

A Brief History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict
By Jeremy Pressman
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The modern conflict between Jews and Arabs, the precursor to the Arab-Israeli conflict, began in 1881. At that time, about 565,000 Arabs and 24,000 Jews lived in Palestine; about 90% of the Arabs were Muslim while most of the rest were Christian.¹ A few Zionist Jews from outside the Holy Land decided they wanted to emigrate to Palestine, then a part of the Ottoman Empire. Zionism, one form of Jewish nationalism, called for the return of Jews to the Holy Land and the re-establishment of a Jewish homeland; the last Jewish state had been destroyed in 70 CE. The Zionists fled European anti-Semitism and rejected two other, more popular options for 19th century Jews: assimilation in Western Europe based on the progressive values of the Enlightenment and emigration to the United States.

By the Holy Land, I mean roughly the area that is today called Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. During World War I (1914-1918), the Ottoman Empire was defeated and collapsed. Britain then occupied the Holy Land and held it as a mandate from the League of Nations, a pre-cursor to the United Nations; the land was known as (Mandatory) Palestine. The British also took control of the land east of the Jordan River that is today the country of Jordan.

The Zionist cause drew support from early written works such as *Auto-emancipation* by Leo Pinsker (1881) and *Der Judenstaat* (meaning the State of the Jews) by Theodor Herzl (1896). After some initial wavering, Zionists focused on one spot for the homeland: Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel (virtually the same territory as that controlled by the Ottomans and called Palestine). Over the next few decades, Zionism moved on two fronts. In Europe and other capitals, Zionist leaders sought statehood through diplomacy. On the ground in the Holy Land, Zionists built new communities, bought land, welcomed new immigrants, and, for many, emphasized Jewish labor and agriculture. Herzl himself founded the World Zionist Organization and worked to internationalize Zionism until he died in 1904; Chaim Weizmann later came to symbolize this international diplomatic route. Over time, David Ben Gurion emerged as the leader of those building the Jewish presence on the ground in Palestine. He later became Israel's first and longest-serving prime minister.

Although one well-known Zionist slogan was “a land without a people for a people without a land,” many Arabs lived in Palestine. As Zionism was growing, local patriotic sentiments began to develop in Palestine. Given that most Arabs were Muslim, it is not surprising that they felt some connection to the Muslim Ottoman Empire and initially felt little pull toward a specific Arab or Palestinian nationalism that would conflict with their Ottoman imperial identity. Not surprisingly, then, some of the first Arab nationalists in Palestine were Christian Arabs. Naguib Azoury wrote *The Awakening of the Arab Nation* and new newspapers were published such as *al-Karmil* (1908) and *Filastin* (1911). At the same time, Arab literacy was comparatively low, a factor that tends to limit the spread of nationalist ideologies and national identity. The growth of the Jewish population and the land purchases, however, clearly motivated some Arabs to act, write, and speak out.

¹ Mark Tessler, *A history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 43 and 124.

The Zionist diplomats scored a major victory on November 2, 1917 when Lord Arthur J. Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary, wrote the following to Lord Rothschild, a Jewish leader: “His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.” This statement, known as the Balfour Declaration, clearly privileged the Zionist cause over the rights of the Arab inhabitants of Palestine. The British also made promises to the Arab side such as the Hussein-McMahon correspondence of 1915-1916. In the longer view of history, however, no other exchanges were given as much weight as the Balfour Declaration.

From 1881-1948, the Jewish community, known as the Yishuv, was much more effective than the Arab side at building state-like institutions. For instance, the Jewish Agency and its precursors functioned as a quasi-government. The Jewish National Fund raised capital to purchase land, often from absentee Arab landowners, for Jewish settlement. The city of Tel Aviv, established in 1909, rapidly became an urban center of Jewish life, and Jews established many agricultural collectives called kibbutzim. (or ‘kibbutz’ in the singular)

The Arab side was less organized and more reactive. In the 1920s and 1930s, Arab leaders never seemed to settle on whether they wanted to work with the British and accept the premise of two communities, Arab and Jewish, in Palestine or reject cooperation and lump the Jews and British together as colonial interlopers. To formally work with the British, the Arab side would have had to accept the terms of the British mandate which included the language of the Balfour Declaration. Arab leadership was usually based on family and clan ties rather than on political and ideological factors as among the Zionist leaders.

In 1936, Arab militias revolted against British rule. This Arab Revolt was crushed by 1939. The British tried to appease the Palestinian community with a plan, the 1939 White Paper, calling for limits on Jewish immigration.

