

# Palestine, Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict

Joel Beinin and Lisa Hajjar (2014)

The conflict between Palestinian Arabs and Zionist (now Israeli) Jews is a modern phenomenon, dating to the end of the nineteenth century. Although the two groups have different religions (Palestinians include Muslims, Christians and Druze), religious differences are not the cause of the strife. The conflict began as a struggle over land. From the end of World War I until 1948, the area that both groups claimed was known internationally as Palestine. That same name was also used to designate a less well-defined “Holy Land” by the three monotheistic religions. Following the war of 1948–1949, this land was divided into three parts: the State of Israel, the West Bank (of the Jordan River) and the Gaza Strip.

It is a small area—approximately 10,000 square miles, or about the size of the state of Maryland. The competing claims to the territory are not reconcilable if one group exercises exclusive political control over all of it. Jewish claims to this land are based on the biblical promise to Abraham and his descendants, on the fact that the land was the historical site of the ancient Jewish kingdoms of Israel and Judea, and on Jews’ need for a haven from European anti-Semitism. Palestinian Arab claims to the land are based on their continuous residence in the country for hundreds of years and the fact that they represented the demographic majority until 1948. They reject the notion that a biblical-era kingdom constitutes the basis for a valid modern claim. If Arabs engage the biblical argument at all, they maintain that since Abraham’s son Ishmael is the forefather of the Arabs, then God’s promise of the land to the children of Abraham includes Arabs as well. They do not believe that they should forfeit their land to compensate Jews for Europe’s crimes against Jews.

## The Land and the People

In the nineteenth century, following a trend that emerged earlier in Europe, people around the world began to identify themselves as nations and to demand national rights, foremost the right to self-rule in a state of their own (self-determination and sovereignty). Jews and Palestinians both started to develop a national consciousness and mobilized to achieve national goals.

Because Jews were spread across the world (in diaspora), the Jewish national movement, or Zionist trend, sought to identify a place where Jews could come together through the process of immigration and settlement. Palestine seemed the logical and optimal place because it was the site of Jewish origin. The Zionist movement began in 1882 with the first wave of European Jewish immigration to Palestine.

At that time, the land of Palestine was part of the Ottoman Empire. This area did not constitute a single political unit, however. The northern districts of Acre and Nablus were part of the province of Beirut. The district of Jerusalem was under the direct authority of the Ottoman capital of Istanbul because of the international significance of the cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem as religious centers for Muslims, Christians and Jews. According to Ottoman records, in 1878 there were 462,465 subject inhabitants of the Jerusalem, Nablus and Acre districts: 403,795 Muslims (including Druze), 43,659 Christians and 15,011 Jews. In addition, there were perhaps 10,000 Jews with foreign citizenship (recent immigrants to the country) and several thousand Muslim Arab nomads (Bedouin) who were not counted as Ottoman subjects. The great majority of the Arabs (Muslims and Christians) lived in several hundred rural villages. Jaffa and Nablus were the largest and economically most important towns with majority-Arab populations.

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, most Jews living in Palestine were concentrated in four cities with religious significance: Jerusalem, Hebron, Safed and Tiberias. Most of them observed traditional, orthodox religious practices. Many spent their time studying religious texts and depended on the charity of world Jewry for survival. Their attachment to the land was religious rather than national, and they were not involved in—or supportive of—the Zionist movement that began in Europe and was brought to Palestine by immigrants. Most of the Jews who emigrated from Europe lived a more secular lifestyle and were committed to the goals of creating a modern Jewish nation and building an independent Jewish state. By the outbreak of World War I (1914), the population of Jews in Palestine had risen to about 60,000, about 36,000 of whom were recent settlers. The Arab population in 1914 was 683,000.

## The British Mandate in Palestine

By the early years of the twentieth century, Palestine had become a trouble spot of competing territorial claims and political interests. The Ottoman Empire was weakening, and European powers were strengthening their grip on areas along the eastern Mediterranean, including Palestine. During 1915–1916, as World War I was underway, the British high commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, secretly corresponded with Husayn ibn ‘Ali, the patriarch of the Hashemite family and Ottoman governor of Mecca and Medina. McMahon convinced Husayn to lead an Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire, which was aligned with Germany against Britain and France in the war. McMahon promised that if the Arabs supported Britain in the war, the British government would support the establishment of an independent Arab state under Hashemite rule in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire, including Palestine. The Arab revolt, led by Husayn’s son Faysal and T. E. Lawrence (“Lawrence of Arabia”), was successful in defeating the Ottomans, and Britain took control over much of this area during World War I.

But Britain made other promises during the war that conflicted with the Husayn-McMahon understandings. In 1917, the British foreign minister, Lord Arthur Balfour, issued a declaration (the Balfour Declaration) announcing his government’s support for the establishment of “a Jewish national home in Palestine.” A third promise, in the form of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, was a secret deal between Britain and France to carve up the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire and divide control of the region.

After the war, Britain and France convinced the new League of Nations (precursor to the United Nations), in which they were the dominant powers, to grant them quasi-colonial authority over former Ottoman territories. The British and French regimes were known as mandates. France obtained a mandate over Syria, carving out Lebanon as a separate state with a (slight) Christian majority. Britain obtained a mandate over Iraq, as well as the area that now comprises Israel, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and Jordan.

In 1921, the British divided this latter region in two: East of the Jordan River became the Emirate of Transjordan, to be ruled by Faysal’s brother ‘Abdallah, and west of the Jordan River became the Palestine

Mandate. It was the first time in modern history that Palestine became a unified political entity.

Throughout the region, Arabs were angered by Britain’s failure to fulfill its promise to create an independent Arab state, and many opposed British and French control as a violation of Arabs’ right to self-determination. In Palestine, the situation was more complicated because of the British promise to support the creation of a Jewish national home. The rising tide of European Jewish immigration, land purchases and settlement in Palestine generated increasing resistance by Palestinian peasants, journalists and political figures. They feared that the influx of Jews would lead eventually to the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Palestinian Arabs opposed the British Mandate because it thwarted their aspirations for self-rule, and they opposed massive Jewish immigration because it threatened their position in the country.

In 1920 and 1921, clashes broke out between Arabs and Jews in which roughly equal numbers from both communities were killed. In the 1920s, when the Jewish National Fund purchased large tracts of land from absentee Arab landowners, the Arabs living in these areas were evicted. These displacements led to increasing tensions and violent confrontations between Jewish settlers and Arab peasant tenants.

In 1928, Muslims and Jews in Jerusalem began to clash over their respective communal religious rights at the Western (or Wailing) Wall. The Wall, the sole remnant of the second Jewish Temple, is the holiest site in the Jewish religious tradition. Above the Wall is a large plaza known as the Temple Mount, the location of the two ancient Israelite temples (though no archaeological evidence has been found for the First Temple). The place is also sacred to Muslims, who call it the Noble Sanctuary. It now hosts the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, believed to mark the spot from which the Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven on a winged horse, al-Buraq, that he tethered to the Western Wall, which bears the horse’s name in the Muslim tradition.

On August 15, 1929, members of the Betar Jewish youth movement (a pre-state organization of the Revisionist Zionists) demonstrated and raised a Zionist flag over the Western Wall. Fearing that the Noble Sanctuary was in danger, Arabs responded by attacking Jews in Jerusalem, Hebron and Safed. Among

the dead were 64 Jews in Hebron. Their Muslim neighbors saved many others. The Jewish community of Hebron ceased to exist when its surviving members left for Jerusalem. During a week of communal violence, 133 Jews and 115 Arabs were killed and many wounded.

