

Chronology of events: Israel-Palestine

2006 is a year of legislative elections in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. Hamas wins an absolute majority at the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council in January and forms a government in March. The new Palestinian National Authority, refusing to give up violence and recognise the State of Israel as well as the agreements signed earlier between the Palestinian Authority and Israel – three prerequisites for recognising the Hamas administration imposed by the Quartet on the Middle East – faces international diplomatic isolation, a suspension of international aid and the freezing of the transfer of taxes and customs duties by Israel, plunging the Palestinian territories into a serious financial and humanitarian crisis, despite the Quartet's creation of a "temporary international mechanism" in May. In Israel, elections to the Knesset mark the victory of Kadima and its leader, Ehud Olmert, who plans to establish the definitive borders of Israel, unilaterally if necessary, by 2010.

The financial and humanitarian crisis in the Palestinian territories is aggravated by a political crisis engendered by deadly internal struggles among Palestinians in the Gaza Strip beginning in April, namely between the advocates of the Hamas government and the followers of Fatah, the party led by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. The non-payment of the salaries of civil servants for a number of months due to the international financial embargo heightens the internal tensions in Palestine. In May, Abbas announces that, in the absence of an agreement between Fatah and Hamas, he will hold a referendum on the issue of recognising Israel in order to put an

end to the political and financial crisis. Despite the implicit recognition of the existence of Israel by Hamas in June and the start of talks in August to create a government of national unity, which promises to be a difficult task, internal Palestinian confrontations continue through to the year's end, killing more than 300 people. On 16th December, Mahmoud Abbas calls early elections to resolve the situation in Palestine.

The internal problems in the occupied territories notwithstanding, violence between Israel and the Palestinian factions intensifies over the course of 2006. In early April, in response to the frequent rocket attacks by Palestinian terrorist groups, Israel launches the largest military operation against the Gaza Strip since the evacuation of Jewish settlers in 2005. In late May, Israeli troops enter the Gaza Strip for the first time since their retreat in 2005. The Israeli offensive against the Gaza Strip gains in intensity with the abduction of an Israeli soldier by several Palestinian groups on 25th June. In response, Israel launches "operation summer rain" and arrests dozens of Palestinian representatives of Hamas, 9 of them Ministers, in June and the President of the Palestinian Legislative Council in August. On 26th November, a cease-fire begins between Israel and Palestinian militants and the Israeli Armed Forces withdraw from the Gaza Strip. On 23rd December, a glimmer of hope emerges with the first official meeting between the Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas, and the Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, since the election of Hamas in January, the meeting aiming to renew the peace process in the Middle East.

January 2006

Israel

- On 4th January, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon suffers a severe stroke and goes into a coma. On the following day, Ehud Olmert, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, is appointed as acting Prime Minister. On 16th January, Kadima, Sharon's political party, appoints Olmert as interim party president.
- On 11th January, 3 Ministers of the Likud party resign from government. On 13th January, the last Likud minister remaining in the government, Silvan Shalom, Minister of Foreign Affairs, resigns in his turn. The leader of Likud, Benjamin Netanyahu, had resigned in August 2005.

Palestine

- On 10th January, Israel announces that a limited number of Palestinians of East Jerusalem will be allowed to participate in legislative elections and that candidates, except for members of Hamas, are authorised to run for elections in East Jerusalem.
- On 25th January, the Islamist group Hamas wins an absolute majority in legislative elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council, gaining 74 seats out of 132, as compared to the 45 seats going to Fatah, President Mahmoud Abbas' party. Over 900 international observers supervise the elections. The Islamic Jihad had refused to participate in the elections and had called on its followers to abstain from voting. There was a turnout of 74.6% of the electorate. On 26th January, the government of Prime Minister Ahmed Qurie, predominantly belonging to the Fatah party, resigns.

Israel declares that it will not negotiate with a Palestinian government comprised by an armed terrorist organisation advocating the destruction of Israel. On 26th January, US President George Bush likewise declares that he will not negotiate with Hamas, which is on the US list of terrorist groups, insofar as it advocates the destruction of Israel. On 30th January, the Quartet meets in London and calls for Hamas to recognise Israel, relinquish violence and recognise all previous agreements, as, for instance, the Road Map for Peace, and adds that all financial aid to the new government will depend on Hamas' acceptance of these conditions.

Conflicts between the Parties

- On 19th January, in a suicide attack, a Palestinian detonates a bomb in a restaurant in Tel Aviv, wounding at least 22 people. Authorship for this suicide bombing is claimed by the Islamic Jihad, which states it is in retaliation for Israeli military action in the Gaza Strip.

February 2006

Israel

- On 1st February, confrontations take place between settlers and Israeli police and soldiers in charge of evacuating and destroying an illegal colony in Amona, in the heart of the West Bank. Over 200 settlers and 65 police officers and military personnel are wounded and 16 settlers are arrested.
- On 7th February, Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert declares on Channel 2 TV that if Kadima wins the elections, Israel will continue to pull out of the West Bank while retaining control over the large settlements of Maale Adumin, Ariel and Gush Etzion, as well as over smaller settlements in the Jordan River Valley.
- On 14th February, the eldest son of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Omri Sharon, is sentenced to 9 months imprisonment without remission for violations of the party financing law committed during primary elections to the Likud party in 1999, won by his father.

