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## Armed Groups in Northern West Bank:

**The Beginning of an Armed Intifada or the Seeds of an Internal Palestinian Conflict?**



**Alaa Lahlouh**

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**Alaa Lahlouh** is a researcher at the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research. He holds a Master's degree in Contemporary Arab Studies from Birzeit University; graduated in 2003. His work is focused on democratic transformation, accountability and integrity in the security sector, and the Palestinian national movement. He participated in preparing Palestine's Report of the Arab Security Sector Index and the Arab Democracy Index. A list of recent publications includes "Accountability in Public Institutions that Report to PA President," prepared for AMAN, 2022; "The Integrity Index in the Palestinian security sector for 2022," prepared for the Civic Forum to Enhance Good Governance in the Security Sector, 2023; "Birzeit Student Elections: Why Hamas Won and Fatah Lost, issued by PCPSR, 2022; and "Violence and Security Disorder in Hebron Governorate: Reality and Challenges," prepared for REFORM, 2023.

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### **The Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR)**

P. O. Box 76, Ramallah, Palestine

Tel: +970-2-2964933

Fax: +970-2-2964934

[pcpsr@pcpsr.org](mailto:pcpsr@pcpsr.org)

[www.pcpsr.org](http://www.pcpsr.org)

# Armed Groups in Northern West Bank:

## The Beginning of an Armed Intifada or the seeds of an Internal Palestinian Conflict?

Alaa Lahlouh

### Introduction:

Public opinion polls show that a majority of 54% of the public in the West Bank expects an armed intifada to erupt soon, while a majority of 58% of the same public fears internal armed clashes between Palestinian armed groups and the Palestinian security forces. In less than a year, the Jenin and Nablus governorates witnessed several confrontations between armed groups and Palestinian security forces following the arrest of members of these groups by the PA security forces. The question that arises is the following: why have we come to this point and where are we heading?

In 2022, armed groups emerged in the northern West Bank (e.g., in Jenin refugee camp and Nablus city) and engaged in armed confrontations with the Israeli occupation forces. Polls conducted over the past year have shown wide support among the Palestinian public for these groups. A combination of factors helped the emergence of these groups and their spread to other areas in the northern and central West Bank (e.g., in Aqbat Jaber refugee camp, Nablus, Tulkarm, and Qabatiya, Jaba' and Burqin towns in Jenin), such as the failure of the peace process, the continued policies of the Israeli governments of confiscating land and Judaizing Jerusalem, and the continued attacks by settlers against Palestinian citizens. Internal factors have also contributed to this development. These included the weakness of the Palestinian Authority and the public loss of confidence in it as a result of several reasons, the most important of which is its inability to provide security and safety for Palestinian citizens who face Israeli army incursions and settlers' terrorism or enforce law and order in areas where tribes and clans have taken the law into their own hands. On top of that, the PA's political system witnessed highly negative governance developments during the past decade that affected its legitimacy and weakened the protection for human rights.

This paper aims to examine the conditions pushing toward a new armed intifada and those that may increase the possibility of an internal Palestinian conflict. It explores similarities with those witnessed during the second intifada and proposes recommendations that aim at preventing the deterioration toward internal conflict. The analysis and conclusions are based on in-depth conversations with figures from various Palestinian parties who are familiar with the current internal developments. They are also influenced by the findings of public opinion polls conducted in the Palestinian territories during the past two years.

### Background:

In mid-2021, the first armed group in Jenin camp, the Jenin Brigade, was formed and began to operate openly. It is worth recalling that the Jenin camp provided an incubator and a launching platform for most of the armed and bombing attacks during the second intifada. For this reason, it witnessed fierce battles between armed groups and the Israeli army that lasted for about 13 days in April 2002. During that