European Jewish immigration to Palestine increased dramatically after Hitler's rise to power in Germany in 1933, leading to new land purchases and Jewish settlements. Palestinian resistance to British control and Zionist settlement climaxed with the Arab revolt of 1936–1939, which Britain suppressed with the help of Zionist militias and the complicity of neighboring Arab regimes. After crushing the Arab revolt, the British reconsidered their governing policies in an effort to maintain order in an increasingly tense environment. They issued the 1939 White Paper (a statement of government policy) limiting future Jewish immigration and land purchases and promising independence in ten years, which would have resulted in a majority-Arab Palestinian state. The Zionists regarded the White Paper as a betrayal of the Balfour Declaration and a particularly egregious act in light of the desperate situation of the Jews in Europe, who were facing extermination. The 1939 White Paper marked the end of the British-Zionist alliance. At the same time, the defeat of the Arab revolt and the exile of the Palestinian political leadership meant that the Palestinians were politically disorganized during the crucial decade in which the future of Palestine was decided.

### **The United Nations Partition Plan**

Following World War II, hostilities escalated between Arabs and Jews over the fate of Palestine and between the Zionist militias and the British army. Britain decided to relinquish its mandate over Palestine and requested that the recently established United Nations determine the future of the country. But the British government's hope was that the UN would be unable to arrive at a workable solution, and would turn Palestine back to them as a UN trusteeship. A UN-appointed committee of representatives from various countries went to Palestine to investigate the situation. Although members of this committee disagreed on the form that a political resolution should take, the majority concluded that the country should be divided (partitioned) in order to satisfy the needs and demands of both Jews and Palestinian Arabs. At the end of 1946,

1,269,000 Arabs and 608,000 Jews resided within the borders of Mandate Palestine. Jews had acquired by purchase about 7 percent of the total land area of Palestine, amounting to about 20 percent of the arable land.

On November 29, 1947, the UN General Assembly voted to partition Palestine into two states, one Jewish and the other Arab. The UN partition plan divided the country so that each state would have a majority of its own population, although a few Jewish settlements would fall within the proposed Arab state while hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs would become part of the proposed Jewish state. The territory designated for the Jewish state would be slightly larger than the Arab state (56 percent and 43 percent of Palestine, respectively, excluding Jerusalem), on the assumption that increasing numbers of Jews would immigrate there. According to the UN partition plan, the area of Jerusalem and Bethlehem was to become an international zone.

Publicly, the Zionist leadership accepted the UN partition plan, although they hoped somehow to expand the borders assigned to the Jewish state. The Palestinian Arabs and the surrounding Arab states rejected the UN plan and regarded the General Assembly vote as an international betrayal. Some argued that the UN plan allotted too much territory to the Jews. Most Arabs regarded the proposed Jewish state as a settler colony and argued that it was only because the British had permitted extensive Zionist settlement in Palestine against the wishes of the Arab majority that the question of Jewish statehood was on the international agenda at all.

Fighting began between the Arab and Jewish residents of Palestine days after the adoption of the UN partition plan. The Arab military forces were poorly organized, trained and armed. In contrast, Zionist military forces, although numerically smaller, were well organized, trained and armed. By early April 1948, the Zionist forces had secured control over most of the territory allotted to the Jewish state in the UN plan and begun to go on the offensive, conquering territory beyond the partition borders, in several sectors.

On May 15, 1948, the British evacuated Palestine, and Zionist leaders proclaimed the State of Israel. Neighboring Arab states (Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Iraq) then invaded Israel, claiming that they sought to

“save” Palestine from the Zionists. Lebanon declared war but did not invade. In fact, the Arab rulers had territorial designs on Palestine and were no more anxious than the Zionists to see a Palestinian state emerge. During May and June 1948, when the fighting was most intense, the outcome of this first Arab-Israeli war was in doubt. But after arms shipments from Czechoslovakia reached Israel, its armed forces established superiority and conquered additional territories beyond the borders the UN partition plan had drawn up for the Jewish state.

In 1949, the war between Israel and the Arab states ended with the signing of armistice agreements. The country once known as Palestine was now divided into three parts, each under a different political regime. The boundaries between them were the 1949 armistice lines (the “Green Line”). The State of Israel encompassed over 77 percent of the territory. Jordan occupied East Jerusalem and the hill country of central Palestine (the West Bank). Egypt took control of the coastal plain around the city of Gaza (the Gaza Strip). The Palestinian Arab state envisioned by the UN partition plan was never established.

### **The Palestinian Refugees**

As a consequence of the fighting in Palestine/Israel between 1947 and 1949, over 700,000 Palestinians became refugees. The precise number of refugees is sharply disputed, as is the question of responsibility for their exodus. Many Palestinians have claimed that most were expelled in accordance with a Zionist plan to rid the country of its non-Jewish inhabitants. The official Israeli position holds that the refugees fled on orders from Arab political and military leaders. One Israeli military intelligence document indicates that through June 1948 at least 75 percent of the refugees fled due to military actions by Zionist militias, psychological campaigns aimed at frightening Arabs into leaving, and dozens of direct expulsions. The proportion of expulsions is likely higher since the largest single expulsion of the war—50,000 from Lydda and Ramle—occurred in mid-July. Only about 5 percent left on orders from Arab authorities. There are several well-documented cases of massacres that led to large-scale Arab flight. The most infamous atrocity occurred at Dayr Yasin, a village near Jerusalem, where the number of Arab residents killed in cold blood by right-wing Zionist militias was about 125.

### **Palestinians**

Today this term refers to the Arabs—Christian, Muslim and Druze—whose historical roots can be traced to the territory of Palestine as defined by the British mandate borders. Some 5.6 million Palestinians now live within this area, which is divided between the State of Israel, and the West Bank and Gaza; these latter areas were captured and occupied by Israel in 1967. Today, over 1.4 million Palestinians are citizens of Israel, living inside the country’s 1949 armistice borders and comprising about 20 percent of its population. About 2.6 million live in the West Bank (including 200,000 in East Jerusalem) and about 1.6 million in the Gaza Strip. The remainder of the Palestinian people, perhaps another 5.6 million, lives in diaspora, outside the country they claim as their national homeland.

The largest Palestinian diaspora community, approximately 2.7 million, is in Jordan. Many of them still live in the refugee camps that were established in 1949, although others live in cities and towns. Lebanon and Syria also have large Palestinian populations, many of whom still live in refugee camps. Many Palestinians have moved to Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf countries to work, and some have moved to other parts of the Middle East or other parts of the world. Jordan is the only Arab state to grant citizenship to the Palestinians who live there. Palestinians in Arab states generally do not enjoy the same rights as the citizens of those states. The situation of the refugees in Lebanon is especially dire; many Lebanese blame Palestinians for the civil war that wracked that country from 1975–1991, and demand that they be resettled elsewhere in order for the Lebanese to maintain peace in their country. Some elements of Lebanon’s Christian population are particularly anxious to rid the country of the mainly Muslim Palestinians because of their fear that the Palestinians threaten the delicate balance among the country’s religious groups. Palestinians in Syria have been caught up in violence since the uprising against the regime there started in 2011.

Although many Palestinians still live in refugee camps and slums, others have become economically successful. Palestinians now have the highest per capita rate of university graduates in the Arab world. Their diaspora experience contributed to a high level of politicization of all sectors of the Palestinian people,

though this phenomenon faded in the 2000s as political factionalism increased and the prospects of a Palestinian state receded.

