

2018

Conflict Risk Assessment Report

**Palestinian Territories:
West Bank and Gaza Strip**



Rachel Laborce | Jonathan Malcolm

Monica Morrison | Mitchell Norstrom | Muna Osman



The Norman Paterson School
of International Affairs



Carleton
UNIVERSITY

Executive Summary

The ongoing conflict in the Palestinian territories has largely been characterized by its protracted history of armed conflict, fragile governance and high levels of political instability. Due to its history of armed conflicts, the Palestinian territories have produced millions of refugees, with 5.3 registered refugees as of 2017. The tensions between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority (PA) in conjunction with the PA's shift towards a more autocratic stance after calling off elections in 2016, have exacerbated the fragile political situation. Hamas has also refused to forfeit governance control over the Gaza Strip to the Palestinian Authority in defiance of the reconciliation agreement.¹ Despite the reconciliation agreement, it appears neither group is willing to concede full control to the other. This places the agreement, and the possibility of elections in 2018, in jeopardy. The Gaza Strip is currently “nearing total collapse” as the Israeli-Egyptian blockade has severely limited the delivery of medical supplies in addition to basic goods and services.² While the Israeli-Egyptian blockade has continued to have destabilizing effects on the area, its ability to stem the flow of arms has had an overall stabilizing impact. Furthermore, Israeli occupation of the West Bank has steadily increased annually which reduces the potential for peace. The youth bulge, high unemployment rate, stagnating GDP growth, and inconsistent foreign direct investment continue to be pressing albeit less significant issues affecting the conflict. In sum, the underlying structural conditions continue to leave the Palestinian territories in a state of fragility and recent events including U.S. President Trump's landmark decision on the status of Jerusalem, have diminished prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Background

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict stems from the inability to determine sovereignty over the Palestinian territories which includes East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The Oslo Accords (1993-1999) between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) attempted to negotiate Palestinian self-governance.³ As per the Accords, control over civilian and security affairs in parts of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were transferred to the PA government body.⁴ Palestinian agitation over Israel's enduring occupation of their perceived homeland has inspired *intifadas* (uprisings) in 1987 and 2001.⁵ However, negotiations resolving the status of the Palestinian territories have historically been deadlocked despite international intervention on the conflict.⁶ Peace talks stalled as of 2006 when Hamas, a militant Palestinian party, won the Palestinian Legislative Council elections and took control of the government. In addition, Hamas' failed efforts to form a unity government with the traditionally dominant Palestinian party, Fatah, led to a violent power struggle among the parties and its supporters. Hamas subsequently assumed military and government control over the Gaza Strip leaving parts of the West Bank under the control of Fatah.⁷ In response to Hamas' seizure of the Gaza Strip, Israel instituted a military blockade which has contributed to the humanitarian crisis in the Palestinian territories and continues to present-day.⁸ Ultimately, Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories, restrictions on Palestinian freedom of movement, and protracted Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Hamas violence have hampered the development of a lasting peace agreement for a two-state solution.

Primary Stakeholders

Actor(s)	Impact	Effect
Fatah / Palestinian Authority (PA)	Mixed	(+) President Mahmoud Abbas and the Fatah party are seen by the international community as the legitimate leadership of the Palestinian people. (-) The PA implemented severe cuts to electricity in the Gaza Strip in 2017 worsening the humanitarian crisis in that territory. (-) Increased media censorship, as well as, reports of arbitrary arrest of journalists, activists and opposition politicians continued to surface in 2017.
Hamas	Negative	(-) Carries out indiscriminate rocket fire into Israeli population centres causing fear, disruption and sometimes deaths, while inciting armed reactions from Israel. ⁹ (-) Political stand-offs with Israel and rival Fatah have resulted in a grave deterioration of humanitarian conditions in the Gaza Strip. (-) Hamas authorities arrested scores of protesters in 2017 in uprisings related to poor living conditions, arbitrary arrests, torture, and unfair trials.
Israel	Negative	(-) Feb 2018, Israel moves to legalize West Bank settlement outpost. ¹⁰ (-) Increasing Israeli settlements and ongoing military occupation in the West Bank diminish progress toward a peaceful two-State solution between Israel and Palestine. ¹¹ (-) Israel's discriminatory water-sharing agreements prevent thousands of Palestinians from accessing sufficient water supplies. ¹²
United States	Negative	(-) Dec 2017, U.S. President Trump breaks with decades of U.S. policy and officially recognizes Jerusalem as Israel's capital leading to violent demonstrations in the Palestinian

