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2021 in Palestine: a new generation has finally appeared

At first, 2021 appeared to be another ordinary year of relentless Israeli occupation and continued Palestinian misery. While much of that situation remained true, an unprecedented sense of popular unity among Palestinians, not only in occupied East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza, but also among the Palestinian communities of historic Palestine, challenged the dynamics of the Israeli occupation of Palestine.



Palestinians take part in a protest against the Israeli occupation.

(Photo: *ActiveStills.org*, File)

A pervasive sense of cautious hope has finally replaced the absolute sense of despair of previous years. In doing so, there has been a sense of renewal throughout Palestine and a willingness to adopt new political ideas. For example, according to a [poll](#) conducted by the Jerusalem Media and Communication Center (JMCC), published on November 22, there are more Palestinians in the West Bank who support the one-state solution than those who continue to support the virtually vanished two-state solution that dominated Palestinian thinking for decades.

The pandemic takes its toll

However, the year began with the focus on something totally different: the covid-19 pandemic. In addition to ravaging and occupied Palestinians, especially in the Gaza Strip, the pandemic began to [spread](#) among Palestinian prisoners.

In February, the Palestinian Authority, along with international human rights groups and organizations, [criticized](#) Israel for blocking access to COVID-19 vaccines in the besieged Gaza Strip. The Sputnik 5 vaccines were donated by Russia, the first country to contribute to the fight against the pandemic in Palestine. Over time, Palestinian communities gradually gained access to vaccines [from](#) the COVAX program. However, the pandemic continued to wreak havoc in occupied Palestine, especially as the Israeli occupation authorities [continued to](#) block Palestinian preventive measures and dismantle makeshift COVID-19 facilities in the occupied territories. According to the [Worldometer](#) website, 4,555 Palestinians died from COVID-19, while 432,602 tested positive for the deadly pandemic.

Cancelled elections

Like the previous year, Israel's political crisis quickly dominated headlines, as the power struggle between then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his rivals continued to strengthen, leading to Israel's fourth election in two years. The March [elections](#) have finally changed the Israeli political landscape thanks to a bizarre governing coalition formed by Israel's new Prime Minister [Naftali Bennett](#) on June 13. The coalition [included](#) Arab politician Mansour Abbas, whose political party was instrumental in the formation of the government.



Another attack on Gaza: Israel squeezes life out of Gaza – Cartoon
[Sabaaneh/MonitordeOriente].

As Netanyahu and his Likud party quickly retreated into opposition, ending a reign of more than twelve years, Palestinians anticipated their own elections, which were [announced](#) by PA President Mahmoud Abbas on Jan. 15.

The PA's parliamentary and presidential elections were [scheduled](#) for May 22 and July 31, respectively. The two rounds of voting were to be followed by a political settlement ending Palestinian political disunity, ensuring equitable representation for all Palestinian political groups, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, in a revitalized Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

Unfortunately, none of this has happened. Despite positive [talks on Palestinian unity](#) in Cairo over several weeks, Abbas [cancelled](#) the planned elections on the pretext that he had taken such a decision in protest at Israel's refusal to allow Palestinian voter participation in East Jerusalem.

In exchange for blocking Palestinian efforts to ensure a semblance of democracy even under Israeli occupation, Abbas was allowed to return to Washington's list of allies. In fact, the United States [resumed](#) its financial aid to the Palestinians in April, [promising](#) to reopen the PLO's office in Washington, which was closed by the Trump Administration, and also pledging to reopen its own consulate in Jerusalem, which was also [shut down](#) by Trump in September 2018.

Despite these gestures, which served to validate the PA again after four years of complete marginalization by the United States, the new Biden Administration offered neither a road map for a renewed peace process nor pressured Israel to end its occupation or curb the pace of expansion of illegal settlements in occupied Palestine. Indeed, the pace of settlement construction by Israel has grown exponentially in 2021, with the [announcement](#) of Israel's plan to approve, in October, thousands of new Israeli homes in the West Bank.