### **Palestinian Citizens of Israel**

In 1948, only about 150,000 Palestinians remained in the area that became the State of Israel. They were granted Israeli citizenship and the right to vote. But in many respects they were and remain second-class citizens, since Israel defines itself as a Jewish state and the state of the Jewish people, and Palestinians are non-Jews. Until 1966 most of them were subject to a military government that restricted their movement and other rights (to work, speech, association and so on). Arabs were not permitted to become full members of the Israeli trade union federation, the Histadrut, until 1965. About 40 percent of their lands were confiscated by the state and used for development projects that benefited Jews primarily or exclusively. All of Israel's governments have discriminated against the Arab population by allocating far fewer resources for education, health care, public works, municipal government and economic development to the Arab sector.

Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel have had a difficult struggle to maintain their cultural and political identity in a state that officially regards expression of Palestinian or Arab national sentiment as subversive. Until 1967, they were entirely isolated from the Arab world and often were regarded by other Arabs as traitors for living in Israel. Since 1967, many have become more aware of their identity as Palestinians. One important expression of this identity was the organization of a general strike on March 30, 1976, designated as Land Day, to protest the continuing confiscation of Arab lands. The Israeli security forces killed six Arab citizens on that day. All Palestinians now commemorate it as a national day.

In recent years it has become illegal in Israel to commemorate the nakba—the expulsion or flight of over half the population of Arab Palestine in 1948. Israel's Central Elections Committee has several times used patently political criteria to rule that Arab citizens whose views it found objectionable may not run in parliamentary elections. While in all cases the decisions were overturned by the Supreme Court, they contributed to anti-Arab hysteria and anti-democratic

sentiment, which increased dramatically among Jewish Israelis after 2000.

### **The June 1967 War**

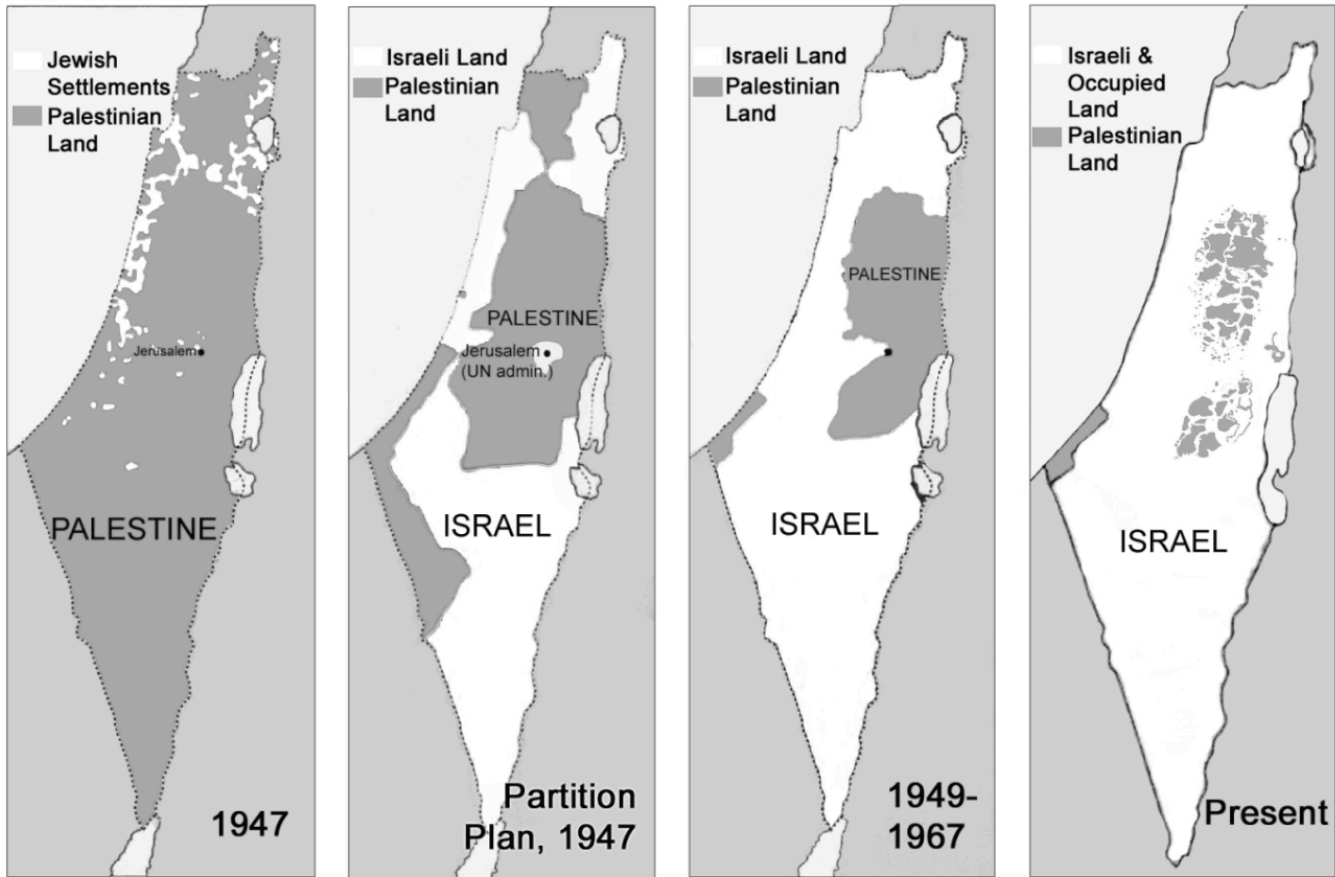
After 1949, although there was an armistice between Israel and the Arab states, the conflict continued and the region remained imperiled by the prospect of another war. The sense of crisis was fueled by a spiraling arms race as countries built up their military caches and prepared their forces (and their populations) for a future showdown. In 1956, Israel joined with Britain and France to attack Egypt, ostensibly to reverse the Egyptian government's nationalization of the Suez Canal (then under French and British control) and to neutralize Palestinian commando attacks on Israel from the Gaza Strip. Israeli forces captured Gaza and the Sinai Peninsula, but were forced to retreat to the armistice lines as a result of international pressure led by the US and the Soviet Union (in an uncharacteristic show of cooperation to avert further conflict in the Middle East). By the early 1960s, however, the region was becoming a hot spot of Cold War rivalry as the US and the Soviet Union were competing with one another for global power and influence.

In the spring of 1967, the Soviet Union misinformed the Syrian government that Israeli forces were massing in northern Israel to attack Syria. There was no such Israeli mobilization. But clashes between Israel and Syria had been escalating for about a year, and Israeli leaders had publicly declared that it might be necessary to bring down the Syrian regime if it failed to end Palestinian guerrilla attacks from Syrian territory.

Responding to a Syrian request for assistance, in May 1967 Egyptian troops entered the Sinai Peninsula bordering Israel. A few days later, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser asked the UN observer forces stationed between Israel and Egypt to redeploy from their positions. The Egyptians then occupied Sharm al-Sheikh at the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula and proclaimed a blockade of the Israeli port of Eilat on the Gulf of 'Aqaba, arguing that access to Eilat passed through Egyptian territorial waters. These measures shocked and frightened the Israeli public, which believed it was in danger of annihilation.

As the military and diplomatic crisis continued, on June 5, 1967, Israel preemptively attacked Egypt and Syria, destroying their air forces on the ground within a few hours. Jordan joined in the fighting belatedly, and

## Palestinian Loss of Land 1947 to Present



consequently was attacked by Israel as well. The Egyptian, Syrian and Jordanian armies were decisively defeated, and Israel captured the West Bank from Jordan, the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, and the Golan Heights from Syria.