Palestine

- On 1st February, the Chief of the Egyptian Intelligence Service and envoy for Palestinian affairs, Omar Suleiman, calls on Hamas to relinquish violence, recognise the agreements signed by the preceding government under Fatah and recognise Israel. On 9th February, Russia becomes the first member of the Quartet to establish contact with Hamas, inviting its representative to Moscow in order to discuss the Middle East peace process. On 10th February, France expresses circumspect support for Russian President Vladimir Putin's offer. On 18th February, the new Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), dominated by the Islamist group, Hamas, is sworn in. On 19th February Hamas appoints Ismail Haniyeh as Prime Minister of a predominantly-Hamas coalition government. On 19th February, in response to the formation of a Hamas-dominated government, the Israeli government decides to immediately freeze the transfer of tax proceeds and customs duties to the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert qualifies the PNA as a "terrorist authority." Israel likewise calls on international donors to suspend their aid to the PNA and announces an embargo on the transfer of arms and military material to the PNA security forces. Moreover, Hamas representatives on the PLC are refused the privilege of travelling between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank normally granted to Palestinian officials. On 20th February, the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt launches an international campaign to raise funds for the PNA. On 22nd February, the Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Ali Larjani, announces that Iran will provide support to the PNA so it can "withstand US cruelty."

Conflicts between the Parties

- On 23rd February, the Israeli Armed Forces kill five Palestinians in the Bata Refugee Camp in Nablus, in the most significant military operation since August 2005 in the West Bank. Among the casualties is Mohammed Shtawi, a high official of the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades. Until the end of February, Israel carries out military operations in and around

Nablus. On 26th February, Israel kills two Palestinians, whom according to Israel were setting bombs along the border between Israel and the Gaza Strip. One of these two Palestinians is Zayan Dukhan, one of the sons of Abdel Fattah Dukhan, a Hamas member of the PLC.

March 2006

Israel

- On 9th March, Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert declares in an interview to the *Jerusalem Post* that if Kadima wins the elections, the party commits to establish the definitive borders of Israel by 2010 and that the border will follow, either exactly or generally, the line of the West Bank security barrier. Olmert adds that he will expand the largest settlement of Maale Adumim to reach East Jerusalem. The Palestinians and the United States reject this expansion plan, known by the name of E-1 Development Plan. On 28th March, Kadima, the new party of Ariel Sharon led by Ehud Olmert since Sharon entered a coma, wins the greatest number of seats (29) at the elections to the Knesset (unicameral legislative body with 120 seats). Kadima starts negotiations to form a coalition with the Labour Party (holding 19 seats) and other minor parties. Likud only wins 12 seats whereas sectarian parties and those advocating specific interests take a third of the seats in the Knesset. Olmert qualifies the elections as a referendum demonstrating support of his plan for unilaterally establishing the definitive borders of Israel by 2010.

Palestine

- In early March, a Hamas delegation led by Khaled Mashal, Chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau based in Syria, travels to Moscow upon invitation by President Vladimir Putin. On 3rd March Putin declares that Hamas should recognise Israel and relinquish violence if it wishes to avoid international isolation. On 29th March, the new Prime Minister, Ismail Haniyeh, and his cabinet, predominantly Hamas members, take up office. That same day, Canada suspends its aid to the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). The Quartet announces that

aid to the PNA is in jeopardy, given that Hamas refuses to recognise Israel, relinquish violence and recognise previous agreements. The Quartet adds that it commits to maintain its humanitarian aid to Palestine. The new Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mahmud al-Ahhar, states that he will not submit to international pressure and that the new government does not intend to recognise Israel. On 30th March, the new Minister of Home Affairs, Said Siyam, states that Palestinian militants will not be arrested by Palestinian security forces but suggests that the new administration will attempt to convince the factions not to launch attacks against Israel.

Conflicts between the Parties

- On 2nd March, Khaled Al-Dahdouh, Chief of the Al-Qods Brigades, the Islamic Jihad's military wing, is killed in the Gaza Strip when a bomb explodes in his car. The Islamic Jihad accuses Israel of the assassination, but the latter denies having had anything to do with it.
- On 14th March, Israeli military forces storm the Palestinian prison of Jericho in order to capture six people sought by Israel and who had been in prison for four years under US and UK control. Among the prisoners sought were the Secretary General of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Ahmed Saadat, and a number of other activists involved in the assassination of the Israeli Minister of Tourism, Rehavam Zeevi, in 2001. The British and Americans had decided to withdraw for security reasons. On 15th March, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas condemns the Israeli operation.
- On 30th March a Palestinian suicide attacker detonates a bomb near the settlement of Kedumim in the West Bank, killing four Israelis. A faction of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades claims authorship for the attack.
- On 31st March, Khalil al-Quqa, the commander of the Salah a-Din Brigades, the military wing of the Popular Resistance Committees, is killed in a car-bomb explosion in Gaza. The Palestinians accuse Israel, which denies any involvement. The Popular Resistance Committees accuse the Palestinian security forces of collaborating with Israel, causing rioting and the exchange of gunfire

between the Palestinian security forces and members of the Popular Resistance Committees. Three people are killed.