battler, the occupation forces bombed and destroyed large areas in the camp's buildings. Moreover, the year 2021 witnessed the daring escape of six prisoners from the Gilboa prison inside Israel; all the prisoners were from the Jenin governorate, five of them from the Islamic Jihad movement and a prisoner from the Fatah movement, Zakaria al-Zubaidi. Al Zubaidi is a member of the Fatah Revolutionary Council, and one of the most prominent commanders of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades during the second intifada. He witnessed all the battles of Jenin camp.<sup>1</sup> The atmosphere that prevailed in the Jenin governorate in general, and in the Jenin refugee camp and city in particular, helped many young men from other areas in the governorate to join these armed groups. At the end of 2021, small armed groups in Nablus started to target Israeli checkpoints and military vehicles in the vicinity of the city, eventually leading in mid-2022 to the formation of the Lions' Den armed group. The group made the Old City of Nablus its home base. Here too, it is worth mentioning that in April 2002, the Old City of Nablus witnessed fierce battles that lasted for about a week, after which the Israeli army was able to impose its control over the Old City. Throughout most the second intifada, that part of Nablus remained a stronghold of armed groups.

In 2022, several armed attacks inside Israel were carried out by young Palestinians, most of who, came from the Jenin area. These attacks led to the killing of several Israelis. Shooting attacks were also carried out in the vicinity of Jenin governorate against Israeli soldiers and settlers, killing and wounding many soldiers and settlers. The same development was repeated in the Nablus district.

### **Reasons behind the rise of the armed groups:**

There are many reasons for the rise of armed groups in the northern West Bank, some of which are related to the daily hardships imposed by the unending Israeli occupation and settlers' terror attacks against Palestinians. Needless to say, public loss of confidence in the peace process led to despair as more and more people came to the conclusion that diplomacy and negotiations were no longer viable. But other factors were internal. Internal governance failures produced high levels of distrust and loss of confidence in the Palestinian political system and its leadership. The PA was seen as unable to provide protection for the citizens. On top of that, the regime's loss of electoral legitimacy, the existence of widespread popular perception of corruption within the PA, and the repeated violations of human rights contributed greatly to weakening the PA. In a published study<sup>2</sup> by Dr. Omar Rahhal, the author lists eight reasons for the rise of armed groups, the most important of which are the PA's failure to protect its own citizens, its emphasis on negotiations as the only option for a political solution, the willingness of the Palestinian people to sacrifice, and the PA neglect of the youth and their concerns. Palestinian public opinion polls conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) during the last five years have often shown that these and other reasons are directly or indirectly linked to the escalation of negative popular attitudes against the PA and the Israeli military occupation.

In addition to these forces, it is worth highlighting the following recent developments as they have contributed to providing a permissive environment that facilitated the rise of the armed groups:

1. *The escalating Israeli land confiscation policy* and the measures aiming to Judaize East Jerusalem united the Palestinians in the belief that a Palestinian response should be forthcoming. The spring of 2021 witnessed popular confrontations in the city of Jerusalem and its various neighborhoods as a result of the Israeli government's attempts to expel seven families from Sheikh Jarrah from their homes. These escalating confrontations led to a military confrontation

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<sup>1</sup> All six prisoners were rearrested by the Israeli forces.

<sup>2</sup> Omar Rahhal, "The transformation of Palestinian attitudes in the West Bank regarding the confrontation with the occupation," Amman: Center for Middle East Studies, 2022 (Arabic)

between Israel and Hamas in May 2021 that was accompanied by street confrontations in the West Bank and similar confrontations inside Israel, particularly in mixed Arab-Jewish cities. It should be noted that the rise of the armed groups in the Jenin refugee camp coincided, and was perhaps propelled by this Hamas-Israel war and the accompanying confrontations. These events were followed a month later by the Israeli assassination of one of the commanders of the Al-Quds Brigades in Jenin. This sequence of developments was particularly emphasized by Maher al-Akhras, a spokesman for Islamic Jihad, in an interview conducted with him by the author.<sup>3</sup>