		territories, and Palestinian President Abbas to respond with aversion to any future U.S. peace deal. ¹³ (-) Jan 2018, U.S. withholds millions of dollars to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) which is responsible for administering aid to Palestinian refugees. ¹⁴
Secondary Stakeholders		
United Nations	Positive	(+) UN Secretary-General states that illegal settlement expansion must stop, and that Palestine and Israel must make the two-state solution a reality. ¹⁵ (+) UNGA adopts resolution 11995 asking nations not to establish diplomatic missions in Jerusalem. ¹⁶ (+) UN Secretary-General calls on all Member States to continue to provide support to UNRWA so that it may fulfill its role and implement its humanitarian mandate to serve Palestinian refugees. ¹⁷
Arab League	Mixed	(+) The Arab Peace Initiative – calling for normalized relations between the Arab region and Israel, Israel’s withdrawal from occupied territories, and just settlement of Palestinian refugees – was re-endorsed by the Arab League at the 2017 Arab League Summit. ¹⁸ (-) Egypt continues to exert tight control over the Rafah border in the south of Gaza Strip, controlling the flow of people, goods, and aid between. ¹⁹
Islamic Republic of Iran	Negative	(-) Iran lends military financial support to Hamas enabling the rift in Palestinian leadership and promoting armed conflict with Israel.
European Union	Positive	(+) The EU is Palestine’s largest donor of foreign aid, providing funds for needed stabilizing services and programs. ²⁰ (±) The EU vows push to make Jerusalem capital for Palestine in retaliation to the U.S. announcement. ²¹
Risk Assessment Indicators		
Very High Risk	High Risk	Medium Risk
Low Risk		Trend: Deteriorating
Governance and Political Instability		
Destabilizing Factors:		
Regime Durability: The PA operates under an expired mandate in the West Bank, and Hamas are the de facto government authority in the Gaza Strip. ²² 2016 marked Mahmoud Abbas’ 11 th year as the president of the PA, and his seventh without an electoral mandate or official legislature. ²³		
Restrictions on Civil and Political Rights: In October 2016, the PA postponed all local elections, reasoning that they could not control the voting in the Gaza Strip or East Jerusalem. ²⁴ The postponement of elections has direct effect on the Gaza Strip as they remain without an elected government, leaving Hamas as the de facto government authority. ²⁵ Both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank have been systematically removing international regulations for NGOs and imposing their own regulations. ²⁶		
Restrictions on Press Freedom: Restrictions on press freedom have continued to deteriorate. In 2016, both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip regularly subjected journalists to arrest, detention, and interrogation without charge. ²⁷ A third of the journalists detained reported torture and mistreatment while in custody. ²⁸		
Risk Assessment: The PA’s unilateral decision to postpone the elections in 2016 has signaled a shift towards a more authoritarian regime as it marks Mahmoud Abbas’ 11 th year in power, and seventh without an official electoral vote. ²⁹ This move also further exacerbates tensions between the governments of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Without official and open elections, the Gaza Strip received a 0/12 in 2017 for electoral rights, with the West Bank receiving 2/12. ³⁰ As both territories continue to restrict freedom of speech through illegal detainment and abuse of those who publicly criticize the government, individual civil liberties are severely obstructed, and in direct violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Convention against Torture, which was ratified in 2014; signalling a further shift away from international norms and towards authoritarianism. ³¹		
History of Armed Conflict		Trend: Stable
Destabilizing Factors:		
Violence spiked in 2014 with 1,610 battle-related deaths in conflict with Israel. ³² Sporadic armed conflict continued in 2017 with 77 deaths as of November 6. ³³ The conflict registers as an Intermediate Armed Conflict according to the Uppsala Conflict Data Project.		
Refugees Produced: Refugees from Palestine represented almost one quarter of the global refugee population in 2017. ³⁴ There are 5.3 million registered Palestinian refugees as of January 1, 2017 of which 1.6 million or 28% lived in official camps in neighbouring countries. ³⁵		

Refugees Hosted: The Palestinian Territories were home to more than 193,000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) by mid-year 2017.³⁶

Risk Assessment: Conflict with Israel has become a persistent threat over several decades; however, since the rise of militant Hamas in the Gaza Strip there has been a dramatic increase in violence. Displacement remains a severe problem where destruction caused by fighting increases the number of IDPs and looming budget cuts to the UNRWA by the U.S. will undoubtedly pose additional challenges to the dispersed refugee population and to regional stability.

