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ASSESSMENT REPORT

Palestine: A Third Intifada?

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Dec 2014

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Introduction

In the occupied Palestinian territories, political log-jam and the escalation of measures by occupation authorities and settlers has resulted in an upsurge in acts of protest and resistance from Palestinians, leading some observers to question the potential outbreak of a third intifada. The increase of individual acts of popular national resistance, devoid of linkage to political factions or parties, appears to signal the onset of a new modality of confrontation with the occupation. In this paper we explore the characteristics of these new expressions of Palestinian resistance, the motivations underlying them, and the likely future scenarios.

Underlying Causes

The Collapse of the Negotiations

Following continued, intensified Israeli settlement-building in the West Bank and Israeli refusal to release a fourth installment of Palestinian prisoners, Palestinian-Israeli negotiations taking place under US Secretary of State John Kerry's so-called "framework agreement" have come up against a brick wall. The situation has had an impact on Palestinian officialdom as well as on grassroots. In the face of the political impasse, the Palestinian Authority took steps to activate the State of Palestine's membership in international institutions, including accession to fifteen international conventions and treaties¹; this in addition to reconciling with Hamas². At the same time, a number of

¹ Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas signed fifteen international conventions availing the "non-member" status enjoyed by the State of Palestine at the United Nations. The move was an attempt to pressure Israel to release the prisoners and provide him with a justification for continuing the negotiations. Reinforcing such suspicions was his avoidance of signing a request to join the most important international body, namely, the International Criminal Court, which could subject Israeli officials to prosecution for war crimes and crimes against humanity. See: "The Palestinian - Israeli Negotiations: A Story of Inevitable Failure", Assessment Report, the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, April 12 / April 2014, at: <http://www.dohainstitute.org/release/07f1e125-c7e8-4b1f-8e3d-53573c00424f>. The Palestinian Authority had previously repeatedly signaled its wish to join the International Criminal Court, but hesitated to take this step, even at a time when it was greatly needed, such as the summer of 2014, citing the lack of a national consensus and the external pressure exerted upon them by the American administration.

² Fatah and Hamas announced an end to the state of Palestinian political division on April 23, 2014, with steps taken towards the formation of a national unity government. The formation of the Palestinian unity government, the seventeenth government of the Palestinian Authority, was announced on June 2, 2014.

Palestinian youths undertook the kidnapping of three teenage settlers near Hebron on June 12 of this year. Following the discovery of their corpses, Israel launched a new military campaign against the Gaza Strip, charging Hamas with responsibility for the kidnappings. In retaliation, a group of settlers associated with gangs known as “debt collectors” carried out the execution of 16 year old Palestinian Mohammed Abu Khudair, in Shu’fat, northern Jerusalem, burning him alive. Abu Khudair’s murder led to the eruption of protests throughout the neighborhoods of the old city of Jerusalem, protests that continue to date, turning Jerusalem into the epicenter of escalating events.

Israel’s Summer 2014 War on Gaza

On July 7, 2014, Israel launched a 51-day war on the Gaza Strip leading to the deaths of more than 2,000 Palestinians, with another 10,000 injured, not to mention the destruction of thousands of homes and vital facilities. Palestinians in the West Bank followed the day to day events of this asymmetrical war intently, and responded with organizing mass marches in Palestinian cities and along demarcation lines confronting Israeli occupation forces (at the entrances of settlements and camps, along the bypass roads that are allocated to the use of settlers, at military checkpoints). Youth groups working on their own initiative organized these protests without instruction from central political parties or reference to their political pronouncements. These demonstrations saw considerable stone-throwing and use of Molotov cocktails, as occurred in a series of repeated demonstrations held near “Ofer” camp close to the city of Ramallah, and at the “March of the 48 Thousand”³ near the Qalandiya checkpoint at the entrance to Jerusalem City, the largest of the many demonstrations held during the war. The momentum of this march was reinforced by the absence of the Palestinian security services; these had hitherto always prevented such protests since the area in question

The importance of this government lies in it ending seven years of division within the Palestinian political system, and paves the way for new elections to the Palestinian Authority, the PLO and the Palestinian National Council. There remain, however, many challenges still facing this reconciliation, not least being the actual application of the reconciliation agreement on the ground. For more see: "Palestinian Reconciliation: Motives and Prospects," Assessment Report, the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, April 28, April 2014, at: <http://www.dohainstitute.org/release/592ecf3b-a636-4d4d-8812-c4c976c9c1d5>

³ “Two Palestinians Martyred and nearly 200 Wounded Firing from the Occupation Forces at the March of the 48 Thousand”, *Arabs 48*, July 25, 2014, see: <http://www.arabs48.com/?mod=articles&ID=111586>

falls within the jurisdiction of direct Israeli control, interdicting the deployment of Palestinian security forces therein. Along with other institutions of Palestinian civil society, these youth groups also organized campaigns boycotting Israeli products, and collected in-kind and material donations for people in the Gaza Strip⁴.

