

The Israeli- Palestinian Conflict

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This text was prepared in January 2008 and does not take into account the evolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to date

The Origins of Zionism and Israel

Almost 2000 thousand years ago the Romans drove most Jews from their homeland, leaving behind a Jewish remnant in the land that came to be called Palestine. Scattered around of the world in the intervening millennia, the Jews were often ill-treated, but they clung to their faith and survived. Persecution strengthened the Jews' commitment to their ancient faith, and for many, became the foundation of the Zionist dream of the ingathering of Jews in their ancient homeland. No other long-established religious community, though dispersed over the world, has maintained such a deep connection to its geographic roots.

Zionism, as an expression of Jewish nationalism, was the culmination of chronic anti-Semitism and persecution of the Jews in western, Christian society. Launched in the late 19th century, its goal was a Jewish state in Palestine, where Jews could live freely in peace.

Critical support came from Britain toward the end of World War I through the Balfour Declaration in favor of creating a "homeland for the Jews in Palestine." Thereafter, Britain captured Palestine from the Ottoman Turks and fostered Jewish immigration.

The indigenous Palestinian Arabs, who were also developing national awareness, viewed the Jews as colonial usurpers who had come to take their land. Jewish and Palestinian militias clashed, and repeated British efforts to resolve the conflict failed.

World War II, the Holocaust, and the Creation of Israel

During World War II the Nazis murdered six million Jews. Afterwards, neither European states nor the U.S. opened their doors fully to the remnant of Europe's Jews. For the Zionists and many non-Jews, this made a Jewish state indispensable. In 1947 amid rising violence, including Jewish and Palestinian terrorism, the UN called for a Jewish-

Arab partition of Palestine. Neither side liked the idea, but the Zionists agreed. The Palestinians and the Arabs opposed it, claiming that it was unjust to ask the Arabs to pay for Hitler's atrocities against the Jews. Britain withdrew, and Israel proclaimed its independence in May 1948. War erupted and forces from six Arab states intervened.

Israel, with better arms, leadership and ultimately more troops, won the war. The creation of Israel was a triumph for the Jews after a history of tragedy. But it was a disaster for the Palestinians, who rejected the Zionists' claim to Palestine, bore no responsibility for anti-Semitism or the Holocaust, and bitterly resented their dispossession. Most Israeli historians now agree that 750,000 Palestinian civilians were either forced to leave Palestine or fled for their lives, becoming refugees in neighboring Arab areas. This tragic background of two suffering people, both victims of history and both seeking justice, must be grasped to understand and resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The 1967 War, Israel's Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, Advent of Israeli Settlements

After 1948, diplomacy to create an Arab-Israeli peace failed. Both sides created ultra-patriotic narratives that ignored or denied the history and suffering of the other. The conflict became increasingly polarized. And both sides missed opportunities for peace.

In June 1967, following a massive Egyptian military build up, Israel invaded the Sinai. Jordan and Syria joined the fighting, and Israel captured the Golan Heights, Gaza, and also East Jerusalem and the West Bank that Jordan had occupied since 1948. Israel won a decisive victory. UN Security Council Resolution 242 called on Israel to withdraw in exchange for a negotiated peace and agreed borders. Neither side agreed to implement 242.

Many in Israel warned that keeping the lands occupied in 1967 would prevent peace and threaten Israel's Jewish, democratic character. But Israel decided to settle Jews in the occupied Palestinian territories. The military supported settlement for security reasons, and messianic Jews were determined to re-settle their entire ancient homeland. Settlements were designed, through "facts on the ground," to foreclose Arab

sovereignty in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza. Presidents Nixon, Ford and Carter all declared that Israeli settlements violated international law which forbids civilian settlement in occupied territory.

Stalemate, Moves toward Peace, Failure of the Oslo Process

After 1967, the Palestinian Liberation Organization, led by Yasser Arafat in exile, emerged, vowing to destroy Israel and recover Palestine. Terrorism by Palestinians, such as the murder of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics, shocked the world but drew attention to their cause. In 1978, Egypt and Israel finally made peace and agreed to resolve the Palestinian issue. But the latter agreement was not implemented, and settlements continued. Israeli and Palestinian peace advocates began a quiet dialogue, and in 1988, the PLO, in an historic shift, accepted a two state solution, and Arafat renounced violence. A Palestinian uprising in 1987-91 and renewed U.S. diplomacy led to the Madrid Conference in 1991, where Israeli and Palestinian officials met for the first time. This process faltered, but it prompted secret talks between Israeli and PLO officials that led to the Oslo Declaration in 1993.

The Oslo process committed Israel and the PLO to mutual recognition and negotiations for a peace treaty over six years, but it did not define “peace.” There were intensive talks, but each side had different expectations and were internally divided. Settlement growth accelerated and the occupation became more oppressive. Following the killing by an Israeli settler of 29 Palestinians at a mosque in Hebron, Palestinian extremists began suicide bombings. An Israeli terrorist murdered Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, and confidence gave way to despair.