Demographic Stress **Trend: Stable**

Population: The Palestine Territories have a population of 4,551,566 as of 2016.³⁷ The annual population growth rate has remained around 3% over the past five years.³⁸

Destabilizing Factors:

Youth Bulge: Palestine's children aged 0-14 represent approximately 40% of the total population, placing strain on the government's ability to provide adequate health care and education for its population.³⁹ This coupled with a 42% youth unemployment rate is cause for concern as unemployed young men and women may choose alternative sources of income through fighting, joining rebel movements, or engaging in informal economies.⁴⁰

Urban Population: Palestine's urban population represents approximately 75% of the total population, placing enormous pressures on its social services.⁴¹

Urban Population Growth Rate: Palestine's urban population growth has been experiencing a very marginal decrease over the past five years – similar to total population growth – and was 3.19% in 2016.⁴² Urban population growth is surpassing total population growth indicating that more people are re-locating from rural areas, and as noted above, this is placing greater pressures on social services.

Risk Assessment: The Palestinian territories exist in a region amidst conflict, a number of which have been fuelled by social unrest and uprising by marginalized and vulnerable populations. The youth bulge and level of youth unemployment outpace those of both the Arab World and Middle East North Africa Region, approximately 10% greater than.⁴³ Similarly, the youth unemployment rate – reaching 58% in the Gaza Strip⁴⁴ - is approximately double the regional average.⁴⁵ As these structural factors remain high and pressures on the government continues to grow with the urban population, the risk for conflict is elevated.

Population Heterogeneity **Trend: Deteriorating**

Destabilizing Factors:

Ethnic Diversity: More than 3 million people live in the West Bank: approx. 2.9 million Palestinian Arabs and 132 Israeli settlements housing 399,300 Israeli Jewish settlers, and 97 outposts - settlements built without official authorization.⁴⁶ There are also 12 settlements in East Jerusalem housing about 200,000 settlers, and in Gaza Strip, there are 1.8 million Palestinian Arabs since the withdrawal of Israeli settlers from the territory in 2005.⁴⁷

Religious Diversity: The West Bank is comprised of approx. 85% Muslims (predominantly Sunni), 12-14% Jewish, 1-2.5% Christians (mainly Greek Orthodox) and <1% other. The Gaza Strip is comprised of 98-99% Muslims (predominantly Sunni), <1% Christians and <1% other.⁴⁸

Risk Assessment: The population of Israeli Jewish settlers in the West Bank have increased annually creating new facts on the ground and blurring the boundaries of a future Palestinian state. Settlements and the military occupation required to defend them inhibit freedom of mobility for many Palestinians.⁴⁹ This remains a major source of dispute between Israel and the Palestinians.⁵⁰ Additionally, U.S. President Trump's recent announcement to move its embassy from the Israeli city of Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a city considered holy by Muslim, Christian and Jewish believers, have sparked protests and international outrage.⁵¹ Palestinians seek to claim East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state, whereas Israel has declared the whole city to be its "united and external" capital, ultimately dimming the prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace.⁵²

Economic Development **Trend: Deteriorating**

Stabilizing Factors:

Trade Openness: Palestine has undertaken a number of initiatives to open foreign trade. However, Palestine would further benefit from further integrating into Arab regional trade.⁵³

Destabilizing Factors:

GDP Growth: GDP growth is currently on the rebound following the 2014 recession, this is in part due to the increase of construction in the Gaza Strip. However, growth will be slow due to external restrictions currently in place on the territories and decreased donor aid.⁵⁴

GDP Per Capita: Slow GDP growth will result in an even slower increase of GDP per capita.⁵⁵

FDI: The Palestinian government has established a regulatory framework favourable to investors, however the political and security circumstances of the region makes it risky for foreign investors. As a result, FDI has been quite erratic.⁵⁶

Risk Assessment: Unsustainable GDP growth through construction efforts in Gaza Strip, compounded by stagnating GDP growth and erratic foreign direct investment presents a very unstable Palestinian economy. As a result, economic instability will only serve to push the Palestinian people toward conflict.