2. *A blocked political horizon* and a failed peace process cemented a popular conclusion that peace was no longer viable; that it has reached a dead-end and that Palestinians must look for alternative means to end the Israeli occupation. The formation during the past years of right wing and extreme Israeli coalitions led by Benjamin Netanyahu has been emphasized by interviewees, most prominently by a member of the Palestinian legislative Council (PLC), Jamal Huwail, who is also a member of Fatah's Revolutionary Council and one of the leaders of the April 2002 battle of the Jenin camp.<sup>4</sup> While Israeli measures of settlement expansion continue to tear apart the geographical contiguity of the promised Palestinian state and continue to Judaize the city of Jerusalem, the Palestinian leaders refused, in the past, to return to negotiations unless settlement expansion was stopped. The US efforts during this period were unsuccessful in producing a sustained progress in peace making throughout President Obama's first term. Despite US Secretary of State John Kerry's efforts and success in holding negotiations between the two sides in 2013 and 2014, these efforts met the same fate of failure. After that, the negotiations entered a state of clinical death. Yet, the Palestinian leadership remained committed to negotiations as the only option for ending the Israeli occupation. Despite its declared advocacy of peaceful resistance, the Palestinian leadership has not succeeded in activating this option. One of the consequences of the failure of diplomacy and the expansion of settlements has been the declining willingness of the Palestinians public to make concessions. For example, polls show a significant decline in public support for the two-state solution in recent years, reaching the lowest level in 2023, standing at 27% and 28% in two successive polls conducted in March and June. Moreover, these polls show that negotiations are no longer seen as the most effective means of ending Israeli occupation or building a Palestinian state.
3. One of the reasons for the willingness of Palestinian youth to challenge the PA is the *loss of confidence* in that authority and due to its mounting weakness. As indicated earlier, this has been the result of the PA's inability to provide security and safety for its citizens in the face of Israeli incursions, army and settlers, and in the face of clan and tribal conflicts, in addition to various damaging PA practices in recent years. Ayman Daraghmeh, a member of the PLC representing the Change and Reform bloc, highlighted this reason in particular in an interview with the author.<sup>5</sup> Confidence in the PA has also declined as a result of its loss of electoral legitimacy. The president's term expired in 2010 and since then he ruled for 13 years without a popular mandate. During these years, parliamentary and presidential elections have not been held. As a result, public trust in the PA government fell from 68% when it was first elected in 2006 to 27% by the end of 2021. The public's perception in the existence of corruption in PA institutions has reached 86% for most of the past decade. During the same period, the vast majority of Palestinians demanded the resignation of President Abbas, with 80% calling for his resignation today. Palestinians now view the Palestinian Authority as a burden on the Palestinian people, and the

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<sup>3</sup> Phone interview with Maher al Akhras, spokesperson of Islamic Jihad, 15 July 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Jamal Huwail, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council and a member of Fatah's Revolutionary Council, 15 July 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Ayman Daraghmeh, PLC member representing Change and Reform bloc in the parliament, 9 August 2023.

majority sees its continuation in the interest of Israel and its disintegration or collapse in the interest of the Palestinian people.<sup>6</sup>

4. The formation of armed groups in the West Bank reflects the emergence of *a new Palestinian young generation*. Those who observe the armed clashes realize that most of the Palestinian fighters are young people, as young as twenty-five years old. This generation was mostly born after the invasion in 2002, or were only several years old. This generation grew up under the harsh conditions of the military occupation and its efforts to control the people and the land. They have witnessed what they perceive as a leadership failure and an Arab abandonment. They lived through Palestinian division and the widening gap between the people and the PA. A weak PA left a political vacuum that the new generation is trying to fill. As Fatah leader Fathi Khazim (also known as “Abu Ra’ad”) said in an interview with the author: “nature does not accept a vacuum.”<sup>7</sup> Faced with disappointment and disillusionment and in an attempt to break away from the resilient status quo, these youths organized themselves in various military formations while putting political divisions and loyalties behind them. This can be seen in the formation of the Lions' Den in Nablus, which included elements from all Palestinian factions (such as Fatah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front) as well as independents and the nonaffiliated. The same can be said about the Jenin groups, where various military wings work together, including the Al-Quds, Al-Aqsa, Al-Qassam, and Abu Ali Mustaf Brigades.