After World War II (1939-1945), the British soon realized that their global empire was no longer tenable and that the mandate in Palestine was not workable. By 1945, the population of Palestine was just over 1.8 million, including 554,000 Jews (30.6%).² From 1944-1947, Jewish militias attacked British forces. In November 1944, for instance, Jewish terrorists assassinated Lord Moyne, a British official in Egypt. In 1946, the National Military Organization (Irgun or IZL) and Fighters for the Freedom of Israel (LHI or Stern gang) killed 300 civilians and tens more military personnel.³

² Mark Tessler, *A history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 266.

³ Mark Tessler, *A history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 256.

In February 1947, Britain asked the fledgling United Nations to address the question of Palestine. Like the Peel Plan of 1937, the majority of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) favored a partition of Palestine into two states, a Jewish one and an Arab one. According to UNSCOP, the Arab state would be about 42% of Palestine and the Jewish one about 55%; the remaining territory, including Jerusalem, would be an international zone. The Jewish state would have had about 500,000 Jews and 400,000 Arabs.⁴ On November 29, 1947, UNSCOP's majority report was approved by the United Nations General Assembly as resolution 181. The Jews accepted partition, and the Arabs rejected it.

Almost immediately, fighting started in Palestine between Jewish and Arab forces. Until Israel declared its independence on May 14, 1948, most of the fighting was between local forces. Once Israel declared independence, Arab states became directly involved. The Arab side failed to take advantage of its overall personnel edge by coordinating its military attacks. By the time the fighting fully ended in early 1949, Israel controlled about 78% of the territory in UNSCOP's plan. Jerusalem was not under international control. Israel controlled the west of the city while Transjordan, soon to be Jordan, held the east. Of the remaining 22%, Egypt occupied the Gaza Strip, and Jordan held and later annexed the West Bank. In 1949, Israel signed armistice agreements with Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.

As a result of the war, approximately 650-700,000 Palestinians became refugees mostly as a result of Israeli expulsions, military offensives, and massacres and the resulting panic and fear. For several years, Zionist political and military leaders had discussed how to form an independent Jewish state given the Palestinians' numerical advantage. Some Zionist leaders hoped for a massive migration of Jews from the diaspora to Israel while others emphasized the need to expel Palestinians from Israel. Israeli military leaders created contingency plans for removing the Palestinian population during war-time.

As events unfolded, some Palestinians were given orders by the Israeli military to leave. Yitzhak Rabin, later Israel's prime minister, ordered 50,000 Palestinians to leave Lod and Ramle with the approval, he says, of Ben Gurion.⁵ More generally, the Israeli government did not issue a formal decision to expel Palestinians, but Ben Gurion made clear the need to take advantage of the war-time opportunity to alter the unfavorable demographic balance. At least ten episodes in which 50 or more Palestinian civilians were killed by the Israeli military, including the well-known incident at the village of Deir Yassin on April 9, 1948, also created fear among Palestinians.⁶ Many women and children fled the war zone. Weak Palestinian leadership was unable to provide much support to civilians during the fighting. Ever since, Palestinians and the United Nations have claimed the Palestinians have a right to return to their former homes.

⁴ Fred J. Khouri, *The Arab-Israeli Dilemma*, third edition (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1985), p. 54; and Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-1999* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), p. 184.

⁵ Yitzhak Rabin, translated by Dov Goldstein, *The Rabin memoirs* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 383-384.

⁶ Guy Erlich, "Not Only Deir Yassin," *Ha'ir* (Hebrew), May 6, 1992. He quotes Aryeh Yitzhaki, an Israeli historian who also served as the Israel Defense Forces military archivist in the 1960s.

Most of the Palestinian refugees ended up in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. They were treated differently in each country. In Jordan, for instance, they were given citizenship. The United Nations created the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) to deal with the refugees' needs. As of June 2004, UNRWA listed almost 4.2 million refugees including descendants of the original refugees. Of those, 42% lived in Jordan; 29% lived in refugee camps.⁷ In addition to the refugees, about 150,000 Arabs remained inside Israel in 1949.⁸ Eventually, they became Israeli citizens and are known as Israeli Arabs or Palestinian citizens of Israel. Immediately after the war, official Israeli policy was to bar Palestinians who had left from returning to areas inside Israel, destroy empty Arab villages, expropriate Arab homes and lands, and establish Jewish towns in their stead.

On December 11, 1948, the United Nations General Assembly weighed in on the issue in resolution 194: "Resolves that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible."

