



## In Brief: Palestine update 2013

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Over the past months, tensions between Palestinians and Israelis have persisted, with announcements of settlement building, clashes between settlers and Palestinians, hunger strikes by Palestinians in Israeli custody and significant exchanges of fire between Israel and Gaza at the end of the June 2012. There have been repeated complaints by Palestinians that the Israeli authorities are seeking to evict them from Area C, the part of the West Bank that is fully controlled by Israel.

In July 2012 the Palestinian Authority (PA) encountered increasing financial problems. In September there were protests as the Authority had difficulty paying salaries; the unrest was used by Fatah opponents of Prime Minister Salam Fayyad to undermine his rule.

In October 2012, partial local elections were held in the West Bank. Fatah declared victory after Hamas boycotted the election, although in reality it won less than half the seats contested despite the fact that Hamas was not running. No elections took place in Gaza.

Hostilities between Israel and Gaza broke out in November, with rocket fire against Israeli targets and Israeli bombing. During **Operation Pillar of Defence**, 167 Palestinians were killed by the Israeli military action and another dozen or so by Palestinian actions ('friendly fire' and executions for alleged collaboration); four Israeli civilians were killed by rocket fire from Gaza according to the [report of an Israeli human rights group](#). The hostilities were brought to a halt by a ceasefire brokered by President Mursi of Egypt.

At the end of November the **UN General Assembly** [voted to upgrade the status](#) of the Palestinians to that of a non-member observer state. Palestinians can now take part in General Assembly debates and may be able to join other UN agencies. Shortly afterwards, Israel announced a new programme of building in the settlements and froze the transfer of tax receipts due to the Palestinian Authority.

In February 2013, **John Kerry** was sworn in as the new US Secretary of State. Kerry has spent a lot of energy trying to reignite the negotiations between the PA and the Israelis but the problem of settlement construction continues to be the main obstacle. The Israelis say that they have no preconditions while the Palestinians say that they cannot negotiate against a background of settlement construction whittling away the land on which they might build a state. In March President Obama visited the region with the intention of persuading both the Israeli and Palestinian publics that he cares about their concerns. President Obama was particularly fulsome in his declarations of support for Israel's security.

Between March and July Kerry visited the area five times, and during the World Economic Forum meeting in Jordan in May, announced a [plan to raise \\$4 billion](#) in investment for the Palestinian economy. The plan involved exploiting the trillion-cubic-foot reserves of natural gas that were found by BG Group in Gaza waters in 2000. The gas would be brought ashore

in Gaza where some would power a desalination plant while much of it would be sent to Israel, which lacks secure gas supplies and has been suffering from power cuts (although far less severe than those in Gaza).

Although Kerry left Israel in July without seeing a breakthrough in the peace process, [he said that 'real progress' had been](#) made and that a re-start could be within reach.

February and April 2013, further political protests broke out over prisoners held in Israeli jails.

On 13 April 2013 **Salam Fayyad**, the internationally-respected Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority resigned. Fayyad had been appointed in 2007 to take the lead in constructing functioning government institutions in the West Bank (he was never accepted by Hamas in Gaza), paying little attention to the stalled peace negotiations with Israel that he thought would not go very far. He was credited with improving the security situation and the economy in the West Bank and Israel, but his relations with Mahmoud Abbas and Fatah, Abbas's party, were always difficult, as Fayyad insisted on independence and his security cooperation with the Israeli authorities was never popular.

His successor was **Rami Hamdullah**, seen by Western officials as a 'moderate' who will broadly continue Fayyad's policies. Western commentators fear, however, that he will not be as effective as Fayyad. Hamdullah may be seen as a pale imitation of Fayyad, but for that reason he may be less of an obstacle to reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas. Nevertheless that is unlikely to happen in the near future as the divisions between the two parties remain wide.

Arab leaders visited Washington DC in April in an attempt to promote the continued relevance of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, which offered recognition by Arab states of Israel in return for a two-state solution.

In June 2013, Mohammed Assaf, a Gaza resident, won the international **Arab Idol** television talent contest, watched by millions across the Arab world. Junior Hamas officials were present to welcome him home, although the [group does not approve of the contest](#), which it says goes against Islamic principles. Fatah called on Palestinians to support him and it is expected that the Israeli authorities will grant him transit visas to perform in the West Bank.

Sporadic violence has continued between militants in Gaza and Israel, although the level is much lower since the ceasefire ended the major outbreak in November. In June six rockets were fired at Israel from the territory. Israel responded by sending warplanes to destroy what it described as weapons storage facilities and a launch site.

There are signs of growing radicalisation in the Israeli population and 'price-tag attacks' (vandalism against Arab property and attacks on Arab individuals in Israel) have been in the headlines recently. Such events were declared illegal gatherings by the government recently in order to make it easier for the Israeli authorities to take action against perpetrators. Meanwhile sporadic violence at border points continue. In July, a Palestinian was killed in a clash between stone-throwing youths and Israeli troops in the West Bank.

The UK provides [£30 million a year](#) in budget support to the Palestinian Authority, while the Department for International Development has [allocated £349 million](#) to support Palestinian development in its current four-year spending programme. The Foreign Secretary has expressed his support for the two-state solution and [his hope that the US](#) will lead a push, supported by European allies, to drive the peace process forward.

International Crisis Group [analysts say](#) that restored financial viability of the PA will buy some time, but that with the continuation of the occupation and the poor prospects for a negotiated peace with the Israelis, the situation in both Gaza and the West Bank will remain fundamentally unstable. Palestinians may be too demoralised and exhausted to mount another Intifada at present but further unrest cannot be ruled out.