Recurrent Settler Violence and the Policies for the Judaization of Jerusalem

The Netanyahu government has intensified its settlement-building activities in Palestinian territories in Jerusalem and the West Bank, no doubt a factor contributing to the stalling of negotiations with the Palestinian side. According to the Negotiations Affairs Department of the Palestine Liberation Organization, this year alone witnessed plans to build more than 14,000 housing units in the West Bank, about half of them located in East Jerusalem⁵. Benjamin Netanyahu's administration has also worked to organize incursions by extremist settlers, soldiers, and Jewish rabbis into the al-Aqsa Mosque. Occurring on nearly a weekly basis, these were funded and encouraged by the Ministry of the Interior's Knesset committee, with the assistance of the occupation police and soldiers. These incursions – tantamount to armed raids – featured the involvement of prominent Israeli extremists including Internal Security Minister Yitzhak Aharonovich, Minister of Housing Uri Ariel, and Israeli Knesset Vice President Moshe Viglen. Adding fuel to the fire, the Israeli government proceeded with a draft resolution by the Ministry of Interior's Knesset committee to partition the Al-Aqsa Mosque between Jews and Arabs, with the frequent repeated incursions clearly seeking to make this a *fait accompli*⁶.

⁴ On the results achieved by the boycott campaign initiated by Palestinian activists see: "Boycott Campaign Stacks Thousands of Tons of Israeli Products in Warehouses," *al-Quds*, August 24, 2014, at: <http://www.qudsn.ps/article/47076> See also: "Boycott Campaigns Targeting Occupation's Products Comes to Fruition," *al-Quds*, August 11, 2014, at: <http://www.qudsn.ps/article/46434>

⁵ Since the beginning of the year more than 14 thousand housing units in Jerusalem and the West", *Rassd*, November 21, 2014, see: <http://rassd.com/22-121935.htm>

⁶ The law allows Jews to pray in al-Aqsa Mosque through the proposed "equal right to worship" law, allocating both Muslims and Jews specific places and times for their prayers and (in the case of the Jews) the performance of Talmudic rites and rituals. The proposal also prohibits organizing counter demonstrations and protests, with reference to the Palestinians. See: "Project Israeli law allows the division of Al-Aqsa Mosque," *Al-Quds*, October 20, 2014, at: <http://www.alquds.com/news/article/view/id/529174>

Distinctive Features of Recent Operations

Increasing oppressive Israeli policies, along with repeated attacks and campaigns of mass detentions, have led to Jerusalem emerging as a center for operations carried out by Palestinians, who have independently taken it upon themselves to carry out actions which have included incidents of hit and run, knife attacks, and firing upon groups of settlers and Israeli occupation soldiers. While these do not in themselves constitute new methods, they are distinctive for three reasons.

First, the planning and execution of these operations have a strictly individual nature. With the participation of two people at most, these are remote from any political party's planning. Despite some factions being quick to claim responsibility for a number of these actions, it is clear these constituted individual initiatives, undertaken without the knowledge of any party leadership or linkage to its structures, highlighting the extent to which political division, over the course of recent events, has served to weaken factions and parties and distance them from Palestinians.

Second, these operations have been centered deep within Israeli territory. Those who carried out the attacks were from Jerusalem, or from the territories occupied in 1948⁷. Such easy infiltration was made possible because of the easy direct contact with settlers and the occupation forces, something not found (save on their outer peripheries) in the West Bank cities subject to the Palestinian Authority's security controls, which come with high-level coordination on security preventing any contact from occurring, under agreements signed with the Israeli side. The recent operations occurred in areas located beyond the control of the Palestinian Authority.

⁷ In recent events a significant number of Palestinians from "the inside" (the territories occupied in 1948), undertook actions in support of Gaza and solidarity with its people. Palestinian cities and towns witnessed demonstrations condemning the aggression, and a number of Arab leaders brought the battle to the corridors of the Israeli Knesset itself, accusing Israel of committing war crimes in Gaza, and defending the right to resistance of the Palestinian people to resistance. They also had significant presence in confronting attacks by settlers in Jerusalem and the incursions on the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Racist Israeli policies had served to build up tensions among the "inside" Palestinians, who accumulated experience asserting themselves in the face of efforts to subjugate them through measures such as forced conscription into civil service and acknowledgement of the Jewishness of the State and so forth.

Finally, by their nature, these operations present a challenge for intelligence services to control or predict, and cannot be aborted with the arrest of the planners, as in 'traditional' resistance operations.

Future Scenarios

Palestinian popular resistance may well be witnessing an increase of individual Palestinian acts of protest, however limited geographically they may remain, and especially in places not subject to the security controls of the Palestinian Authority. Although future resistance operations of such individual nature cannot be predicted, given the absence of any organizational dimension to sustain them over time, they nonetheless represent a very strong indication of discontent and rage that is simmering under the surface among Palestinians.

Given the persistence of the occupation's settlement activity amid the indifference and disregard displayed by the Arab countries and the world at large, in addition to the blockage of prospects for a settlement following the stands taken by the Netanyahu government in rejection of any political solution, it is safe to assume that Palestinians are currently living under conditions not unlike those prevailing on the eve of the previous intifadas.

In the current situation, the principle difference is the behavior of the Palestinian Authority, and the change in the political creed of its security apparatus. These threaten to make it possible for a future Palestinian intifada to turn into an inter-Palestinian confrontation. This difference, however, may be of diminished importance given the extent of anger generated by the practices of the occupation, and the failure of the Palestinian Authority and its leaders in Fatah and Hamas to come up with alternative courses of resistance action to offer Palestinians.