After the war, Israel proceeded with state-building, and Palestinians recovered from the defeat and dispossession of 1948. Israel and the neighboring Arab states signed armistice (cease-fire) agreements. In the years just after the war, Arab infiltrators clashed with Israeli soldiers. Some infiltrators, often called fedayeen, sought such clashes and attempted to kill Israelis and destabilize Israel. Many others were seeking to visit relatives, harvest fields, and re-claim property lost in 1948. Israeli and Syrian forces also clashed, in particular over several demilitarized zones along the Israeli-Syrian border. Israel was especially keen on establishing its sovereignty in these contested zones. From 1948-1956, Arab infiltrators killed hundreds of Israelis, including approximately 200 civilians. During the same period, Israel killed 2,700-5,000 "mostly unarmed" Arab infiltrators and expelled more than 10,000.⁹

The next Arab-Israeli war came in 1956 when Britain, France, and Israel attacked Egypt and sought to topple Egypt's President, Gamel Abdel Nasser. Nasser espoused pan-Arabism, a call for Arab unity among the many Arab countries. In July 1956, he angered the British and French by nationalizing Egypt's Suez Canal; the canal was owned by an Anglo-French company. The United States and the Soviet Union opposed the attack on Egypt, and US pressure forced Britain, France, and Israel to end the attack and withdraw their soldiers. Despite the poor military performance of his forces, Nasser declared a symbolic victory.

⁷ See www.un.org/unrwa.

⁸ Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-1999* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), p. 259; or Tessler, p. 279.

⁹ Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-1999* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), pp. 271, 274-275.

In the 1950s, the United States made some diplomatic efforts to end the conflict. President Dwight Eisenhower sent Eric Johnston to try to jump start warmer relations through an agreement on water sharing. Project Alpha, an Anglo-American effort to bring peace, was a second effort. By the early 1960s, the United States was less focused on resolving the conflict and spoke of keeping it in the “icebox.”

Arabs and Israelis did not fight again until 1967. In the early 1960s, the Arab world was caught up in a cold war of its own between Arab radicals (Nasser’s Egypt, Syria, and Iraq) against more conservative Arab monarchies (Saudi Arabia, Jordan). Tens of thousands of Egyptian soldiers were sent to Yemen to fight in the civil war against Saudi-supported forces. At the same time, Israel was secretly working with France to build nuclear weapons; by 1970, Israel had nuclear bombs. Israel also started buying arms from the United States, a process that intensified after the 1967 war. The Soviet Union was the main arms supplier for Arab countries like Egypt, Iraq, and Syria.

In 1964, Egypt orchestrated the founding of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Cairo hoped to use the PLO to control Palestinian nationalists. Already by the late 1950s, Palestinians had started to form political and military organizations of their own. One prominent one was Fatah, a militia that included Yasser Arafat. By the mid-1960s, Fatah and others were openly declaring the need to launch an armed struggle (the use of violence and terrorism) against Israel to advance the Palestinian cause and drive out most Israeli Jews.

The situation worsened in 1966. Syria, like many Palestinian fighters, had been calling for a people’s war against Israel to re-claim Palestinian land and had been sending guerillas across the Israeli border. Israeli raids, such as against the West Bank village of Samu in November 1966, resulted in large numbers of Arab casualties and ratcheted up the level of tension. To Israeli leaders, these retaliatory raids were meant to deter further Arab attacks. On April 7, 1967, Israeli-Syrian dogfights led to the downing of six Syrian jets.

In May 1967, Egypt pushed the situation toward war. In early May, the Soviet Union warned Egypt that Israel was massing soldiers on the Israeli-Syrian border as if poised to attack. The information was incorrect, as Egypt knew at the time, but Egypt then took several escalatory steps. On May 13-14, it mobilized more Egyptian forces in the Sinai. Between May 16-21, Egypt asked for the UN peacekeepers to leave the Sinai Peninsula (bordering on Israel) where they had been since late 1956, and the United Nations complied. On May 23, Cairo announced the closure of the Straits of Tiran in the Red Sea to Israeli-bound ships. On May 26, 1967, Nasser spoke confidently: “One day two years ago, I stood up to say that we have no plan to liberate Palestine and that revolutionary action is our only course to liberate Palestine....Recently we felt we are strong enough, that if we were to enter a battle with Israel, with God’s help, we could triumph. On this basis, we decided to take actual steps.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Walter Laqueur and Barry Rubin, editors, *The Israel-Arab Reader*, revised and updated edition (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 175-176.

Multiple diplomatic efforts failed. The United States failed to organize a maritime flotilla to break the Egyptian blockade of the Straits of Tiran. The United Nations failed to convince Egypt to keep the peacekeepers in Sinai; efforts to re-deploy the peacekeepers to the Israeli side of the border also failed. U Thant, the UN Secretary General, called for a special UN representative to work the diplomatic channels during a two-week moratorium. Egypt accepted the idea, but Israel rejected it. Egypt suggested reviving the Egypt-Israel Mixed Armistice Commission or turning to the world court, but Israel rejected both ideas. Israeli leaders argued that the military situation left them little time; they could not accept a holding pattern while negotiations commenced. US efforts to restrain Israel were not successful.

