist the PA in developing a modern and effective civil police service. On 27 April, Russian President Putin arrived in Israel for an unprecedented state visit by a Russian/Soviet head of

Israeli army removing non-essential equipment from Gaza



state, indicating Russian interest in adopting a higher profile in the region, though Israel and the US immediately reject his proposal for a new Middle East peace conference. Also in April, Israel freed nine Jordanian prisoners in a bid to improve ties between Israel and Jordan, Pres. Bush told visiting PM Sharon on 11 April that Israel should meet its Road Map obligations, including with regard to settlements in the West Bank, UN Sec.-Gen. Annan appointed Alvaro de Soto as the new UN Special Coordinator, and the Quartet appointed James D. Wolfensohn as Special Envoy for the Gaza Disengagement. The global arena also witnessed a decision on the part of the British Association of University Teachers to impose an academic boycott on Haifa and Bar-Ilan Universities on the grounds that they "collaborate with the crimes of occupation," and the US-based Rand Corporation proposing a rail and highway link - called the ARC due to its arc-like route - between the West Bank and Gaza to lay the groundwork for the long-term development of a Palestinian state.

Palestinian Municipal Elections



In early **May**, Palestinians held elections in over 80 municipalities; Fateh came out on top, but Hamas beat its rival in four out of five major cities. On 19 May, however, a Palestinian court dealt a blow to Hamas when it annulled some election results relating to the Gaza Strip councils after Fateh complained of irregularities. In the aftermath of the court ruling, tensions between Hamas and Fateh in Gaza rose high, which cast a shadow over the planned PLC elections.

In related news, the Central Elections Commission (CEC) began registering all voters whose names were not previously included on the electoral lists in preparation for the PLC elections. On 29 May, the Israeli Cabinet approved the release of 400 Palestinian prisoners in what PM Sharon called a bid to bolster moderate Pres. Abbas ahead of the Gaza pullout, with regard to which Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit had announced a few days earlier that his country would deploy 750 troops on the Gaza-Egypt border. In the second half of the month, Pres. Abbas visited Japan, Malaysia, China, Pakistan, and India for bilateral talks and deliberations on the Middle East peace process before, on 24 May, embarking on his first trip as President to Washington, where Pres. Bush urged him to tackle the dismantling of militants while also reiterating that “a viable two-state solution must ensure contiguity of the West Bank, and a state of scattered territories will not work.” Before returning to Palestine, Pres. Abbas toured several Arab countries, incl. Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, where he briefed his counterparts about his trip to the US.



Abbas-Bush Meeting in Washington

June began with the release of approx. 400 Palestinian prisoners from Israeli prisons and the issuing of a decree by Pres. Abbas that postponed the PLC elections scheduled for 17 July 2005 for an indefinite period. Abbas was also busy meeting with Hamas officials to discuss the enforcing of a *de facto* truce and with the heads of the security forces and Fateh leaders to diffuse tensions with Fateh. Around the same time, press reports indicated that Israel and the US had begun discussing the participation of Hamas in the PLC elections and that it had been suggested that Pres. Abbas ban Hamas from running. On 18 June, the PLC approved amendments to the 1996 Election Law, enlarging the parliament from 88 to 132 members, half of whom were to be elected from district lists and the other half in national lists. A few days later, PM Sharon demanded in a meeting



Israel releases 400 Palestinian Prisoners

with Pres. Abbas that the PA act against terrorism, while Abbas demanded that Israel “strengthen his hand” so that he could act. On 23 June, the Quartet met in London as did the G-8 Foreign Ministers, both to discuss the peace process and the Gaza Disengagement. Towards the end of the month, PM Qrei’a said he wanted to establish a national unity cabinet of different factions, and in Amman, the first meeting of the Fateh Central Committee with the presence of all 16 members since the signing of the 1993 Declaration of Principles convened. In Jerusalem during June, Israeli forces continued demolishing Palestinian homes, while the Israeli High Court ordered the rerouting of the separation barrier in the Al-Jib, Beit Hanina, Bir Nabala, and Al-Judera areas, as well as the return of some 2,000 dunums of land to local villagers.