The 1967 war, which lasted only six days, established Israel as the dominant regional military power. The speed and thoroughness of Israel's victory discredited the Arab regimes. In contrast, the Palestinian national movement emerged as a major actor after 1967 in the form of the political and military groups that made up the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

### UN Security Council Resolution 242

After the 1967 war, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 242, which notes the "inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force," and calls for Israeli withdrawal from lands seized in the war and the right of all states in the area to peaceful existence within secure and recognized boundaries. The grammatical construction of the French version of Resolution 242 says Israel should withdraw from "the territories,"

whereas the English version of the text calls for withdrawal from "territories." (Both English and French are official languages of the UN.) Israel and the United States use the English version to argue that Israeli withdrawal from some, but not all, the territory occupied in the 1967 war satisfies the requirements of this resolution.

For many years the Palestinians rejected Resolution 242 because it does not acknowledge their right to national self-determination or to return to their homeland. It calls only for a "just settlement" of the refugee problem without specifying what that phrase means. By calling for recognition of every state in the area, Resolution 242 entailed unilateral Palestinian recognition of Israel without reciprocal recognition of Palestinian national rights.

### The Occupied Territories

The West Bank and the Gaza Strip became distinct political units as a result of the 1949 armistice that divided the new Jewish state of Israel from other parts of Mandate Palestine. During 1948–1967, the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, was ruled by Jordan,

which annexed the area in 1950 and extended citizenship to Palestinians living there. In the same period, the Gaza Strip was under Egyptian military administration. In the 1967 war, Israel captured and occupied these areas.

Israel established a military administration to govern the Palestinian residents of the occupied West Bank and Gaza. Under this arrangement, Palestinians were denied many basic political rights and civil liberties, including freedoms of expression, the press and political association. Palestinian nationalism was criminalized as a threat to Israeli security, which meant that even displaying the Palestinian national colors was a punishable act. All aspects of Palestinian life were regulated, and often severely restricted. Even something as innocuous as the gathering of wild thyme (*za'tar*), a basic element of Palestinian cuisine, was outlawed by Israeli military orders.

Israeli policies and practices in the West Bank and Gaza have included extensive use of collective punishments such as curfews, house demolitions and closure of roads, schools and community institutions. Hundreds of Palestinian political activists have been deported to Jordan or Lebanon, tens of thousands of acres of Palestinian land have been confiscated, and thousands of trees have been uprooted.

Israel has relied on imprisonment as one of its key strategies to control the West Bank and Gaza and to thwart and punish Palestinian nationalist resistance to the occupation. The number of Palestinians arrested by Israel since 1967 is now approaching 1 million. Hundreds of thousands of the arrestees have been jailed, some without trial (administratively detained), but most after being prosecuted in the Israeli military court system. More than 40 percent of the Palestinian male population has been imprisoned at least once.

Torture of Palestinian prisoners has been a common practice since at least 1971. In 1999 Israel's High Court of Justice forbade the "routine" use of such techniques. Dozens of people have died in detention from abuse or neglect. Israeli officials have claimed that harsh measures and high rates of incarceration are necessary to thwart terrorism. Israel regards all forms of Palestinian opposition to the occupation as threats to its national security, including non-violent methods like calling for boycotts, divestment and sanctions.

Israel has built 145 official settlements and about 100 unofficial settlement "outposts" and permitted 560,000 Jewish citizens to move to East Jerusalem and the West Bank (as of early 2013). These settlements are a breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention and other international laws governing military occupation of foreign territory. Many settlements are built on expropriated, privately owned Palestinian lands.

Israel justifies its violation of international law by claiming that the West Bank and the Gaza Strip are not technically "occupied" because they were never part of the sovereign territory of any state. According to this interpretation, Israel is but an "administrator" of territory whose status remains to be determined. The international community has rejected this official Israeli position and maintained that international law should apply in the West Bank and Gaza. But little effort has been mounted to enforce international law or hold Israel accountable for violations it has engaged in since 1967.

Some 7,800 Jewish settlers in the Gaza Strip were repatriated in 2005 following an Israeli government decision to "evacuate" the territory. Since then, Israel has maintained control of exit and entry of people and goods to the Gaza Strip and control of its air space and coastal waters.

## **Jerusalem**

The UN's 1947 partition plan advocated that Jerusalem become an international zone. In the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, Israel took control of the western part of Jerusalem, while Jordan took the eastern part, including the old walled city containing important Jewish, Muslim and Christian religious sites. The 1949 armistice line cut the city in two.

In June 1967, Israel captured East Jerusalem from Jordan and almost immediately annexed it. It reaffirmed its annexation in 1981.

Israel regards Jerusalem as its "eternal capital." Most of the international community considers East Jerusalem part of the occupied West Bank. Palestinians envision East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state.

## **The Palestine Liberation Organization**

The Arab League established the PLO in 1964 as an effort to control Palestinian nationalism while appearing to champion the cause. The Arab defeat in

the 1967 war enabled younger, more militant Palestinians to take over the PLO and gain some independence from the Arab regimes.

The PLO includes different political and armed groups with varying ideological orientations. Yasser Arafat was PLO chairman from 1968 until his death in 2004. He was also the leader of Fatah, the largest PLO group. The other major groups are the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and, in the Occupied Territories, the Palestine Peoples Party (PPP, formerly the Communist Party). Despite these factional differences, the majority of Palestinians regarded the PLO as their representative until it began to lose significance after the 1993 Oslo accords and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994. Hamas, which is an Islamist group and not a component of the PLO, emerged in the late 1980s. The rise of Hamas, especially in the 2000s, further diminished the authority of the PLO.

In the late 1960s, the PLO's primary base of operations was Jordan. In 1970–1971, fighting with the Jordanian army drove the PLO leadership out of the country, forcing it to relocate to Lebanon. When the Lebanese civil war started in 1975, the PLO became a party to the conflict. After the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the PLO leadership was expelled from the country, relocating once more to Tunisia.

Until 1993, Israel did not acknowledge Palestinian national rights or recognize the Palestinians as an independent party to the conflict. Israel refused to negotiate with the PLO, arguing that it was nothing but a terrorist organization, and insisted on dealing only with Jordan or other Arab states. It rejected the establishment of a Palestinian state, demanding that Palestinians be incorporated into the existing Arab states. This intransigence ended when Israeli representatives entered into secret negotiations with the PLO, which led to the 1993 Oslo Declaration of Principles.

### **The October 1973 War and the Role of Egypt**

In 1971, Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat indicated to UN envoy Gunnar Jarring that he was willing to sign a peace agreement with Israel in exchange for the return of Egyptian territory lost in 1967 (the Sinai Peninsula). When this overture was ignored by Israel and the US, Egypt and Syria decided to act to break

the political stalemate. They attacked Israeli forces in the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights in October 1973, on the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur. The surprise attack caught Israel off guard, and the Arabs achieved some early military victories. This turn of events prompted American political intervention, along with sharply increased military aid to Israel.

After the war, US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger pursued a diplomatic strategy of limited bilateral agreements to secure partial Israeli withdrawals from the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights while avoiding negotiations on more difficult issues, including the fate of the West Bank and Gaza. This strategy also positioned the United States as the sole mediator and most significant external actor in the conflict, a position it has sought to maintain ever since.