April 2006

Israel

- On 11th April, Ariel Sharon's mandate as prime minister is officially over when doctors declare him "permanently incapacitated" after being in coma for over three months, allowing Ehud Olmert to be officially appointed as prime minister. On 30th April, Olmert concludes negotiations on a coalition government consisting of his Kadima party, the Labour Party, the ultra-orthodox Sephardic Association of Torah Keepers (Shas) and the Pensioners of Israel to the Knesset (Gil).
- On 20th April, the Israeli government extends for a year the travel restriction imposed on Mordechai Vanunu, released in April 2004 after having served a term of 18 years for disclosing Israeli nuclear secrets, continuing to prohibit him from travelling abroad, as he is deemed to still represent "a State security risk."

Palestine

- On 7th April, since Hamas has refused to comply with the conditions established by the international community for continuing aid to the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), the United States announces the suspension of its aid to the PNA, totalling over 240 million dollars, in order to prevent this money from benefiting the Hamas government. The United States decides, on the other hand, to increase their humanitarian aid by 57% to reach an amount of 287 million dollars. On 9th April, the Israeli government under Prime Minister Ehud Olmert declares that Israel shall have no contact with the PNA, which it describes as "a hostile authority," while stating that it will maintain contact with Mahmoud Abbas. On 10th April, the EU Ministers of Foreign Affairs likewise decide to suspend bilateral assistance as well as the European Commission's aid to the PNA. The Ministers decide, nonetheless, to maintain certain contact with the members of the PNA. On 14th April, the US Depart-

ment of the Treasury prohibits US citizens, US companies and companies operating in the United States from doing business with the PNA. On 17th April, Iran and Qatar promise the PNA aid amounting to 50 million dollars each to help it overcome its financial crisis.

- In early April, tensions surface between President Mahmoud Abbas, leader of Fatah, and the Hamas government on security matters. On 7th April, *The Independent* reports that President Mahmoud Abbas is attempting to take control of one of the Gaza border crossings, under command of the Minister of Home Affairs and National Security, Said Siyam, in order to avoid a pull-out of EU observers, who have been prohibited from having any contact with Hamas. The tension between the two factions grows even more acute when Abbas attempts to appoint Rachid Abu Shabak, a former official responsible for security in Gaza, as the chief of the internal security service. Abbas is obliged to relinquish the project, as Hamas expresses its opposition to the creation of "parallel offices." On 20th April, Siyam announces the creation of a new security force under the authority of the commander of the Popular Resistance Committees in Gaza, Colonel Jamal Abu Samhadana, and comprised by active members of the Popular Resistance Committees. Abbas qualifies this force as "illegal and unconstitutional."
- On 30th April, James Wolfensohn resigns from his post as the Quartet's Special Envoy to the Middle East, explaining that the presence of a government under Hamas in the Palestinian Territories does not allow him to exercise his functions.

Conflicts between the Parties

- In early April, in response to a rocket strike by Palestinian factions from the Gaza Strip, Israel launches its most important military operation in the Gaza Strip since the withdrawal of Jewish settlers in August and September 2005. On 7th April, at least six Palestinians are killed, including a child and five presumed members of the Palestinian Resistance Committees, and on 10th April, a little girl is killed. By mid-April, the number of shells fired by Israel per day reaches 300. On 17th April, a Palestinian

suicide bomber kills six Israelis, two Romanians and a French tourist when he detonates a bomb in a fast food establishment in Tel Aviv. Authorship for the attack is claimed by the Islamic Jihad, responsible for nearly all the suicide bombings committed since the beginning of 2005.

May 2006

Israel

- On 4th May, the Knesset (unicameral legislative body) approves the new government of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, of the Kadima party. The new administration holds 67 of the 120 seats of the Knesset. Amir Peretz, of the Labour Party, is appointed to the post of Minister of Defence and Tzipi Livni to that of Vice-President and Minister of Foreign Affairs. In his address to the Knesset, Olmert reiterates his plan to establish Israel's borders by 2010, unilaterally if necessary, and indicates that these borders will be different from the territories under his control today, meaning that isolated Jewish territories, which jeopardise State security, will be abandoned, as opposed to the large settlements, which will form part of Israel, with Jerusalem as capital. On his visit to the United States in late May, Olmert had received President George Bush's support for his plan.
- On 14th May, the Supreme Court decides not to amend the law on citizenship that excludes family reunification between Palestinian and Israeli Arabs.