### **The spread to other areas and the potential for a new intifada:**

Soon, armed groups spread to new areas. By the end of last year and the beginning of this year new armed formations were created in Tulkarm and Jericho, as well as in the towns inside the Jenin governorate and in the refugee camps in the Nablus area. As mentioned earlier, these groups enjoy great sympathy from the Palestinian street. Public opinion polls conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR) in late 2022 and the beginning and mid-2023 showed clear support for the formation of these groups: 72% of the public said that they support the formation of armed groups, such as the Lions’ Den and the Jenin Brigade, that are not operating under PA control and are not part of the official security forces; only 22% say they are against the formation of these groups. Support for the formation of armed groups increases among young people aged 18-29 years compared to older Palestinians, 75% and 72% respectively.<sup>8</sup> In March 2023, 68% of the public supported the formation of these groups and 25% opposed their formation.<sup>9</sup> Three months later, 71% of the public supported and 23% opposed the formation of these groups.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, a majority of the public (58%) expects these armed groups to spread to other areas in the West Bank.<sup>11</sup>

Three of the factors that have contributed to the formation of the armed groups also push toward the eruption of a third intifada:

1. Israel's unending occupation of the Palestinian territories is turning into de facto annexation as the campaign to confiscate land, build settlements, and impose Israeli law is widening in the absence of an effective official PA or international response.

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<sup>6</sup> Khalil Shikaki, “The Road to Collision: a Weak Palestinian Authority and a New National-Religious Israel,” Critical Policy Brief, Ramallah, PCPSR, June 2023: <https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/942>

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Fathi Khazim, leader and activist at the Jenin Refugee Camp, 5 August 2023.

<sup>8</sup> [Public Opinion Poll No \(86\) | PCPSR](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Public Opinion Poll No \(87\) | PCPSR](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Public Opinion Poll No \(88\) | PCPSR](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Public Opinion Poll No \(88\) | PCPSR](#)

2. The apparent and growing weakness of the PA in an environment in which known organized political factions are also absent thereby generating a vacuum that these armed groups are trying to fill.
3. The escalation of violence carried out by the Israeli occupation forces and the settlers against armed groups and against peaceful civilians in Palestinian villages and towns, as we have recently witnessed in Hawara, Turmus'ayya, Um Safa and other Palestinian towns.

### **The prospects for internal strife:**

Public opinion polls conducted among the Palestinians during the past nine months indicate that a majority of the public, ranging between 52% and 59%, fears that the formation of Palestinian armed groups will lead to internal armed clashes between them and the Palestinian security forces. We noted that while support for the formation of these groups increases, trust in the PA and its institutions drops sharply. When asked about their expectation that the official security services would join forces and participate alongside armed groups in the event of an armed intifada, 62% said they did not expect that.<sup>12</sup> When asked about their views regarding the option for the armed men to surrender to the PA security services in order to obtain protection against Israeli assassination, between 80% and 83% of the public said they are against members of these armed groups surrendering themselves and their weapons to the Palestinian Authority<sup>13</sup>. If the PA were to try to disarm the armed groups, a majority of 59% expects them to resist the PA security services with arms, only 8% expect members of this group to surrender, and only 23% believe that resistance by armed groups to the Palestinian security services would be unarmed.<sup>14</sup> An overwhelming majority (87%) of the public believes that the PA has no right to arrest members of these armed groups to prevent them from carrying out armed attacks against Israel or to provide them with protection.<sup>15</sup>

The in-depth interviews conducted by the author highlighted a number of factors and developments that might increase the prospects for internal Palestinian conflict:

1. The PA does not condone the existence of these armed groups or support the eruption of a third intifada. The PA leadership, especially President Abbas, supports nonviolence and it is still fully committed to negotiations and a peaceful solution as the only strategic option for ending the occupation. President Abbas rejects the idea of armed resistance in all its forms. By contrast, when the second intifada broke out in 2000, the PA leadership, under Yasser Arafat, believed in preserving all options, including armed resistance if necessary. Arafat did not hesitate to provide support to armed groups, or even allow the security services to participate in the intifada or turn a blind eye to their participation.
2. The ramifications of the internal political division between the West Bank, under Fatah's control, and the Gaza Strip, under Hamas', are still haunting the PA. Needless to say, the split in the Palestinian political system and territories have left a great constraining impact even on all resistance options. The Palestinian Authority and its ruling party, Fatah, have great fears that any increased power and influence of Hamas in the West Bank could turn into a highly destabilizing source in Palestinian politics leading to similar developments as those that happened in the Gaza Strip in 2007, when Hamas took over control of that area using its own armed wing to achieve a full armed control.

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<sup>12</sup> [Public Opinion Poll No \(87\) | PCPSR](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Index PSR Polls | PCPSR](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Public Opinion Poll No \(87\) | PCPSR](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Index PSR Polls | PCPSR](#)

3. The media exchange between Fatah and Hamas is poisonous. The widespread hate speech in the Palestinian media, especially between Fatah and Hamas, is highly alarming. This has been one of the issues particularly emphasized by Fathi Khazem (Abu Ra'd) who said that this exchange "leads to an aggravation of the internal situation and provides a fertile environment for the occurrence of an internal Palestinian conflict."<sup>16</sup> The observers of this media can easily see the volume of hate speech that is broadcast through satellite channels, websites or social network sites. It spreads accusation of treason against the other thereby creating an atmosphere that helps accelerate the pace towards internal conflict.
4. The armed groups are not reluctant to target PA forces or openly challenge its monopoly over force. This is evident in the recent cases in the northern West Bank when some of these groups attacked the PA headquarters or organized military parades in the middle of towns thereby posing a direct challenge to Abbas' assertion that the PA is enforcing the "one arm, one authority" principle.
5. Concerns about regime security could compel the PA to take coercive measures. The ruling elite's fear of the collapse of the PA, as a result of its inability to confront the armed groups, could increase its willingness to take risks. This has been one of the issues raised by Ayman Daraghmeh who pointed out that the "PA's imperative of self-preservation might be highly worrying, particularly given its failure to enforce order in the Jenin refugee camp and the old city of Nablus and in light of the regional and international pressure on it to act and confront the armed groups."<sup>17</sup>
6. The PA has shown that it is willing and able to occasionally arrest members of the armed groups. Such arrests have normally been followed by armed confrontations with members of these groups. A decision by the PA to mass arrest or disarm members of the armed groups in their home bases could lead to wide spread and prolonged internal violence.
7. Finally, a highly disruptive, but unseen, lack of societal trust among the Palestinians could add an additional driver of internal strife, particularly when the PA weakness becomes evident to the public to see. Societal trust expresses the extent to which any society is able to remain intact in the face of serious internal and external threats. In this sense, it is an expression of the societal immunity to disintegration. The greater the internal immunity of the Palestinian society, the lower the prospects for infighting; the greater the societal distrust, the greater the risk of internal conflict in the face of severe shocks or increased internal or external challenges. The results of the Arab Barometer surveys in Palestine indicate a decline in the percentage of societal trust from 39% in 2008 to only 14% in 2019, in the fifth round of the Barometer. The last round of the Barometer, in 2021-22, shows that the percentage has now dropped to only 10%. If this societal flaw is added to the very low level of trust in the PA public, especially toward those responsible for enforcing law and order, as we have indicated above, the challenge facing Palestinian society becomes critical.

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Khazim.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Daraghmeh.