The Fateh Central Committee meeting in Amman ended on 2 July without any of the major issues under discussion having been resolved as the participants could not agree on the adding of new members, on a date for the next Fateh convention, or on how delegates should be chosen. Two days later, Hamas rejected the bid to join a unity government. On 8 July, the G-8, meeting in Scotland, pledged to provide the PA with up to US\$3 billion in the next few years to boost Middle East peace prospects. The next day, four bomb explosions rocked the London transportation system, killing over 50 people, in what was widely believed to be an Al-Qaeda attack. It was not to be the only such attack that month as on 23 July three coordinated bombs exploded in Sharm Esh-Sheikh, Sinai, claiming the lives of another 88 or so people and injuring over 200. Back in Palestine, the PA declared a state of emergency on 12 July after fierce clashes between PA policemen and Hamas gunmen added to the already tense situation, which did not cool down in spite of attempts by Pres. Abbas to hold talks with armed factions and the deployment of Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades members by Preventive Security head Rashid Abu Shabak. A few days later, 15 July became the bloodiest day of the month as Israeli forces

G-8 meeting in Scotland



Israeli airstrikes in Gaza



killed at least 12 Palestinians, mainly Hamas members, in separate air strikes and battles in Gaza and Salfit. On 21 July, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice arrived for talks on the disengagement, an Israeli-Palestinian truce, and on how to ensure calm after the Israeli pullout. Towards the end of the month, the Knesset voted for a new Citizenship Law, limiting the eligibility for citizenship of Palestinians married to Israeli citizens

to men over the age of 35 and women over 25, and the PA announced that the PLC elections would be postponed until Jan. 2006. In Jerusalem, Israel’s provisional approval for a new settlement in the Burj Al-Laqlaq area of the Old City and the decision to complete the separation barrier around East Jerusalem by the end of August - thereby cutting off 55,000 Palestinian Jerusalemites from their city - stirred more unrest.

In **August**, tens of thousands of rightwing Israelis rallied against the impending disengagement. On 4 August, an Israeli soldier who was opposed to the disengagement killed four people in the Israeli-Arab town of ShfaAmr, and on 17 August, a settler killed four Palestinians working at the Shilo settlement. Meanwhile, some 30 Egyptian security officers arrived to supervise the training of 5,000 PA police officers and in order to ensure calm in the Gaza Strip after the Israeli pullout. On 6 August, the PA Chief Justice Zuheir As-Sourani, resigned over the lawlessness in the courts and the repeated storming of courtrooms by Palestinian gunmen. In Gaza, the security situation deteriorated further, with numerous incidents involving the storming of governmental buildings, kidnappings, and shootings at various offices taking place throughout the month. On 10 August, Quartet envoy James Wolfensohn finalized a deal between Israelis and Palestinians according to which Israel would demolish the buildings in the evacuated Gaza settlements, remove hazardous materials, and pay the World Bank US\$25 million to hire Egyptian and Palestinian firms to clear the rubble. Less than a week later, on 16 August, Israeli forces began the pullout from Gaza, evacuating the largest settlement there, Neve Dekalim. On 22 August, settlers were removed from the last remaining settlement, Netzarim, which concluded the withdrawal from Gaza after nearly four decades of occupation. In the northern West Bank, the evacuation of the four settlements there was completed a day later. Palestinians celebrated the pullout all over the WBGS, but the killing of five Palestinians during an Israeli raid on Tulkarem on 25 August and the unveiling of plans to expand the Ma'ale Adumim settlement and to build a new settlement in Jabel Al-Mukabber cast a shadow over the general mood and caused Pres. Abbas to accuse Israel of wrecking prospects for peace.