Palestine

- On 9th May, gunfire is exchanged between armed members of Hamas and the bodyguards of Samir Mashrawi, a Fatah leader, sparking confrontations between Fatah and Hamas factions that lead to three casualties and nine wounded. On 17th May, the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), under Hamas, defies the veto imposed by President Mahmoud Abbas and deploys its new, 3,000-strong paramilitary security force in Gaza under the command of Jamal Abu Samadhana, Commander of the Popular Resistance

Committees. On 22nd May, confrontations between the Hamas militia and the police forces loyal to Abbas near the premises of the Palestinian Legislative Council cause one dead and eleven injured. On 24th May, Nabil Hodhod, Head of the Preventive Security Service under Fatah control, dies in a grenade attack targeting him. On 24th May, Salem Khudeih, member of the Hamas militia, is killed in front of a mosque in Khan Yunis and Hamas accuses the Preventive Security Service of his death. On 26th May, Hamas withdraws its militia from the streets of Gaza in order to restore peace.

- On 9th May, the Quartet, meeting in New York, agrees to establish a "temporary international mechanism" allowing the arrival of aid to Palestinians without going through the PNA, so as to prevent a financial crisis in the Palestinian Territories. On 10th May, Israel announces that it will accept the new mechanism and on 17th May, the Israeli government orders the army to reopen the Karni crossing point.
- On 10th May, Palestinian leaders imprisoned in Israel, among them Marwan Barghouti (Fatah) and the Sheikh Abdel Halek Natshe (Hamas), make suggestions for overcoming the crisis between Fatah and Hamas. The most significant ideas are the formation of a Fatah-Hamas coalition government, the end of attacks on Israeli territory and the creation of a Palestinian State within the borders established in 1967. On 25th May, President Abbas gives Hamas an ultimatum, giving it ten days to recognise Israel, after which a referendum will be organised on the document made public by the Palestinian prisoners, which implicitly recognises the State of Israel.
- On 18th May, the Chinese government invites the Palestinian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mahmud al-Zahhar, to Beijing to participate in the Forum on Arab-Chinese Cooperation. Israel denounces this invitation as contravening the conditions imposed by the international community for recognising the Hamas government, namely, Hamas' recognition of Israel, relinquishment of violence and acceptance of previous agreements.

Peace Negotiations

- On 21st May, during the World Economic Forum, for the first time since Hamas' election in January, high-level contacts are renewed between the two parties, with a meeting between President Abbas and the Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tzipi Livni. After the meeting, Livni announces that the Israeli government will use 11 million dollars from the Palestinian taxes confiscated by Israel after Hamas won the elections to send medical aid.

Conflicts between the Parties

- On 5th May, the new Israeli Minister of Defence, Amir Peretz, approves an air raid on Gaza that kills five members of the Popular Resistance Committees, thus continuing the policy of targeted assassination carried out by his predecessor. Peretz likewise pursues the Israeli policy of bombarding the Gaza Strip in response to rocket fire against Israel from the Gaza Strip.
- On 23rd May in Ramallah, the Israeli army arrests Sheikh Ibrahim Hamed, an important Hamas activist. According to Israel, Hamed is the Commander in Chief of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas, and it accuses him of having orchestrated a number of suicide bombings that have taken the lives of over 60 Israelis. On 24th May, a secret Israeli operation to arrest Mohammed Shubaki, an important official of the Islamic Jihad, ends in an exchange of gunfire resulting in four Palestinian dead and 50 wounded. On 30th May, for the first time since Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip in September 2005, the Israeli forces penetrate into the Gaza Strip and kill seven Palestinians in an operation to prevent rocket fire on Israel and to arrest the Islamic Jihad militants sought by Israel. On 26th May, the leader of the Islamic Jihad in southern Lebanon, Mahmoud al-Majzoub, dies in a bomb attack in the port city of Sidon. The Islamic Jihad immediately accuses Israel of being responsible for the attack and swears revenge. The Lebanese Information Minister, Ghazi al-Aridi, denounces the killing. On 28th May, the Israeli air force attacks bases of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine on Lebanese territory in response to rocket fire from southern Lebanon on northern Israel.

June 2006

Israel

- On 18th June, Lieutenant General al-Hayb, a Bedouin member of the Israeli army, is sentenced to 15 years of prison for espionage on behalf of Hezbollah.

Palestine

- On 5th June, confrontations between Hamas and Fatah cause five deaths. On 6th June, President Mahmoud Abbas gives the Hamas government four more days to accept a political platform implicitly recognising Israel, after which he will opt for organising a referendum on the matter of granting recognition to Israel in order to overcome the political crisis affecting the Palestinian Territories since the election of Hamas in January. On 10th June, Abbas announces a referendum, to be held on 26th July. On 11th June, Hamas qualifies the referendum as a coup d'état against its government and announces it will boycott the vote. On 12th June, Hamas fires rockets against the headquarters of the Preventive Security Service controlled by Fatah, obliging Abbas to declare a state of emergency. On 27th June, Hamas agrees to sign a document of "national entente" implicitly recognising the existence of Israel.
- On 14th June, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mahmud al-Zahhar, announces that he has raised 20 million dollars during a trip to Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, China, Pakistan, Iran and Egypt. On 17th June, the Quartet approves a plan put forth by the EU to renew financial assistance for the Palestinian people, while continuing to boycott the Hamas government.