A last ditch effort to resolve all issues at the Camp David Summit in July 2000 failed amidst mutual recriminations. A more violent Palestinian uprising erupted spontaneously, provoking a harsh Israeli military response. Ariel Sharon, the architect of settlements, was elected Prime Minister in February 2001, vowing to crush the uprising.

In retrospect, the Summit was premature. President Clinton, Ehud Barak, and Yasser Arafat all share blame for its failure. Nevertheless, much conceptual progress was made during the Oslo process, for example, the Clinton “parameters” which both sides accepted with reservations, and

the talks at Taba in January 2001. Finally, the two sides began to focus on the crucial final status issues of borders, security, settlements, Jerusalem, and refugees. But time ran out.

Gaza Disengagement, Barrier, Fatah-Hamas Rupture

After four years of terrible violence that killed over 1,000 Israelis and 3,000 Palestinians, renewed Israeli military occupation of the territories, and stalemate, Ariel Sharon, facing a costly war and a swelling Palestinian population, withdrew 8,500 settlers from 20 Gaza settlements. He also began a vast “separation barrier” to prevent terrorist infiltration from the West Bank. But the barrier, which runs deep into the West Bank in places, also creates, *de facto*, a new border, annexes settlements, and cuts off Arab East Jerusalem from the West Bank.

Arafat died in 2004. His successor, Mahmoud Abbas, pledged non-violence and renewed negotiations. But Sharon rebuffed him and continued unilateral actions. In January 2006, Sharon suffered a debilitating stroke, and Hamas, the rejectionist Islamic party, won the Palestinian parliamentary elections. In April, 2006, Ehud Olmert formed a new Israeli government, vowed to finish the barrier, and promised further withdrawals from settlements to its east. However, he abandoned his withdrawal plan after the war between Israel and the Lebanese Hizbollah in mid-2006.

After Hamas won the Palestinian elections in January 2006, Israel, the U.S. and the EU, who have designated Hamas a terrorist organization, suspended contacts with the Palestinian Authority, except for President Mahmoud Abbas, and froze all economic aid. Renewed contacts and aid were conditioned on Hamas’ acceptance of Israel and rejection of violence. In February, 2007, the two Palestinian factions, Fatah and Hamas, established a national unity government, brokered by Saudi Arabia. But the U.S. and the EU opposed the unity government and still withheld aid and recognition. In June, 2007, Hamas seized control of Gaza after a violent clash with Fatah forces. Abbas dissolved the Hamas-led unity government, appointed a new Fatah cabinet under technocrat Salam Fayyad, and ended all contacts with Hamas and Gaza. The U.S. and EU recognized the new Fatah government in the West Bank and resumed aid to the West Bank.

The Problem and the Solution: Creating Two States

Real peace requires an agreement between Israelis and Palestinians to coexist in a land that is precious to both. Neither side can drive the other out and neither will leave voluntarily. Neither wants a single Jewish/Arab “binational” state that a few have advocated and that would almost certainly continue the conflict. The only solution lies in a division of the land into two states.

Negotiations must replace unilateral action. Peace can be achieved only through an agreement that meets the fundamental needs of both sides which are interdependent. Israel needs peace, security, and recognition by its neighbors in a Jewish, democratic state with a Jewish-majority. The Palestinians need an end to occupation and settlements and liberation in a sovereign, viable, contiguous, economically sustainable state with its capital in East Jerusalem. If peace and security for Israel in a Jewish state and freedom and sovereignty for the Palestinians are achieved, both peoples will win. If not, both face a grim future.

Settlements, Barrier, Palestinian Disunity, Block Two-State Peace

There cannot be a viable Palestinian state without evacuation of most Israeli settlements from the West Bank. In late 2007, there were about 268,000 Jewish settlers in the West Bank in about 127 settlements. Another 220,000 live in East Jerusalem. Settlements occupy much of the best land and dominate underground water resources. An extensive road network is dedicated exclusively to settlers. Hundreds of military checkpoints and the barrier severely restrict Palestinian mobility and economic activity. The result is severe hardship and poverty among over three million Palestinians that breed continued anger and violence against Israelis.

The barrier and the current pattern of settlements and settler roads create three scarcely connected Palestinian enclaves in the West Bank. No Palestinian leadership could accept these truncated areas as the basis for a state and peace. An agreement and a viable Palestinian state will require much more extensive withdrawal from settlements, a capital in East Jerusalem, and relocation of the barrier. It will also require freedom for the Palestinians to trade, an airport and a seaport, and a Gaza-West

Bank transport link. A peace agreement will also require reconciliation between Hamas, which now controls Gaza, and Fatah, which now controls the West Bank, and integration of all Palestinian security forces. The Israeli and U.S. policy of strangling Gaza with an economic boycott and a strict closure regime in order to strengthen Abbas and weaken Hamas is likely to backfire, since it thwarts Palestinian unity that is essential for negotiations toward a just and secure peace with Israel.