Israeli settlers burning their homes and property before leaving their settlements in the Gaza Strip



Evacuation of settlements from Gaza



Palestinians celebrating the pullout from Gaza

As the school year began in **September**, hundreds of Palestinian children in East Jerusalem were again refused admission to local schools. The month also saw renewed internal violence in Gaza as unemployed Palestinians repeatedly staged protests and activists seized governmental buildings and abducted foreigners, all in a bid to bolster their demand for jobs with the PA and an end to corruption. Tension rose even further with the 7 September assassination of Musa Arafat, a security advisor to Pres. Abbas and nephew of former Pres. Yasser Arafat by the Popular Resistance Committees. In the meantime, Israel reached

an agreement with Egypt on the control of the Philadelphi Corridor along the Gaza-Egypt border, where Egypt subsequently deployed a total of 750 soldiers, and the last Israelis left the Gaza Strip on 12 September as GOC Southern Command Maj.-Gen. Dan Harel signed a proclamation that brought to an end the 38-year military occupation of the area. After a week of unchecked crossings by thousands of people at Rafah, hundreds of Palestinian police officers were sent to the

Palestinian Police imposing order at Rafah



border with Egypt in a bid to impose order. On 21 September, Israel declared its border with Gaza an international boundary, and a day later, Israel's Disengagement Plan was completed with the dismantling of the Dotan military post near Jenin. Israel's announcement that all



Explosion at a Hamas parade in Jabalia RC

investigations into police actions during the Oct. 2000 riots, which left 13 Arab citizens dead, would be closed caused an uproar among Israeli Arabs, many of whom took to the streets in protest. The joy related to the operating of the Rafah crossing without an Israeli presence or Israeli supervision for the first time in 37 years was overshadowed on 23 September by a large explosion at a Hamas parade in Jabalia RC that claimed the lives of 16 Palestinians and wounded many more. The next day, in response to Hamas rocket attacks on Negev towns, Israel

conducted an air raid on Gaza, killing at least four people, and approved a wide-ranging operation, 'First Rain,' which consisted of air strikes and arrest raids, the purpose of which was to stop the fire coming from Gaza. Amidst the Israeli assaults, Palestinians cast their ballots in 104 West Bank municipalities in the third of four rounds of municipal elections, in which Fateh won 54% of the votes and Hamas 26%.

October began with the worst outbreak of Palestinian infighting in nearly a decade between PA police officers and members of Hamas and the PLC's call to dissolve the government because of its failure to impose order and end chaos in the Territories. Amidst the growing violence, Israel arrested hundreds of Palestinians, imposed additional movement restrictions in the West Bank, and continued its assassination policy. Meanwhile, the leaders of various Palestinian factions met in Damascus in an (unsuccessful) attempt to boost national unity and solve internal differences. On 6 October, local human rights organizations achieved a small but nonetheless significant victory when the Israeli High Court of Justice ruled that the army's use of Palestinians as 'human shields' - e.g., forcing them to search houses believed to be booby-trapped and to enter houses where wanted men were hiding - violated International Law and was thus illegal. In response to a suicide attack in Hadera that left five people dead, PM Sharon approved another major offensive against Palestinians on 27 October while Palestinians called for swift international intervention to stop Israel's indiscriminate air strikes on Gaza. Israel meanwhile launched a diplomatic offensive against Iran after Iran's Pres. Ahmadinejad called Israel a "disgraceful blot" that should be "wiped off

the map.” In the global arena, the major event was the 20 October meeting between Pres. Abbas and Pres. Bush in Washington, during which Bush reiterated that Israel must remove outposts and stop settlement expansion while the PA must reject and fight terrorism.

Among the first news to emerge in **November** was that of the new plans of the American Jewish millionaire Irwin Moskowitz to establish a new settlement in Jerusalem’s Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood around the Shepherd’s Hotel. Towards the end of the month, another report - prepared by EU representatives - hit the news as it recommended, in response to Israeli actions, a renewal of contacts with Palestinians in East Jerusalem and economic assistance to their institutions. On 15 November, the marathon talks led by visiting US Secretary of State Rice resulted in the Israeli-Palestinian Agreement on Access and Movement, which covers, amongst other things, the operating of the Rafah Terminal between Gaza and Egypt, and plans to construct the Gaza seaport as well as to facilitate travel for Palestinians between