Peace Negotiations

- On 22nd June, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and President Abbas hold informal talks in Petra, Jordan, under the aegis of King Abdullah II and Elie Wilson, 1986 Nobel Peace Prize laureate. This is the first official meeting between the two since Olmert became prime minister. Both parties commit to accelerate preparations for a summit within the next few weeks.

Conflicts between the Parties

- On 8th June, Jamal Abu Samhadan, a leader of the Popular Resistance Committees and Commander of the Hamas paramilitary militia, is killed in an air raid on a Popular Resistance Committee training camp in Rafah.
- On 9th June, an Israeli shell explodes on a beach in Beit Lahiya, in the northern Gaza Strip, killing seven people from a single Palestinian family and wounding 30 other Palestinians. The Israeli Prime Minister apologises for the tragic event whereas on 13th June, the Minister of Defence, Amir Peretz, declares that the accident was due to a defective shell buried in the sand that had exploded and caused the deaths. That same day, Human Rights Watch confirms the theory that it was an Israeli shell.
- On 10th and 11th June, Hamas ends its truce, which had lasted since March 2005, when Hamas militants fire rockets against the Israeli city of Sderot. On 13th June, an Israeli missile targeting a vehicle transporting members of the Islamic Jihad kills eleven Palestinians, two of them children, near Gaza. On 15th June, Hamas offers to reinstate the cease-fire if Israel stops aggressions, a condition which Israel accepts.
- On 20th June, Israel kills three children during an air raid on the Gaza Strip intended to thwart rocket firing.
- On 25th June, a number of Palestinian militants, some of them from the armed wing of Hamas, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, as well as the Popular Resistance Committees, launch an audacious attack against an Israeli army control post near the kibbutz of Kerem Shalom. Two soldiers are killed and a third, Gilad Shalit, captured. The spokesperson of the Palestine Liberation Committees, Abu Mujahid, declares that the attack was committed in response to the assassination of Jamal Abu Samhadana on 8th June. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert holds President Mahmoud Abbas and the Hamas administration responsible for the abduction. The government spokesperson, Ghazi Hamad, denies having any knowledge of the abduction and appeals to Palestinian factions not to kill Shalit, whereas President Abbas orders the mobilisation of forces to find him. On

26th June, the factions involved in the abduction demand the release of Palestinian prisoners in exchange for information on Shalit. On 28th June, Israel launches a vast land and air offensive on the Gaza Strip, dubbed "Summer Rain," with the aim of recovering the Israeli soldier. The Israeli forces destroy the only power plant for the Gaza Strip as well as a number of bridges connecting the northern and southern Gaza Strip area, as well as a Hamas training camp. On 28th June, the Popular Resistance Committees threaten to kill a 17-year-old Jewish settler if Israel does not stop its offensive against the Gaza Strip. On 29th June, in an incursion by Israeli forces into the West Bank, 64 Palestinian officials, all members of Hamas, are captured, eight of them ministers and 38 MPs. On the following day, they are brought before Israeli justice on charges of collusion in terrorist acts and incarcerated. On 30th June, Israel cancels the Jerusalem residency permits of four Hamas representatives. On 30th June, the Israeli air force launches a series of raids against the home of the Minister of Home Affairs and National Security, Said Siyam, and against the buildings of the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades.

July 2006

Israel

- Israel launches a vast army, air force and navy operation against southern Lebanon after two Israeli soldiers are abducted by Hezbollah. This operation is to last until mid-August. (see General Chronology of the Mediterranean)

Conflicts between the Parties

- On 2nd July, Israel increases pressure on the Hamas government to recover Gilad Shalit, the soldier abducted in June, by launching an air attack against the office of the Palestinian Prime Minister, Ismail Haniyeh, destroying it but causing no casualties. Under US pressure, in early July, Israel restores the sale of fuel to the Gaza Strip, which it had cut off after Shalit's abduction. On 3rd July, the Popular Resistance Committees declare that Israel must release 15,000 Palestinian prisoners by 6AM on 4th