Environmental Stress

Trend: Deteriorating

Stabilizing Factors:

Rate of Deforestation: Of the 602,000 ha of land area in the Palestinian territories, 9,000 is forested, and over the last 20 years there has been no significant change reported in forest cover.⁵⁷

Destabilizing Factors:

People per square km of Arable Land: The size (ha) of arable land per person in the West Bank and Gaza Strip has declined from 0.011 (2010) to 0.014 (2015).⁵⁸ Ongoing Israeli occupation of Area C deprives the Palestinian economy of 63 per cent of its agricultural resources, including the most fertile and best grazing land. The expansion of Israeli settlements has also diminished the area available for agricultural activities.⁵⁹

Freshwater Resources, cubic meters per capita: The amount of freshwater resources per capita has declined from 200.6 (2012) to 189.1 (2014).⁶⁰ Since 1967, Israel has retained exclusive control over all water resources on the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, with the exception of a small section of the coastal aquifer that runs under Gaza Strip.⁶¹ Since the 1995 Oslo II interim agreement 80% of mountain aquifer water has been allocated to Israelis and 20% to Palestinians. Today, Palestinians receive 15% and Israelis an unlimited water supply, forcing the Palestinian Authority to purchase water from Mekorot (Israel's national water company). Due to the poor state of pipelines linking water grids to Palestinian communities, leakages have caused a constant shortage of water.⁶² This is worsened when water supplies are interrupted during periods of crisis.⁶³ In 2015, average water consumption was 84.3L per Palestinian, falling short of the minimum recommended by the WHO. The figure for private consumption by Palestinians is even lower.⁶⁴

Risk Assessment: Overall, land and water are relatively scarce in the Palestinian territories, made worse by the occupation and expansion of Israeli settlements, as well as, Israel's restrictions on the importation of fertilizers. As a result, Palestinian agricultural output and productivity lag behind that of Israel and comparable countries in the region. Additionally, the shrinking water levels of the Dead Sea is rapidly depleting water resources for West Bank Palestinians.⁶⁵ Recent U.S. cuts to UNRWA funding highlight the vulnerability of Palestinians who rely heavily on aid agencies for the provision of safe drinking water.⁶⁶

Human Development

Trend: Deteriorating

Stabilizing Factors:

Infant Mortality: Infant mortality has continually decreased due to organizations such as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which provide healthcare services, including antenatal care, to Palestinians.⁶⁷

Primary School Enrollment: The enrollment rate of young children is relatively high in comparison to regional and global standards. The Palestinian Authority, UNRWA and private schools provide schooling for children.⁶⁸

Access to Sanitation: Access to sanitation has vastly improved recently in the Palestinian territories, however in the West Bank sewage infrastructure remains an issue due to irregular service of wastewater treatment.⁶⁹

Destabilizing Factors:

Access to Water: Access to water is problematic as Palestinians experience a water crisis. Previous conflicts, including the 2014 war have severely damaged the infrastructure needed for water supply within the territory. Water sources need to be secured in Gaza Strip, while in the West Bank the suppliers need to provide more water to meet the increased demand of the growing population.⁷⁰

Secondary School Enrollment: The enrollment rate of children in secondary school has overall been in decline, in part due to the increase of dropouts from secondary school, as well as barriers such as the lack of infrastructure to provide schooling and smaller budgets. The lack of infrastructure is attributed to former conflicts destroying schools, leading to a decrease in the number of available classrooms. However, dropout rates are lower in the Gaza Strip, potentially due to increased NGO provision of services.⁷¹

Risk Assessment: Although infant mortality and primary school enrollment demonstrate strong cases for stabilization, important factors such as access to water contribute to the destabilization of the Palestinian territories. The potential for the access to sanitation to decrease due to similar infrastructure issues linked to the access of water also make the situation untenable for stability. This is aggravated by the circumstances faced by secondary school students, preventing them from receiving the required education to pursue tertiary education and alleviate other societal/structural issues within the Palestinian territories.

International Linkages

Trend: Stable

Stabilizing Factors:

International and Regional Organizations: Palestine is a member of several international and regional organizations, including the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the Arab League. It holds non-member, observer status at the UN and WHO.⁷²

Destabilizing Factors:

Total International Disputes: Progress toward a peaceful two-State solution between Israel and Palestine remain stalled by four main issues: (1) the increasing number of Israeli settlements make it difficult to draw the lines that would become a future Palestinian state; (2) both sides claim Jerusalem as their capital; (3) ongoing disputes over the status of diaspora Palestinians; and (4) Israeli military occupation of the West Bank for the security of Israelis causing insecurity for Palestinians.⁷³