Sadat eventually decided to initiate a separate overture to Israel. He traveled to Jerusalem on November 19, 1977 and gave a speech to the Knesset. It was a powerful symbol of recognition that Israel has been expecting other Arab heads of state to repeat, without due consideration of the particular circumstances that brought Sadat to Jerusalem.

In September 1978, President Jimmy Carter invited Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin to the Camp David presidential retreat in Maryland. They worked out two agreements: a framework for peace between Egypt and Israel, and a general framework for resolution of the Middle East crisis, in other words, the Palestinian question.

The first agreement formed the basis of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty signed in 1979. The second agreement proposed to grant autonomy to the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip for a five-year interim period, after which the final status of the territories would be negotiated.

Only the Egyptian-Israeli part of the Camp David accords was implemented. The Palestinians and other Arab states rejected the autonomy concept because it did not guarantee full Israeli withdrawal from areas captured in 1967 or the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. In any case, Israel sabotaged negotiations by continuing to confiscate Palestinian lands and build new settlements in violation of the commitments Begin made to Carter at Camp David.

### **The First Intifada**



In December 1987, the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza began a mass uprising against the Israeli occupation. This uprising, or *intifada* (which means “shaking off” in Arabic), was not started or orchestrated by the PLO leadership in Tunis. Rather, it was a popular mobilization that drew on the organizations and institutions that had developed under occupation.

The *intifada* involved hundreds of thousands of people, many with no previous resistance experience, including children and teenagers. For the first few years, it involved many forms of civil disobedience, including massive demonstrations, general strikes, refusal to pay taxes, boycotts of Israeli products, political graffiti and the establishment of underground “freedom schools” (since regular schools were closed by the military as reprisals for the uprising). It also included stone throwing, Molotov cocktails and the erection of barricades to impede the movement of Israeli military forces.

*Intifada* activism was organized through popular committees under the umbrella of the United National Leadership of the Uprising. This broad-based resistance drew unprecedented international attention to the situation facing Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, and challenged the occupation as never before.

Under the leadership of Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin, Israel tried to smash the *intifada* with “force, power and beatings.” Army commanders instructed troops to break the bones of demonstrators. From 1987 to 1991, Israeli forces killed over 1,000 Palestinians, including over 200 under the age of 16.

Israel also engaged in massive arrests; during this period, Israel had the highest per capita prison population in the world. By 1990, most of the Palestinian leaders of the uprising were in jail and the *intifada* lost its cohesive force, although it continued for several more years.

During the first *intifada*, Israel instituted a secret policy of targeted killing in the Occupied Territories. These operations were conducted by undercover units who disguised themselves as Arabs to approach and execute their targets, or by snipers who killed from a distance. To evade war crimes allegations, for years Israel’s targeted killing policy was staunchly denied.

Political divisions and violence within the Palestinian community escalated, especially the growing rivalry

between the various PLO factions and Islamist organizations ( Hamas and Islamic Jihad). Palestinian militants killed over 250 Palestinians suspected of collaborating with the occupation authorities and about 100 Israelis during this period.

The *intifada* made clear that the status quo was untenable and shifted the center of gravity of Palestinian political initiative from the PLO leadership in Tunis to the Occupied Territories. Palestinian activists demanded that the PLO adopt a clear political program to guide the struggle for independence. In response, the Palestine National Council (the PLO’s leading body) convened in Algeria in November 1988, recognized the State of Israel, proclaimed an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and renounced terrorism. The Israeli government did not respond to these gestures, claiming that nothing had changed and that the PLO remained a terrorist organization with which it would never negotiate. The US did acknowledge that the PLO’s policies had changed, but did little to encourage Israel to abandon its inflexible stand.

### **The Negotiation Process**

US and Israeli failure to respond meaningfully to PLO moderation resulted in the PLO’s opposition to the 1991 US-led attack on Iraq, which had occupied Kuwait. After the 1991 Gulf war, the PLO was diplomatically isolated. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia cut off financial support they had been providing, bringing the PLO to the brink of crisis.

The US sought to stabilize its position in the Middle East by promoting a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The administration of President George H. W. Bush pressed a reluctant Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir to open negotiations with the Palestinians and the Arab states at a multilateral conference convened in Madrid, Spain, in October 1991. Shamir’s conditions, which the US accepted, were that the PLO be excluded from the talks and that the Palestinian desires for independence and statehood not be directly addressed.

In subsequent negotiating sessions held in Washington, Palestinians were represented by a delegation from the Occupied Territories. Residents of East Jerusalem were barred by Israel from the delegation on the grounds that the city is part of Israel. Although the PLO was formally excluded, its leaders regularly consulted with

and advised the Palestinian delegation. Although Israeli and Palestinian delegations met many times, little progress was achieved. Prime Minister Shamir announced after he left office that his strategy was to drag out the Washington negotiations for ten years, by which time the annexation of the West Bank would be an accomplished fact.

Human rights conditions in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip deteriorated dramatically after Yitzhak Rabin became prime minister in 1992. This development undermined the legitimacy of the Palestinian delegation to the Washington talks and prompted the resignation of several delegates.

Lack of progress in the Washington talks, human rights violations and economic decline in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip accelerated the growth of a radical Islamist challenge to the PLO. Violent attacks against Israeli military and civilian targets by Hamas and Islamic Jihad further exacerbated tensions. The first suicide bombing occurred in 1993.

Before the *intifada*, Israeli authorities had enabled the development of Islamist organizations as a way to divide Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. But as the popularity of Islamists grew and challenged the moderation of the PLO, Israel came to regret this policy of encouraging political Islam as an alternative to the PLO's secular nationalism. Eventually, Rabin came to believe that Hamas, Jihad and the broader Islamic movements of which they were a part posed more of a threat to Israel than the PLO.

### **The Oslo Accords**

The fear of radical Islam and the stalemate in the Washington talks brought the Rabin government to reverse the long-standing Israeli refusal to negotiate with the PLO. Consequently, Israel initiated secret negotiations directly with PLO representatives. The talks were conducted in Oslo, Norway. They produced the Israel-PLO Declaration of Principles, which was signed in Washington in September 1993.

The Declaration of Principles was based on mutual recognition of Israel and the PLO. It established that Israel would withdraw from the Gaza Strip and Jericho, with additional withdrawals from further unspecified areas of the West Bank during a five-year interim period. The key issues—such as the extent of the territories to be ceded by Israel, the nature of the Palestinian entity to be established, the future of the

Israeli settlements and settlers, water rights, the resolution of the refugee problem and the status of Jerusalem—were set aside to be discussed in final status talks.

In 1994 the PLO formed a Palestinian Authority (PA) with “self-governing” (i.e., municipal) powers in the areas from which Israeli forces were redeployed. In January 1996, elections were held for the Palestinian Legislative Council and for the presidency of the PA, which were won handily by Fatah and Yasser Arafat, respectively.

The PLO accepted this deeply flawed agreement with Israel because it was weak and had little diplomatic support in the Arab world. Both Islamist radicals and some local leaders in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip challenged Arafat's leadership and rejected the negotiations. Hamas introduced the tactic of suicide bombings in this period. Some were done in retaliation for Israeli attacks, including a 1994 massacre by an American-born Israeli settler of 29 Palestinians who were praying at the Ibrahim mosque in Hebron. Others seemed motivated by a wish to derail the Oslo process.

The Oslo accords set up a negotiating process without specifying an outcome. The process was supposed to have been completed by May 1999. During the Likud's return to power in 1996–1999, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu avoided engaging seriously in the Oslo process, which he fundamentally opposed.