July or they will “close the case” of the Shalit abduction. Olmert’s cabinet rejects the ultimatum. After the deadline, the Army of Islam, another faction involved in the abduction, decides to cut off all contact and “close the case.” Prime Minister Haniyeh asks the abductors, among them members of his own Hamas party, not to kill Shalit. On 4th July, Palestinians make incursions into the cities of Rafah and Beit Hanoun and fire rockets at Israeli cities along the Gaza Strip. Israeli tanks and troops enter the city of Erez, in the northern area of the Gaza Strip, while shells are fired against neighbouring fields. Palestinian militants fire a rocket covering a record distance of 12 km, reaching the centre of Ashkelon. On 5th July, the Israeli forces continue to advance into the Gaza Strip and take up positions in the two former settlements of Nissamit and Eli Sinai, evacuated in August 2005. On 6th July, twenty Palestinians and one Israeli soldier die in confrontations in the northern Gaza Strip. Seven more Palestinians die on 7th July, while rockets continue to be fired at Israel. Earlier in the day, Hamas had declared that the Israeli soldier would be released in exchange for all women prisoners in Israel as well as 20 men sentenced to long prison terms. For the first time, the Israeli Minister of Public Security, Abraham Dicter, considers the possibility of releasing prisoners. On 7th July, the EU condemns Israeli military action in the Gaza Strip, qualifying it as “disproportionate” and as aggravating the humanitarian crisis. On 9th July, Olmert declares that there will be no negotiation with Hamas on prisoner exchange. On 12th July, Israel steps up its attack, killing twenty Palestinians, nine of them members of a single family, in a residential neighbourhood of Gaza. Israel states that it was aiming to kill Mohammed Deif, leader of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas. On 19th July, thirteen Palestinians are killed in the Maghazi Refugee Camp and Israeli tanks raze a number of buildings in the city of Nablus in the West Bank. On 26th July, The *Guardian* reports that the Palestinian factions, including Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, under the aegis of President Mahmoud Abbas, have come to an agreement to stop firing rockets and release Shalit in exchange for the release

of Palestinian prisoners. According to the human rights observatory in Palestine, the Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group, 151 Palestinians have been killed in the course of July in the Gaza Strip, the majority of them civilians.

August 2006

Israel

- On 20th August, the Minister of Justice, Haim Ramon, resigns after being accused of sexual harassment. President Moshe Katsav also faces charges of sexual harassment and on 22nd August, the police confiscate computers and documents from his home.

Palestine

- On 14th August, the Holy Jihad Brigades, a previously unknown group, kidnaps two correspondents from the US television network, *Fox News*, in Gaza. The kidnappers demand the release of Muslim prisoners in US prisons within 72 hours in exchange for the release of the two correspondents. The US Department of State refuses and demands the immediate and unconditional release of the two journalists. On 27th August, the two correspondents are released.
- On 16th August, President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Haniyeh meet in Gaza to start negotiations on the formation of a government of national unity.

Conflicts between the Parties

- Throughout the month of August, Israel pursues its offensive against the Gaza Strip and Hamas. By early August, Israel had already arrested a third of the Hamas government and over 30 members of the Palestinian Legislative Council. On 6th August, Israel arrests the President of the Palestinian Legislative Council, Abdel Aziz Dweik, in his home in Ramallah and on 19th August, the Israeli army arrests the Palestinian Deputy Prime Minister, Nasser Shaer, at his home in Ramallah. On 31st August, an Israeli military court orders that Dweik and 15 other Hamas representatives in the West Bank be tried for belonging to an illegal group.

September 2006

Israel

- On 4th September, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert authorises the construction of 690 homes in Maale Adumim and Betar Illit, two settlements near Jerusalem.

Palestine

- On 1st September, the international community pledges 500 million dollars in aid to the Palestinians at a meeting of donors in Stockholm. In early September, Palestinian civil servants begin a strike to protest against the non-payment of their salaries by the Hamas government over the past few months. According to the UN World Food Programme, 70% of the people in the Gaza Strip can no longer meet their families’ needs.
- On 11th September, President Mahmoud Abbas announces that he has reached an agreement with Hamas on the creation of a government of national unity. The negotiations continue throughout the month. On 15th September, the EU Foreign Affairs Ministers applaud the Palestinian decision. On 16th September, The Economist reports that Fatah and Hamas have reached an agreement on a new official policy based on the proposal adopted by the Arab League in March 2002 on “territories in exchange for peace” to put an end to the Middle East conflict. On 21st September, Abbas declares before the UN General Assembly that the government of national unity shall recognise Israel and endorse previous agreements, but on 22nd September, Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh declares that Hamas has no intention of forming part of a government that recognises Israel.
- On 12th September, an Israeli judge of the military court of Ofer Camp orders the release of 18 Hamas representatives, among them the President of the Palestinian Legislative Council, Abdel Aziz Dweik, and three Ministers, arrested by Israel over the course of the previous two months. On 25th September, a military court of appeals reverses the decision and continues judicial proceedings against the individuals in question. On 27th September, an Israeli mil-

itary court orders the release of the Palestinian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Higher Education, Nasser Shaer arrested on 19th August 2006.

Peace Negotiations

- On 21st September, the Financial Times reports that Abbas has launched a new, four-stage plan to renew the peace process with Israel.

Conflicts between the Parties

- The Israeli offensive against the Gaza Strip initiated on 25th June continues throughout the month of September. According to *The Independent* of 8th September, 262 people have been killed, 64 of them children and 26 women since the start of the Israeli operation. On 12th September, a second Israeli soldier loses his life in confrontations with Palestinians. On 15th September, the Brigadier General Jad Tayeh, Head of International Coordination for the Palestinian Intelligence Service, is killed in Gaza.