Risk Assessment: The UN overwhelmingly voted to reject the recent U.S. decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' recent visit to Europe aimed to build support for a multilateral sponsorship of peace talks, replacing the U.S. as the broker of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process since displaying its bias in favour of Israel.⁷⁴ Abbas' plans to appeal for international protection for the Palestinians at the UN and the ICC aims to build international support for the plight of Palestinians,⁷⁵ although it remains uncertain whether progress can be made through these international bodies in the face of right-wing Israeli and U.S. leaderships.⁷⁶

Militarization Trend: Stable

Destabilizing Factors:

Military Expenditure: Hamas announced in mid-2017 that it was once again receiving financial and military backing from Iran after a five-year freeze.⁷⁷

Stabilizing Factors:

The long-term Israeli-Egyptian blockade of Gaza Strip continues into 2018 and restricts movement of foreign fighters and weapons into the territory.

Total Armed Forces: As of 2012, the most recent year for which statistics are available, military personnel in the West Bank and Gaza Strip represented 5.5% of the total labour force, numbers which had been trending downwards since 2005 and have likely continued in the same trajectory.⁷⁸

Risk Assessment: Although the blockade of the Gaza Strip has destabilizing effects in several regards, it has been effective in limiting the flow of arms and military personnel into the territory, resulting in a stabilizing impact. The disbanding of Hamas' military wing is also believed to be a central pillar in any reconciliation plan with the Palestinian Authority of the West Bank.⁷⁹ This could potentially be a significant step towards enhancing regional stability.

Recent Events

In **October 2017**, Hamas and Fatah signed a reconciliation agreement to end long-standing hostilities between the two parties and form an unity government. Legislative, presidential and national council elections are projected for October 2018.⁸⁰ In **December 2017**, US President Trump officially recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital leading to violent demonstrations in the Palestinian territories, and a UN resolution condemning the decision. A U.S.-led peace framework is currently being developed, however, Palestinian President Abbas has expressed his aversion to any future U.S. peace deal due to recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital.⁸¹ In **January 2018**, US President Trump threatened to cut off aid to the Palestinian territories over "their unwillingness to negotiate with Israel," and has continued to withhold millions of dollars to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNWRA) which is responsible for administering aid to Palestinian refugees.⁸²

Scenarios

Worst Case Scenario	Most Likely Scenario	Best Case Scenario
The Fatah-Hamas unity government collapses amid disagreements on key issues such as Hamas' demilitarization and an Israel strategy. Elections are held in October 2018 and Hamas wins. Fatah accuses Hamas of electoral fraud leading to clashes between Hamas and Fatah supporters. Palestinians in Gaza will grow frustrated with the humanitarian crisis by the end of 2018. Palestinians will carry out both violent and non-violent protests on the Gaza-Israeli border leading to a violent altercation with Israeli military. A U.S. brokered	Fatah and Hamas continue to discuss conditions on key issues of their reconciliation agreement in 2018. These negotiations will drag on for several years as neither side is willing to take the blame for failed negotiations. Palestinians in Gaza will grow frustrated with the humanitarian crisis by the end of 2018. Palestinians will carry out both violent and non-violent protests on the Gaza-Israeli border leading to a violent altercation with Israeli	The Fatah-Hamas unity government is able to function effectively and gradually lowers the rate of unemployment in the West Bank by 2020. The unity government works towards providing basic goods and services for residents, and the humanitarian crisis gradually declines by 2021. A U.S. brokered peace deal is rejected and instead the Fatah-Hamas coalition government engage in peace talks with Israel in 2020. Israel offers an olive branch in the form of halting construction of settlements in the West

<p>peace deal is delivered in 2018 and quickly rejected by Hamas and Fatah. The U.S. continues to hold back aid to UNWRA causing violent mass protests at the Egyptian and Israeli borders. Israel continues to approve the construction of settlements in the West Bank.</p>	<p>military in late 2018, early 2019. Israel broaches the possibility of peace talks with Fatah and Hamas in 2019, but they fail to produce any final agreements. In response to U.S. recognition of Jerusalem, more countries may move to recognize Palestine as a sovereign state in 2019. Another world power such as the European Union attempts to broker a peace deal between Israel and Palestine in 2019/2020.</p>	<p>Bank and lifts the military blockade in 2020. Israeli and Palestinian officials are able to construct and implement a two-state deal in 2023. Palestine is officially recognized as a sovereign state member of the UN in 2025.</p>
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