A Labor-led coalition government headed by Prime Minister Ehud Barak came to power in 1999. Barak at first concentrated on reaching a peace agreement with Syria, a strategy aimed at weakening the Palestinians. When he failed to convince the Syrians to sign an agreement, Barak turned his attention to the Palestinian track.

During the protracted interim period of the Oslo process, Israel's Labor and Likud governments dramatically escalated settlement building and land confiscations in the Occupied Territories and constructed a network of bypass roads to enable Israeli settlers to travel from their settlements to Israel proper without passing through Palestinian-inhabited areas. These projects were understood by most Palestinians as marking out territory that Israel sought to annex in the final settlement. The Oslo accords contained no mechanism to block these unilateral actions or Israel's

violations of Palestinian human and civil rights in areas under its control.

Final status negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians only got underway in earnest in mid-2000. By then, a series of Israeli interim withdrawals left the Palestinian Authority with direct or partial control of some 40 percent of the West Bank and 65 percent of the Gaza Strip. The Palestinian areas were surrounded by Israeli-controlled territory with entry and exit controlled by Israel.

In July 2000, President Bill Clinton invited Barak and Arafat to Camp David to conclude negotiations on the long-overdue final status agreement. Before they met, Barak proclaimed his “red lines”: Israel would not return to its pre-1967 borders; East Jerusalem with its 175,000 (now about 200,000) Jewish settlers would remain under Israeli sovereignty; Israel would annex settlement blocs in the West Bank containing some 80 percent of the 180,000 (now about 360,000) Jewish settlers; and Israel would accept no legal or moral responsibility for the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem. The Palestinians, in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 242 and their understanding of the spirit of the Oslo Declaration of Principles, sought Israeli withdrawal from the vast majority of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, including East Jerusalem, and recognition of an independent state in those territories.

The distance between the two parties, especially on the issues of Jerusalem and refugees, made it impossible to reach an agreement at the Camp David summit. Although Barak offered a far more extensive proposal for Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank than any other Israeli leader had publicly considered, he insisted on maintaining Israeli sovereignty over East Jerusalem. This stance was unacceptable to the Palestinians and to most of the Muslim world. Arafat left Camp David with enhanced stature among his constituents because he did not yield to American and Israeli pressure. Barak returned home to face political crisis within his own government, including the departure of coalition partners who felt he had offered the Palestinians too much. But the Israeli taboo on discussing the future of Jerusalem was broken. Some Israelis began to realize for the first time that they would never achieve peace if they insisted on imposing their terms on the Palestinians; the majority came to believe that if that

was the case, Israel would have to learn to live with the conflict indefinitely.

## **The Second (al-Aqsa) Intifada**

The problems with the “peace process” initiated at Oslo, combined with the daily frustrations and humiliations inflicted upon Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, as well as corruption in the Palestinian Authority, converged to ignite a second *intifada* in late September 2000. On September 28, Likud candidate for prime minister Ariel Sharon visited the Temple Mount (Noble Sanctuary) accompanied by 1,000 armed guards. In light of Sharon’s well-known call for maintaining Israel’s annexation of East Jerusalem, this move provoked large Palestinian protests in Jerusalem. The following day, Palestinians threw rocks at Jews praying at the Western Wall. Israeli police then stormed the Temple Mount and killed at least four and wounded 200 unarmed protesters. By the end of the day Israeli forces killed three more Palestinians in Jerusalem.

These killings inaugurated demonstrations and clashes across the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In October there were widespread solidarity demonstrations and a general strike in Arab and mixed towns inside Israel, in the course of which police killed 12 unarmed Palestinian citizens of Israel.

The second *intifada* was much bloodier than the first. During the first three weeks of the uprising, Israeli forces shot 1 million live bullets at unarmed Palestinian demonstrators. It was a conscious escalation in the use of force designed to avoid a protracted civil uprising, like the first *intifada*, and the international sympathy it won the Palestinians. On some occasions, armed PA policemen, often positioned at the rear of unarmed demonstrations, returned fire.

Israel characterized the spreading protests as acts of aggression. Soon, the use of force expanded to include tanks, helicopter gunships and even F-16 fighter planes. The Israeli army attacked PA installations in Ramallah, Gaza and elsewhere. Civilian neighborhoods were subjected to shelling and aerial bombardment.

Officials justified waging full-scale war on Palestinians in the Occupied Territories by arguing that the law enforcement model (policing and riot control) was no longer viable because the military was “out” of Palestinian areas, and because Palestinians possessed

(small) arms and thus constituted a foreign “armed adversary.” Officials described the second *intifada* as an “armed conflict short of war,” and claimed that Israel had a self-defense right to attack an “enemy entity,” while denying that those stateless enemies had any right to use force, even in self-defense.

In November 2000 Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and then later the PFLP and the Fatah-affiliated al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, began conducting suicide bombings and other armed operations. There were over 150 such attacks from 2000 through 2005, compared to 22 incidents from 1993 to 1999 by Islamist opponents of the Oslo process.

Palestinian-Israeli negotiations resumed briefly (importantly, with no US presence) at Taba (in the Sinai) in January 2001. The parties came “painfully close” to a final agreement, according to the lead negotiators, before they were called off by Barak in advance of the early elections he had called for prime minister to forestall a likely vote of no confidence in the Knesset. Ariel Sharon handily won the 2001 election.

Sharon’s first term as premier coincided with a particularly violent stretch of the second *intifada*. A cycle of targeted killings of Palestinian militants and Palestinian attacks inside Israel culminated in a suicide bombing in Netanya on March 27, 2002, during the Passover holiday. The attack killed 30 Israelis. In retaliation, Israel launched Operation Defensive Shield, a full-scale tank invasion of the West Bank that lasted for several weeks. Armored Caterpillar bulldozers razed swathes of the Jenin refugee camp and tanks ringed the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Meanwhile, Israeli forces imposed all-day curfews in seven of the West Bank’s eight major towns.

Israel justified this offensive as hot pursuit of terrorist suspects, with the full backing of the George W. Bush administration in Washington. The US bucked the trend of international opinion, which was generally critical of Israel’s operation. A second, shorter tank invasion occurred in June.

The Likud Party dominated Israeli politics for the next decade. Its ascendancy marked the end of the Oslo “peace process” for all practical purposes, since the Likud unequivocally opposed establishing a Palestinian state or making “territorial compromises.” Many, if not most, Palestinians also came to reject the limitations of

the Oslo Declaration of Principles and its two decades of “process” without peace or a Palestinian state. Nonetheless, the term “peace process” continues to be used, primarily as a vehicle for asserting US control over Palestinian-Israeli negotiations.

### **The 2002 Arab Peace Plan**

In 2002, at the Beirut summit of the Arab League, all the Arab states except Libya endorsed a peace initiative proposed by Saudi Arabia. The plan offered an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict, including recognition of Israel, peace agreements and normal relations with all the Arab states, in exchange for a full Israeli withdrawal from all the territories occupied since 1967, including the Golan Heights, “a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem to be agreed upon in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 194,” and establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem as its capital. The Arab League renewed its peace initiative in 2007.

By 2002 the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty was in place for nearly a quarter of a century. In 1994 Jordan signed a peace treaty with Israel; in 1994 and 1996 Israel established mutual “interest sections” with Morocco and Tunisia; in 1994 an Israeli delegation visited Bahrain; in 1996 and 1998 Oman and Qatar initiated trade relations with Israel. On the Arab side, these steps were undertaken in anticipation of a Palestinian-Israeli peace agreement. Only the treaties with Egypt and Jordan survived the outbreak of the second *intifada*.