October 2006

Israel

- On 6th October, the oil exploration company, Ginko, announces that it has discovered oil near the Dead Sea.
- On 15th October, the Minister of Justice and the police issue a joint statement recommending that President Moshe Katsav be prosecuted for rape and aggressions against women.
- On 23rd October, Yisrael Beiteinu (*Israel, Our Home*), a party that had gained eleven seats in the Knesset (unicameral legislative body) at the last elections in March, joins the government coalition, which now holds 78 seats. On 30th October, the Cabinet of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert votes in favour of enlarging the government coalition. In response, the Minister of Science and Technology, Ophir Pines-Paz, member of the Labour Party, resigns, accusing the leaders of Yisrael Beiteinu of racism.

Palestine

- On 1st October, Hamas forces try to

stop a demonstration organised by Fatah against the non-payment of the State's civil servants, ending in confrontations between Fatah and Hamas followers resulting in 8 dead and 50 wounded. The confrontations break out when the Preventive Security Forces, associated with Fatah, attack a Hamas post in Gaza, leading to a counter-attack against the home of the local Fatah leader. These confrontations are the most severe since Hamas was elected in January. President Mahmoud Abbas, leader of Fatah, and Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, of Hamas, call for serenity while the leaders from both factions accuse one another of stepping up the violence. On 2nd October, the Gaza Strip returns to tranquillity. On 4th October, President Abbas admits having failed in his attempt to form a government of national unity with Hamas and issues a veiled threat to dissolve the government. On 4th October, the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade, affiliated with Fatah, declares that it aims to kill three high Hamas officials, including Khaled Mashal, Chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau, based in Damascus, and the Minister of Home Affairs and National Security, Said Siyam. On 6th October, Mohammed Dahlan, a key member of Fatah in Gaza, accuses Hamas of attempting to kill its political rivals and alleges that in the past few months, at least twenty people have been killed. On 10th October, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Qatar goes to Gaza with the aim of forging an agreement between Hamas and Fatah. On 20th October, several armed individuals attack Prime Minister Haniyeh's convoy on its way through the Nusseirat Refugee Camp, though there are no injuries. On 23rd October, Mohammed Shahadeh, the Commander of the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade at the Bureij Refugee Camp, is assassinated. Fatah accuses Hamas.

- On 24th October, a Spanish photographer for the *Associated Press* is abducted by the Palestinian armed forces and released later in the day. On 30th October, a Spanish humanitarian worker is abducted in Gaza and released the same day.

Conflicts between the Parties

- On 12th October, the Israeli forces

intensify their offensive against the Gaza Strip. Between 12th and 15th October, 23 Palestinians are killed, including Hamas fighters, in an Israeli operation seeking to prevent rocket fire on Israel from the Gaza Strip and the entrance of arms from Egypt. On 19th October, the *International Herald Tribune* reports that Israel has discovered a number of tunnels between the Gaza Strip and Egypt used for arms trafficking.

November 2006

Palestine

- On 10th November, Prime Minister Haniyeh, of Hamas, declares that he will resign from his post of it contributes to ending the embargo imposed by the West.
- At a meeting in Cairo on 12th November, the Foreign Affairs Ministers of Arab countries agree to break the international economic blockade imposed on the Palestinians since the entrance into office of the Hamas government in March and to send funds to the Palestinian National Authority.

Peace Negotiations

- On 16th November, France, Italy and Spain disclose a 5-point initiative for peace in the Middle East consisting of: 1) an immediate cease-fire; 2) the formation of an internationally recognised government of national unity; 3) an exchange of prisoners; 4) negotiations between Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Olmert; and 5) the establishment of an international mission in the Gaza Strip to enforce the cease-fire.

Conflicts between the Parties

- From 1st to 7th November, the Israeli army launches a major offensive against the city of Beit Hanoun, in the north-eastern Gaza Strip, killing at least 50 Palestinians, many of them civilians. Israel declares it has discovered a great number of weapons and destroyed nine rocket launchers. Palestinian agencies censure Israel for having also destroyed homes, orchards, water conduits and electrical cables during the raid. On 6th November, an 18-year-old suicide