## Recommendations:

The following recommendations are based on the interviews conducted and the positions expressed by the various stakeholders. They are addressed to the PA as well as the armed groups:

### *To the PA:*

The Palestinian leadership fears a third armed intifada and is working, under difficult constraints, to prevent one from erupting. President Mahmoud Abbas has expressed this view in various interviews in recent years. On the other hand, this PA leadership must also work to avoid throwing the Palestinian people into an internal strife, regardless of the motivation. Therefore, the Palestinian leadership must first work to regain the initiative through several steps that aim at regaining public trust, namely:

1. Prepare for general presidential and legislative elections: This recommendation was emphasized in particular by Fathi Khazem, Jamal Huwail, and Ayman Daraghmeh. All agreed on the importance of electoral legitimacy as the main barrier to internal strife. This must begin by setting a date for the election. Election can resuscitate the legitimacy of the entire political system and its various public institutions thereby providing the PA with the requested claim to monopoly over coercive force.<sup>18</sup>
2. Make serious efforts to end the internal division and restore unity between the two parts of the Palestinian territories. Reunification is critical for regaining public trust, restore societal trust, and strengthening the Palestinian negotiating position.
3. Adopt a national program around which a high level of consensus can be built. In this program, the role and function of the armed groups can be identified and their organizations integrated. Jamal Huwail, from Fatah, believes that this course of action constitutes a safe way out from the current impasse. He proposes various roles that can be assigned to these groups. For example, as long as the PA seeks to avoid direct confrontation with settlers, the protection of Area B from settlers' terror can be assigned to these armed groups. Similarly, if the PA decides, at one point in the future, to protect its control over Area A against Israeli incursions, but without confronting the Israeli army, it can assign this task to the armed groups.<sup>19</sup>
4. End all cases of imprisonment for political reasons. This should be a guiding principle in dealing with the armed groups. The PA should refrain from arresting activists from these armed groups. This recommendation has been particularly emphasized by Islamic Jihad's spokesman Maher al-Akhras who believes that "the Palestinian security services should stop arresting members of these groups for those legitimate activities entailing resisting the occupation forces. In return, members of these groups are required to respect law and order and refrain completely from attacking PA headquarters in order to preserve the sanctity of Palestinian blood."<sup>20</sup>
5. Stop the promotion of incitement and hate speech against political opponents in the local media. Political opposition, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, whose media attacks are even more provocative, must in return refrain from using inflammatory rhetoric against the PA and its leadership.

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<sup>18</sup> Interviews with Khazim, Huwail, and Daraghmeh.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Huwail.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with al Akhras.

*To the armed groups:*

1. Avoid any confrontation with the PA security services and refrain from blocking their entry into Palestinian areas in order to enforce law and order. Armed groups must respect the law and set an example in this in order to send a message to the PA they do not seek to supplant its role or challenge its jurisdiction.
2. If the PA attempts to arrest members of these groups, they should not confront it; instead, they should withdraw and evade, by all means, confronting it. Ayman Daraghmeh stressed that members of armed groups must redeploy outside their home base in those cases where the PA security forces seek to deploy. This should reduce those instances of armed confrontations between the armed groups and the PA security services.<sup>21</sup>
3. The armed groups are already very popular with the Palestinian public, but this is not necessarily the kind of relations between the armed groups and the PA. Moreover, the presence of these groups within the society might trigger tension with the public. It is imperative that the groups strive to avoid any conflict with the public. Moreover, as Maher al Akhras pointed out, the groups must also strive to maintain a smooth and amicable relations with the PA: "members of armed groups are required to respect the citizens and avoid all kinds of problems, whether with citizens or the PA".<sup>22</sup>
4. Visible militarization by the armed groups is destructive, not only because it makes them easy targets for the Israeli army, but also because it increases the pressure on the PA to take effective measures to arrest and disarm them. Jamal Huwail argues for keeping the armed groups completely underground as one way by which they can assure the PA that they do not seek to replace it in their areas of operation.<sup>23</sup>
5. Lack of internal coordination between the armed groups could led to internal in-fighting. To avoid this outcome, the armed groups need to create joint institutions and leadership. These joint institutions can help the groups articulate their vision and negotiate with the PA and societal forces in order to reduce any existing threat perception and contribute to wining hearts and minds.

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with Daraghmeh.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with al Akhras.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Huwail.



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Tel: +970-2-2964933

Fax: +970-2-2964934

[pcpsr@pcpsr.org](mailto:pcpsr@pcpsr.org)

[www.pcpsr.org](http://www.pcpsr.org)