The offer of recognition and normal relations was a substantial innovation in the Arab diplomatic lexicon. Just as important was the proposal for “a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem.” While the Arab League document refers to the UN resolution calling on Israel to allow Palestinians who wish to live in peace to return to their homes, it does not use the term “right to return” and therefore implies that peace would not require the return of all the refugees. Nonetheless, Sharon rebuffed the Arab initiative and Benjamin Netanyahu, who became prime minister in 2006, rejected it again in 2007. Mahmoud Abbas, who succeeded Yasser Arafat as Palestinian Authority president, enthusiastically supported the Arab League proposals and urged the US to embrace them. In 2009 President Barack Obama announced that he would “incorporate” the Arab proposals into his

administration's Middle East policy. But no public statement by the Obama administration suggests any substantive step in this direction.

## **The Separation Barrier**

In 2002 Prime Minister Sharon authorized the construction of a barrier ostensibly separating Israel and the West Bank. Sharon reluctantly embraced the concept of a separation barrier only when he understood that it was demographically impossible for Israel to annex all of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and remain a majority Jewish state. In contrast, the concept of "separation" ("us here, them there," as Yitzhak Rabin put it) was long a principle of labor Zionism.

The separation barrier runs mostly to the east of the Green Line marking the border between Israel and the West Bank. Palestinians refer to the barrier as the "apartheid wall." It cuts communities in two, blocks routes of travel even within towns and villages, and has totally reconfigured the geography of the West Bank. About 95 percent of the barrier consists of an elaborate system of electronic fences, patrol roads and observation towers constructed on a path as much as 300 meters wide; about 5 percent, mostly around Qalqilya and Jerusalem, consists of an 8-meter-high concrete wall.

The area between the Green Line and the barrier—about 9.5 percent of the West Bank—is known as the "seam zone" and has been a closed military area since 2003, functionally detaching it from the West Bank and annexing it to Israel. Israeli officials insist that this wall is essential to preserve and defend Israeli security. In 2004, the case of the wall was taken before the International Court of Justice for an advisory opinion. The ICJ ruled that the wall is "disproportionate" and therefore constitutes a violation of international law.

## **Popular Resistance**

Dozens of Palestinian villages just east of the "seam zone" in the West Bank have engaged in popular resistance to protest the barrier's isolation or confiscation of their agricultural lands. Villagers have mounted demonstrations and other efforts to stop bulldozers from digging the foundations of the barrier. They have chained themselves to olive trees to prevent their being uprooted, cut the barrier open in sections

where it is a fence, and painted graffiti on sections of the barrier where it is a concrete wall.

The International Solidarity Movement and thousands of Israelis, many of them organized by Ta'ayush/Palestinian-Israeli Partnership and Anarchists Against the Wall, have supported the Palestinian popular resistance and regularly participated in its activities. The four-month "peace camp" at the village of Masha in the spring and summer of 2003 and similar efforts in several other villages were critical experiences in forging solidarity among Palestinians, Israelis and internationals. Living and struggling together with Palestinians at this level of intensity for a protracted period raised the consciousness of the hundreds of Israeli participants to an entirely new level.

As a result of the popular resistance, the villages of Budrus and Bil'in, which became internationally renowned due to award-winning documentary films about their struggle, as well as several other villages, regained some of the lands that had been confiscated for construction of the separation barrier.

## **The Road Map and the Quartet**

On June 24, 2002, President George W. Bush delivered a speech calling for an independent Palestinian state living side by side with Israel in peace. Although this "two-state solution" had been the effective policy of the Clinton administration, Bush's speech was the first time the United States officially endorsed that vision for ending the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. To advance this goal, the Bush administration proposed a "road map" beginning with mutual steps, including an end to violence and political reform by the Palestinian Authority and withdrawal from Palestinian cities and a settlement freeze by Israel.

The road map's implementation was to be supervised by a Quartet composed of the United States, Great Britain, Russia, and the UN. In 2003, British Prime Minister Tony Blair conditioned his support for the impending US invasion of Iraq on a renewed international effort to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The road map was apparently the Bush administration's response.

Efforts to implement the road map were delayed for one year in order to allow Ariel Sharon and the Likud to win the elections of January 2003 without the obstacle of an American-sponsored plan for a Palestinian state. This lag also enabled the United

States to carry out its invasion of Iraq and allowed a new Palestinian Authority cabinet led by Mahmoud Abbas to be installed. Israel and the United States refused to deal with Yasser Arafat, who was confined to his Ramallah headquarters by Israeli forces.

After the road map was announced on April 30, 2003, Israel submitted a list of 14 reservations. Although this list amounted to a rejection of the plan, the Bush administration pretended that both parties accepted it and renewed peace talks began on July 1. Negotiations soon stalled, however, due to an escalation of violence.

Despite the freezing of the road map, Prime Minister Sharon had begun to realize that Israel could not remain a Jewish state and control millions of Palestinians indefinitely. In early 2004 he announced his intention to withdraw Israeli forces unilaterally from the Gaza Strip. The Bush administration supported this plan.

President Bush gave additional diplomatic support by writing a letter to Sharon on April 4, 2004, stating: "In light of new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli population centers, it is unrealistic that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949, and all previous efforts to negotiate a two-state solution have reached the same conclusion." Bush also stated that a resolution to the Palestinian refugee issue would have to be found in a Palestinian state.

In practical terms the United States had long accepted Israeli annexation of many of the Israeli settlements established since 1967 and supported Israel's rejection of the Palestinian refugees' "right to return" to their homes inside Israel. Nonetheless, Bush's letter was a dramatic shift—in Israel's favor—in formal US policy on two key issues.

### **Israel's "Withdrawal" from the Gaza Strip**

In 2005 the Likud Party split over disagreements about the future of Gaza and the West Bank. Sharon led a group out of the Likud, which joined with defectors from the Labor Party to form the Kadima (Forward) Party as a vehicle to conduct Israel's military redeployment out of the Gaza Strip. All Jewish settlements in Gaza were evacuated, and the Strip was sealed by a wall adhering closely to the Green Line. The only entry and exit for Palestinians was through several checkpoints totally controlled by Israel.

Despite official Israeli claims that this unilateral disengagement transformed Gaza into "no longer occupied territory," neither those changes nor anything that has transpired since has ended the occupation. Israel's occupation of Gaza continues to the present day because Israel continues to exercise "effective control" over this area; because the conflict that produced the occupation has not ended; and because an occupying state cannot unilaterally (and without international/diplomatic agreement) transform the international status of occupied territory except, perhaps, if that unilateral action terminates all manner of effective control. In addition, Israel continues to control the Palestinian Population Registry, which has the power and authority to define who is a "Palestinian" and who is a resident of Gaza.

Another manifestation of Israel's continuing occupation of Gaza is its periodic incursions to arrest residents and transport them into Israel. In the wake of Israel's unilateral disengagement, the Knesset enacted a new law to allow for the prosecution of Gazans in Israeli civil courts and their imprisonment inside Israel.

### **The 2006 Palestinian Elections and the Rise of Hamas**

In January 2005, following the death of Yasser Arafat, Mahmoud Abbas was elected president of the Palestinian Authority with the backing of his Fatah party. In the January 2006 elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council, Hamas won a majority of 77 out of 122 seats. Its victory over second-place Fatah in the popular vote was a much narrower 44.45 to 41.43 percent.