Sharon and his new centrist party (Kadima, meaning 'Forward')

the West Bank and Gaza in bus convoys. On 21 November, Israeli PM Sharon, taking the biggest gamble of his political career, quit the ruling Likud Party to lead a new centrist party (Kadima, meaning 'Forward') into early elections, slated for March 2006, on a platform that promoted preserving a Jewish majority in exchange for territorial concessions, keeping Jerusalem and large settlement blocs, and establishing a terror-free, demilitarized Palestinian state. Later in the month, Shimon Peres left the Labor Party after 46 years to join Kadima. A few days later, the Gaza Strip

reopened to the world when the Rafah crossing into Egypt resumed operations under Palestinian control, with Pres. Abbas, Egyptian Intelligence Chief Omar Suleiman, and EU envoy Marc Otte cutting the ribbon during the opening ceremony. That same day, Fateh began holding primaries to choose candidates for the Jan. 2006 PLC elections (jailed PLC member Marwan Barghouti won some 85% of votes in the Ramallah area), but the process was halted because of widespread fraud. In regional news, Jordan was hit by an apparent Al-Qaeda attack on 9



Radison Hotel in Amman

November as simultaneous suicide bombs went off in three hotels in Amman, killing at least 57 people and wounding over 115. Among the dead were 26 Palestinians with roots in the West Bank, incl. 17 members of the Akhras clan who were attending a family wedding, the West Bank’s Intelligence Chief, General Bashir Nafeh, his assistant Abed Allon, another member of the PA, Bashar Qaddumi, and the brother of PLC speaker Rawhi Fattouh, Jihad. Also in November, the EU announced the launch of a three-year mission to help the PA build a credible police force and agreed to oversee the border crossing between Gaza and Egypt and to set up a Border Assistance Mission to monitor the Rafah Terminal.

While demonstrations calling for jobs, an end to growing chaos, and an investigation into the alleged irregularities in the Fateh Primary Elections continued throughout the month, accompanied by violent incidents, December was dominated by the preparation of the PLC elections scheduled for January 2006. Finance Min. Salam Fayyad announced that he would head an independent list – ‘The Third Way’ – while the PPP and DFLP joined forces to form the ‘Alternative List’ and Fateh’s young guards registered a separate list - named ‘Al-Mustaqbal’ - headed by jailed leader Marwan Barghouthi. When the deadline for submitting lists of candidates was reached on 15 December, 12 lists had been submitted, including one by Hamas (running as ‘Change and Reform’) with Ismail Haniya as leading candidate, in defiance of Israeli, US, and other warnings that political participation on the part of Hamas would spell an end to all hopes for peace talks because the group had sworn itself to the destruction of Israel. In other developments, the Israeli Cabinet decided on 8 December to pull out of negotiations on



Ismail Haniya presenting the list of candidates for the PLC elections from the “Change and Reform” party

Gaza-West Bank bus convoys, despite an agreement brokered by Secretary of State Rice a month earlier, and a series of Israeli air strikes on Gaza left dozens of Palestinians dead. PM Sharon was rushed to hospital after suffering a mild stroke and Israel announced that it would not enable voting for the PLC elections to take place in East Jerusalem because of the participation of Hamas. Towards the end of the month, Fateh, in a bid to clamp down on internal chaos and improve its chances in the PLC elections, decided to run on a single, united list. Israel, meanwhile, began an offensive operation against Qassam rocket fire by establishing a ‘buffer zone’ in the northern Gaza Strip, and on 30 December, PA security forces, angered by the killing of a fellow police officer, stormed the Rafah border crossing, forcing European monitors to briefly shut the border and flee.

On a final note it should be stressed that this brief overview of a very eventful year does not mention all the Israeli atrocities and violations of International Law that took place and that are characteristic of the ongoing occupation of Palestine and its people. For the sake of completeness it should be mentioned that these included hundreds of incidents involving things such as the killing or injuring of innocent people, land confiscation, home demolitions, the uprooting of trees, the denial of freedom of movement and worship, arrests and detentions, the continued building of settlements, outposts, and the separation barrier, curfews and closures, and so on.