



The Political Year in Review—2014

By Rami G. Khouri



Some years down the road, the year 2014 in retrospect may prove to have been a historic one for Palestinians, who continue their nearly century-long quest for national rights, self-determination, independence, and a normal life. This year's predictable events that recur from past decades along with some novel developments may signal a historic shift, even only temporarily. This shift would be away from the two dominant failed legacies of American-mediated peace negotiations and armed-struggle resistance leading to savage Israeli attacks against Gaza primarily, towards a new strategy that has yet to crystallise but is hinted at already this year. Indications during 2014 suggest that a more effective diplomatic strategy must comprise elements that have been relatively dormant or non-existent in recent years. These include using international organisations and the power of European recognition to achieve meaningful Palestinian statehood, and bottom-up activism such as the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement that could slowly but steadily position Israel in the international arena as an entity that practices apartheid-like policies against the Palestinians living under its occupation.

The most dramatic events of 2014 were all repeats of similar episodes in recent years – the war in Gaza, the on-and-off reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas in a national unity government, the intense but ultimately failed peace negotiations mediated by the United States, and persistent local demonstrations and occasional armed attacks against Israelis. These four processes are very likely to recur in the future, but probably with the same lack of results.



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The peace talks mediated with deep personal involvement by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry were noteworthy for the intensity of the effort and the apparent American willingness to put forth Washington's vision of a fair peace agreement – which did not happen in the end. This direct, sustained, and deep American involvement in the negotiations seemed to be motivated by what several top American military and civilian officials had stated in recent years: that the continuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict damages America's strategic interests and its political standing in the region and the world. Yet 2014 revealed once again that Washington could not resolve its fundamental dilemma of trying to be at once Israel's ironclad supporter and also an impartial and effective mediator between Israel and the Palestinians. When the U.S. Senate voted 100–0 in July to fully support Israel's actions during the summer war in Gaza, it became obviously clear to all that the heart of the American power structure was structurally and chronically too far tilted in Israel's favour to be able to play an impartial mediator's role. It also showed how the Israeli government and its American lobby groups, such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), could achieve

almost any objective they wished by undermining the American president through the power of Congress.

This was not only a blow to hopes that a negotiated peace agreement could bring about a Palestinian state, it also reaffirmed that Israel had the green light from the United States – and as many munitions resupplies as it needed – to repeatedly attack Gaza and destroy homes, schools, hospitals, power plants, and other basic elements of life in urban society. The message to Palestine was that military action against Israel could certainly bring about a feel-good sentiment among Palestinians, and even pride that Hamas was not defeated or destroyed after a month of battle; but in the long run such a strategy would bring about the total destruction of Gaza without eliciting from Israel any meaningful political gestures for a long-term peace agreement.

The dilemma for Palestinians is that Israel seems willing and able to continue indefinitely in this manner, with occasional short wars interspersed by stretches of futile diplomacy, while it continues its expansion of settlements and creeping annexation of occupied Palestinian lands. In view of the Palestinian appreciation



that neither occasional wars nor drawn-out peace negotiations are going to end the Israeli occupation and achieve our national rights, while internal Palestinian divisions continue to hamper political progress, the year 2014 has triggered serious thinking about alternative strategies.

The important new developments during the year all revolve around different aspects of "internationalisation" of political and diplomatic routes to achieve Palestinian national rights. These include dynamics such as advancing Palestinian statehood through resolutions at the UN General Assembly and Security Council, exploring actions through various UN agencies, taking our case to the International Criminal Court (ICC), gaining official recognition of Palestinian statehood from European and other countries, and promoting international boycotts, divestments, and sanctions against Israel for its colonial activities and treatment of Palestinians in the territories it has occupied since 1967. Efforts also continue to isolate and rebuke Israel in professional organisations around

the world, such as the American Studies Association and other such



academic forums, and organising direct actions such as the recent labour union solidarity on the West Coast of the United States that prevented an Israeli cargo vessel from docking to unload its goods.

None of these actions on their own will end the occupation or achieve statehood, but they could cumulatively increase the political pressure on Israel and nudge it towards a more realistic negotiating position, for instance one based on the 2002 Arab Peace Plan as a starting point for talks that respect the legitimate rights of both Israelis and Palestinians (and other Arabs with Israeli-occupied territories). The common denominator of all such international political action is the quest for freedom and statehood through mechanisms that a) avoid the U.S. monopoly on mediation, b) go beyond the 1993 Oslo Accords framework of self-rule, c) squarely make self-determination the goal to be achieved, and d) avoid the failed bilateral-talks-with-Israel route in favour of international frameworks where Palestine can draw on its assets such as UN resolutions and international law and legitimacy.

The weakness that Palestinians appear unable to resolve is the fragmentation of representation and national decision making, leading to the absence of a unified national political strategy. Reviving and re-legitimising the PLO is the obvious route to resolve this weakness, and perhaps that will emerge as a priority in the year 2015.

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