When announcing the road map, the Quartet had stipulated three conditions for participation in internationally sponsored negotiations. First, the parties had to recognize the State of Israel. Second, they had to accept all previous agreements signed between Israel and the Palestinians. And third, they had to renounce the use of violence for political ends. After the elections, Hamas said it was willing to extend a ceasefire with Israel. Its participation in the PA elections could be considered de facto acceptance of the Oslo accords, since those agreements had created the PA. And a senior Hamas figure said the party "did not oppose" the 2002 Arab League peace plan's offer to recognize the State of Israel. He did insist that such recognition come only when Israel recognized "the

rights of the Palestinian people.” The Quartet, together with Israel, has judged these positions as belligerent rather than as steps toward the Palestinian “moderation” they demand.

In response to the Hamas victory, the Quartet cut off its financial support for the Palestinian Authority. Israel began to withhold the tax revenue it collects on behalf of the PA. Because that revenue makes up over half the PA’s budget, these measures further weakened the already embattled Palestinian economy. More than 150,000 Palestinians in the West Bank are on the PA’s payroll and thousands of retirees also depend on PA pensions. Since 2006, the PA has frequently been unable to pay salaries on time or in full.

Ignoring the legitimacy of Hamas’ victory in indisputably free elections, the United States provided \$84 million in military aid to improve the fighting ability of the Presidential Guard loyal to Mahmoud Abbas. Palestinian security forces in the West Bank were retrained under a program led by US Marine Lt. Gen. Keith Dayton. Israel also permitted the Presidential Guard to enhance its arsenal.

In June 2007, with backing from the United States, Fatah moved to carry out a coup to oust Hamas from the Gaza Strip. Hamas preempted the move and after a pitched battle established its sole control over the territory. Governance of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip has been divided between Fatah and Hamas since then.

In the aftermath of the failed coup, Mahmoud Abbas dissolved the Palestinian Authority cabinet and appointed Salam Fayyad, a US-trained economist with experience in the International Monetary Fund, as prime minister. Fayyad undertook to transform the Palestinian economy along neoliberal lines, hoping that this “good governance” along with more aggressive pursuit of Hamas and Islamic Jihad by the “Dayton Brigades,” as they were known, would convince the West that the Palestinians deserved a state. Fayyad resigned in frustration in April 2013.

### **Israel’s Siege of the Gaza Strip**

On September 19, 2007, Israel declared that Gaza had become a “hostile territory.” With support from Egypt under President Husni Mubarak, Israel tightened its blockade of the Gaza Strip.

Israel’s 2008–2009 and 2012 assaults on the Gaza Strip enhanced Hamas’ stature and popularity among Palestinians and internationally. In May 2010 the moderate Islamist party ruling Turkey expressed its sympathy for Hamas by permitting the *Mavi Marmara*, sponsored by the Islamist Humanitarian Relief Foundation, to join a flotilla to relieve the besieged population of the Gaza Strip. Israel attacked the *Mavi Marmara*, killing eight unarmed Turkish citizens and one unarmed US citizen of Turkish origin. (A tenth victim fell into a coma and died in May 2014.) This incident led to the freeze of the previously warm relations between Turkey and Israel.

### **The Secret Olmert-Abbas Negotiations**

Ariel Sharon suffered a stroke that put him in a permanent coma in January 2006. (He would die eight years later.) Ehud Olmert replaced him as prime minister and leader of Kadima.

From December 2006 to September 2008 Olmert and Abbas conducted secret negotiations that came close to agreement. The contents of those talks were revealed to Al Jazeera and published as “the Palestine Papers” in January 2011. Since then, Olmert and Abbas have publicly confirmed that they agreed on demilitarization of the Palestinian state; stationing of an American-led international security force on the border between Palestine and Israel; sharing Jerusalem and an international committee to oversee its holy sites; and return of 10,000 Palestinian refugees to Israel and compensation and resettlement for the rest.

The key disagreement was over the extent of Israeli annexations in the West Bank. To avoid evacuating populous settlements, Olmert proposed 6.3 percent annexation and compensation for Palestine with Israeli territory equivalent to 5.8 percent, plus a 25-mile tunnel under Israel from the South Hebron Hills to Gaza. Olmert suggested he might go down to 5.9 percent. Abbas offered no more than 1.9 percent. The settlements of Ariel and Ma’ale Adumim, deep in the West Bank, as well as Efrat, were the main bones of contention.

The leaders expected that the United States would help them split the territorial difference, as Clinton had in 2000. But the talks were abandoned because of Israel’s invasion of Gaza in December 2008, Olmert’s indictment on corruption charges, and the victory of Benjamin Netanyahu and the Likud in the February

2009 Knesset elections. Netanyahu refused to continue the negotiations from where they had left off.

### **Palestinian Statehood and the UN**

Mahmoud Abbas, in his capacity as chairman of the PLO, has twice petitioned the UN to accept Palestine as a member state. In September 2011 he approached the Security Council and asked for full membership for Palestine. The petition did not receive the nine required votes. In any case, the United States would have vetoed the petition, preventing it from being passed on to the General Assembly for a vote. On November 29, 2012, the sixty-fifth anniversary of UN General Assembly Resolution 181 partitioning Palestine, Abbas asked the General Assembly to accept Palestine as a non-member observer state, the same status enjoyed by the Vatican (and Switzerland before it joined the UN). This request was overwhelmingly approved with 138 votes in favor and 9 against, with 41 abstentions. The no votes came from Israel, the United States, Canada, the Czech Republic, Panama, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru and Palau.

The vote had no effect on the ground. Israel continues to occupy the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. It did, however, open the possibility that Palestine could approach the International Criminal Court to pursue Israeli officials for crimes committed in the course of the occupation.

International opinion is nearly unanimous that a two-state solution, including a sovereign Palestinian state, is the best if not only way forward in the century-old conflict over historical Palestine. Yet there is no visible movement toward achieving this outcome.

One reason is the seismic rightward shift in Israeli Jewish opinion, which since the outbreak of the second intifada holds that no peace is possible with the Palestinians. Rather than “conflict resolution,” many feel, Israel should pursue a policy of “conflict management.” Partly to cater to such opinion, and partly to please the powerful settler lobby, recent Israeli governments have been unwilling to negotiate in good faith. Settlements grow apace.

A second reason is the split between Abbas and Hamas in the Palestinian body politic. Their dispute over strategy—negotiations versus resistance—divides ordinary Palestinians as well. Meanwhile, Palestinian citizens of Israel and refugees in neighboring Arab countries are adamant that a comprehensive peace

must include them. There are increasingly pressing questions about the viability of the two-state vision and even the utility of international law for delivering a minimally just “solution” to the question of Palestine.

Still a third reason is the lack of political will in Washington, where the Obama administration (for the time being, at least) retains stewardship of the “peace process.” In the spring of 2013, Secretary of State John Kerry began traveling frequently to the Middle East in an effort to restart Israeli-Palestinian negotiations aimed at a two-state solution. He succeeded in doing so, and at the time of writing maintains a brave face in public about the possibility of success. There is no indication, however, that a peace agreement is on the horizon. In January 2014 President Obama himself told the *New Yorker* that he estimated the chances of a successful conclusion to negotiations to be “less than 50–50.” In our judgment, the odds are much lower.

#### **Source:**

Beinin, Joel and Lisa Hajjar, “Palestine, Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A Primer.” (Washington, DC: Middle East Research and Information Project, 2014).

<https://merip.org/palestine-israel-primer/>