Jerusalem Must be Shared

Jerusalem is sacred to both Israelis and Palestinians. It contains many of the holiest Jewish, Muslim and Christian sites. Israel's capital is in West Jerusalem. East Jerusalem, where over 220,000 Palestinians live, is the Palestinian political, cultural, and economic center. A Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem and an agreed resolution of the status of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif area of the Old City are vital to a two state peace. Israel's plan to enclose and annex East Jerusalem would prevent peace, and would compromise Christian and Muslim interests in the Holy City.

Terrorism, Violence, and Security

Palestinian terrorism, and settlements backed by the Israeli military that create "facts on the ground", have devastated mutual hopes for peace. An end to terrorism and mutual violence in the West Bank and Gaza is essential to restore hope, renew negotiations, and make peace.

Refugees

Over 4.2 million Palestinian refugees now living in neighboring states and in camps in the Palestinian territories are one of the gravest unresolved problems. They or their forbearers were displaced in the 1948 and 1967 wars, and many demand the "right of return." Virtually all Israelis oppose this since it could threaten the Jewish character of Israel. There will be no peace if the Palestinians demand a literal implementation of the right of return. Many Palestinians would accept return to a new state of Palestine and/or compensation. There is no clear solution yet to this issue. But many believe it is soluble in the context of a peace agreement.

Convergence of Public Opinion on the Ingredients for Peace

Israeli and Palestinian political leaders have failed to make peace, and both sides are divided. But repeated polls show that that the people are ahead of their leaders. Majorities in both societies want a negotiated two state peace.

Israeli polls reflect disillusionment with the dream of “Greater Israel,” opposition to settlements, and even a willingness to share Jerusalem in exchange for real peace. Palestinian majorities have repeatedly supported peace based on a Palestinian state in the West Bank, Gaza, and a capital in East Jerusalem.

Over the past decades, intensive official and unofficial discussions have produced detailed, tentative solutions to all major issues that meet the fundamental needs of both sides. One example is the 2002 Geneva Accord, a “virtual” peace treaty negotiated by distinguished unofficial Israelis and Palestinians. Nevertheless, most Israelis and Palestinians lack hope that peace is possible, and discussion of the conflict is often partisan and polarized. Peace requires deeper dialogue and understanding of each other’s history and suffering. Fortunately, as *Searching for Peace in the Middle East* shows, many thoughtful Israelis and Palestinians are committed to peace and reconciliation. They need greater recognition and support.

Needed: More Active American Diplomacy

America has always been Israel’s closest friend and ally. The memory of anti-Semitism and the horrors of the Holocaust are key factors in this relationship. The U.S. must also show similar empathy and compassion for the Palestinians. Security for Israel in a Jewish state and liberation for Palestine are indivisible requirements for peace. Thus, if you are “pro-Israel” you must also be “pro-Palestine.”

History has shown that because of political divisions on both sides, Israelis and Palestinians are unlikely to make peace alone, without strong American mediation. Moreover, since former peace plans that relied on an interim, step by step “process” with no defined goal failed, a new approach is needed.

In November 2007, President George W. Bush sponsored a one day international meeting in Annapolis to renew negotiations for a two state peace agreement by the end of 2008. Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas were unable to agree in advance on an outline of solutions to the main issues on which they remain deeply divided, or even an agenda for the talks. Abbas faces strong opposition from Hamas, and Olmert from settlers and right wing elements in his coalition. Nevertheless, the talks could succeed if the Bush Administration is committed to strong, sustained American leadership and management of the process of a kind unprecedented in the last fifteen years. A successful peace process will also require reunification between Hamas in Gaza and Fatah in the West Bank.

At some stage, a bold U.S. peace plan, internationally supported and based on formulas that Israelis and Palestinians have developed over the years for resolving the basic issues through negotiations, may be needed. This would likely win strong support in both societies and from Americans. If such an initiative were pursued firmly and patiently, with empathy for the basic needs of both peoples, it could ultimately win support from citizens and political leaders on both sides.

Such a plan would also support U.S. national security interests in the Middle East, where violence and terrorism against America and the West often originate. It would counteract widespread hostility there and elsewhere against perceived weak and partisan American policy. Renewed U.S. leadership would support America's enduring commitment to the security of Israel, whose dream of peace in a Jewish, democratic state is threatened by occupation, settlements and the continuation of the conflict. Such new U.S. leadership would also bring hope to Palestinians for a state of their own, and reassure the world about America's commitment to justice, human rights, and freedom.

The logo consists of a dark grey rectangular box with a thin red border. Inside the box, the text "FOUNDATION FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE" is written in a white, serif, all-caps font, centered horizontally and vertically.

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The Foundation is a nonprofit organization dedicated to informing Americans about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and assisting in a peaceful solution, via two states and a shared Jerusalem, that brings security and justice for both peoples. The Foundation publishes the *Report on Israeli Settlement in the Occupied Territories*, as well as analysis and commentary, maps, charts, and other resources

1761 N Street Northwest • Washington, DC 20036 USA • 202-835-3650 • www.fmep.org