From Sheikh Yarah to Gaza

Israel's provocative actions would have gone unnoticed by the international community were it not for the fact that the Palestinian people took a collective stand using all forms of resistance, from Sheikh Yarah in East Jerusalem to Gaza. The whole episode, which eventually led to an Israeli war against Gaza in May, began with a routine Israeli attempt to [ethnically cleanse](#) Palestinians from various East Jerusalem neighborhoods, such as Sheikh Yarah and Silwan. However, Palestinian Jerusalemites began to organize against an Israeli court order to evict them from their homes, which would then be occupied by Israeli Jewish settlers, as they have been doing for many years.



Palestinians protest against Israel's blockade of Khan Yunis, Gaza, on August 25, 2021

[Mustafa Hassona/Anadolu Agency].

Popular resistance in Sheikh Yarah was met with extreme Israeli violence, involving armed settlers, Israeli police and occupation forces, resulting in at least 178 Palestinian protesters being [injured](#) on 7 May. Palestinians from all over the occupied territories began mobilizing in solidarity with their Al Quds brothers, triggering another [devastating Israeli war](#) against the Gaza Strip on May 10. The war [resulted in](#) the deaths of more than 250 Palestinians, thousands injured and massive destruction.

The Israeli war was intended to distract attention from the events taking place in East Jerusalem. However, Israeli designs failed completely, as Palestinians in Ramallah, Nablus, Hebron, Haifa and many other Palestinian cities, towns and refugee camps [demonstrated](#) in solidarity with Sheikh Yarah and Gaza, articulating a political discourse that, for the first time, lacked factional references.

To quell the Palestinian rebellion, Israel [sent](#) thousands of soldiers and police, along with armed Jewish settlers and militias, to the occupied territories and to Israel itself. Many Palestinians [were killed](#) in the resulting clashes and attacks. However, the events of May have highlighted not only the unity among Palestinians, but also the deep racism that afflicts all sectors of Israeli society. The notion that the Palestinians of historic Palestine have assimilated into the new reality and are no longer part of a larger Palestinian body politic turned out to be completely false.

Boycotts, divestments and the International Criminal Court

Palestinian resistance at home further mobilized civil society around the world. Rights organizations such as [Human Rights Watch](#) and [B'tselem](#) itself concluded that Israel is an apartheid state.

The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement received a lot of boosts throughout the year, as companies such as ice cream giant Ben & Jerry's decided to divest themselves of the occupied territories, and the sports multinational, Nike, has decided to end its operations in Israel altogether, although without rationalizing its decision for political reasons.

In addition, Norway's largest pension fund, KLP, [declared](#) on July 5 that it would stop investing in companies linked to Israeli settlements. Later, the famous Irish novelist Sally Rooney [announced](#) her refusal to have her bestseller "*Beautiful World, Where Are You*" published by an Israeli company.

Meanwhile, efforts continued to hold Israeli war criminals accountable to the International Criminal Court (ICC). In March, then-ICC Chief Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda [announced](#) the opening of a formal investigation into alleged war crimes in the occupied Palestinian territories. Although Bensouda is no longer at the ICC, the Palestinian case remains active, hoping that international justice can finally prevail.

Despite the numerous difficulties, the spirit of all Palestinians was revived, once again, when the Palestinian Olympic delegation [entered](#) Tokyo's Olympic Stadium in July carrying a Palestinian flag. The small delegation included Palestinians from various regions, cementing Palestinian unity also in culture and sport.

Resistance through hunger

Meanwhile, Palestinians on hunger strike continued to resist inside Israeli jails, and prisoners such as Kayed Fafous and Meqdad Al-Qawasmi staged prolonged hunger strikes of 131 and 113 days, respectively, that nearly [resulted](#) in their deaths. In yet another show of defiance, six Palestinian prisoners [escaped](#) from Gilboa prison on 6 September. Although all of them were captured and reportedly [tortured](#) after their re-arrest, the news captivated all Palestinians, who felt empowered by what they perceived as a heroic quest for freedom.

However, many Palestinian prisoners also suffered at the hands of the PA itself, which continued its practice of illegal detention and torture of dissident Palestinian activists. The [death](#) of Nizar Banat, at the hands of PA security forces on June 24, led to massive Palestinian protests in which thousands of people demanded accountability and justice for the PA critic who was beaten to death.

2021 was a year of war, loss and destruction for the Palestinians. However, it was also a year of unity, cultural achievements and hope, as a new generation is finally taking center stage, affirming their identity and their importance for the future of their homeland.

Ramzy Baroud,

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