bomber detonates himself near Israeli troops in Beit Hanoun, killing no-one. The Islamic Jihad claims authorship for the attack. On 8th November, 19 Palestinians, eight of them children and seven women, along with 13 members of a single family, are killed by an Israeli shell in the residential area of Beit Hanoun. The following day, Prime Minister Olmert announces that the blunder was caused by a technical error and starts an investigation. Abbas qualifies this act as an "ignoble crime" and declares that the Israelis do not seek peace and will therefore have to bear the consequences. On 12th November, the United States vetoes a United Nations Resolution backed by the Arab countries calling for the immediate withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Gaza Strip and condemning the Israeli attack. On 15th November, an Israeli woman is killed by a Palestinian rocket in Sderot. On 20th November, Israel is obliged to cancel two attacks after Palestinian civilians form a "human shield" in Beit Lahiya around the homes of Mohammed Baroud, local leader of the Popular Resistance Committees, and Mohammed Nawajeh, a Hamas member, both of whom had been given 30 minutes to evacuate their homes before bombardment. On 22nd November, Israeli tanks re-enter the Gaza Strip and two members of Hamas die in confrontations with the Israeli soldiers. On 23rd November, eight Palestinians die in Israeli military operations in the northern Gaza Strip. A 64-year-old Palestinian woman commits a suicide bombing claimed by Hamas in the Jabaliya Refugee Camp, slightly wounding two Israeli soldiers. On 26th November, a cease-fire begins between Israel and Palestinian militants. Israel withdraws its troops from the northern Gaza Strip and Abbas orders the security forces to patrol the border of the Gaza Strip to prevent all rocket fire. Certain militants, among them the Islamic Jihad, declare that they do not accept the cease-fire. The Israeli Prime Minister calls for restraint when several rockets are fired on Israel from the Gaza Strip after the onset of the cease-fire. On 27th November, Olmert states that he is willing to release a number of Palestinian prisoners in exchange for the Israeli soldier abducted in June and adds that there are several positive points in the Beirut Declaration of March 2002, which promised the recognition of Israel in exchange for Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders.

December 2006

Israel

- On 11th December, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert inadvertently admits in an interview on the German N24 station that Israel possesses nuclear weapons, putting an end to decades of a "strategic ambiguity" policy.
- On 15th December, the UN Security Council adopts Resolution 1729 (2006), extending the mandate of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UND-OF), stationed in the Golan Heights, for another six months.

Palestine

- On 3rd December, Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh undertakes his first trip abroad since his party, Hamas, won elections in January. On 8th December, he arrives in Iran, where he declares that Hamas will never recognise Israel and will continue to struggle until it liberates Jerusalem. On 13th December, Bassam al-Farah, a member of Hamas, is assassinated in Khan Yunis. Hamas accuses Fatah of being responsible for his death. On 14th December, the Israelis refuse to allow Haniyeh to enter the Gaza Strip at the Rafah Crossing Point with a suitcase full of money raised on his visits to Syria, Iran, Qatar and Sudan. In response, hundreds of Hamas supporters turn up and confrontations break out between Hamas and Fatah security forces and thereafter between Hamas combatants and Egyptian security forces. Haniyeh is finally authorised to enter the Gaza Strip after having deposited the money in an Egyptian bank. On 11th December, tension between Fatah and Hamas intensifies when armed individuals kill the three children of Colonel Baha Balousha, member of the intelligence services under Fatah. On 16th December, President Mahmoud Abbas announces that he would like to hold early legislative and presidential elections in order to end the political crisis causing strife among the Palestinian factions, but adds that forming a government of national unity remains his priority to end inter-party tension and international economic sanctions. Hamas leaders are opposed to holding legislative elections. Abbas' proposals cause an increase in violence on 17th December and President Abbas and Ahmad Baher, President of the Palestinian Leg-

islative Council, call for serenity following an attack against the Presidential Guard, the capture of two Ministers, an attack on Foreign Minister Mahmud al-Zahhar's convoy and an attack on President Abbas' home and office in Gaza. On 18th December, British Prime Minister Tony Blair expresses his support for Abbas. On 19th December, Prime Minister Haniyeh accuses the US government of trying to overthrow the Hamas administration. That same day, four Palestinians die in confrontations between Hamas and Fatah. On 29th December, Israel accepts Egypt's delivering arms for Abbas' Presidential Guard.

- On 7th December, the United Nations and its partners make an appeal to raise 454 million dollars in order to deal with the humanitarian crisis ravaging the Palestinian Territories.
- On 29th December, the human rights organisation, Israeli B'Tselem, asserts that the number of Palestinians killed by Israeli security forces in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip rises to 660 for the year 2006, 332 of them civilians and 141 minors, whereas the Palestinians have killed 17 Israeli civilians, one of them a minor and six members of the Israeli security forces.

Peace Negotiations

- On 23rd December, Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas meet at Olmert's residence in Jerusalem for their first official meeting. On 25th December, upon request of Abbas, Olmert approves the withdrawal of 27 of the 400 military control points in the West Bank and promises immediate measures to improve the circulation of goods to and from the Gaza Strip. Israel likewise agrees to release 30% of the Palestinian funds in its possession, but only for humanitarian ends. These Israeli measures are intended to support Abbas in his struggle against Hamas.

Conflicts between the Parties

- On 26th December, the Islamic Jihad fires eight rockets at Israel, one of them striking the city of Sderot and wounding a young Israeli. On 27th December, the Israeli government orders the renewal of targeted strikes against the militants shooting rockets from the Gaza Strip, but declares that it will otherwise keep the cease-fire.