On June 5, 1967, Israel attacked. In six days, it decimated the Arab armies, destroying over \$2 billion in Egyptian military equipment.¹¹ Israel captured the Golan Heights from Syria, the West Bank from Jordan, and the Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula from Egypt. About 180,000 Palestinians who had not previously been refugees fled the West Bank and Gaza during the war. Most fled to Jordan, and they technically are known as displaced persons rather than refugees.¹²

The Israeli capture of Arab land, during what Israel calls the Six-Day War, had dramatic consequences. The Israeli cabinet decided on June 19, 1967 that it would return the captured land to Egypt or Syria in exchange for a peace treaty; it formally rescinded this policy on October 17.¹³ On June 27, Israel greatly expanded the area of municipal Jerusalem and extended Israeli law and administration to East Jerusalem. The Arab parties met at Khartoum, Sudan at the end of the summer and passed a resolution on September 1 now famous for three nos: no negotiations, no peace, and no recognition of Israel. The resolution also highlighted the political dimension of fighting Israel, an idea pushed by Arab moderates. On November 22, 1967, the United Nations Security Council passed resolution 242 which embodied the idea that Israel should trade the captured land for peace agreements. The resolution hardly addressed the Palestinian question, except to affirm “further the necessity ...For achieving a just settlement of the refugee problem.”

In July 1968, the PLO adopted the Palestinian National Charter. It said:

- “Palestine, with the boundaries it had during the British Mandate, is an indivisible territorial unit.” (Article 2)
- “Armed struggle is the only way to liberate Palestine....The Palestinian Arab people also assert their right...to exercise their right to self-determination and sovereignty over it.” (Article 9)
- “The partition of Palestine in 1947 and the establishment of the state of Israel are entirely illegal, regardless of the passage of time.” (Article 19)

¹¹ Michael B. Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 305.

¹² Palestinian Refugee ResearchNet (maintained by the Inter-University Consortium for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies - Montreal), “Palestinian Refugees: An Overview,” http://www.arts.mcgill.ca/mepp/new_prrn/background/index.htm, accessed April 7, 2005.

¹³ Reuven Pedatzur, “The June Decision was canceled in October,” *Ha’aretz*, May 12, 1995 as cited in Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), p. 623.

- “Claims of historical or religious ties of Jews with Palestine are incompatible with the facts of history and the true conception of what constitutes statehood. Judaism, being a religion, is not an independent nationality.” (Article 20)

In 1969, Yasser Arafat became the chairman of the PLO.

In the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the Israeli military occupation led to an improvement by certain economic measures. At the same time, Israel denied the Palestinians political rights. In the 1970s, the PLO, headquartered in Lebanon, used terrorist attacks against Israel in the hopes of gaining international support for the Palestinian cause. High profile attacks included several airplane hijackings and the murder of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics. In October 1974, the Arab leaders declared in Rabat, Morocco that the PLO was the “sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.”

Within a year of the end of the war, Israel began building settlements in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), Gaza Strip, and Golan Heights. The United Nations and international community argued that such settlements were illegal under international law. Some settlements were built for nationalist/religious ideological reasons, some were less expensive bedroom communities for Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, and some were built in strategic locations like the Jordan River Valley or on the high ground in the West Bank.

Egypt was not content with the post-1967 status quo. It launched the War of Attrition in 1968 in order to shake Israeli complacency and, if possible, recover some territory. Unlike the large, rapid wars of 1956 and 1967, the skirmishing dragged on along the Suez Canal and did not end until 1970 when the danger of the war leading to a direct Soviet-American military clash was real.

From the start of the Nixon administration in January 1969, US officials, such as Secretary of State William Rogers and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, sought to facilitate diplomatic efforts. Egypt’s next president, Anwar Sadat, sought to draw Israel to the bargaining table in 1971-1972. When these attempts failed, Egypt launched a limited war against Israel to push Israel back to the bargaining table. Egypt fought alongside Syria, but did not inform Syria of its limited aims prior to the war. After initial military setbacks, the Israeli military rallied and captured slightly more territory than it had prior to the war. Egypt portrayed the war as a political victory.

US negotiators facilitated three partial agreements after the war to deal with the cease-fire, prisoners of war, and basic post-war military issues. Egypt and Israel signed disengagement agreements in 1973 and 1975. Syria and Israel signed one in 1974.

In 1977, Sadat offered to travel to Jerusalem to address the Israeli parliament, and Israel’s government, the first ever led by the right-wing Likud party, accepted. Sadat may have wanted to get closer to the United States or to divert attention from domestic crises. His visit set in motion a process that eventually led to the 1978 Camp David Accords. At Camp David, Sadat, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, and US President Jimmy Carter successfully negotiated two frameworks, one on Egyptian-Israeli relations and the other on Palestinian autonomy. The first led to an Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in March

1979. The second led to naught as follow-on autonomy talks stalled and ended in 1980. Israel completed its withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula in 1982. Egypt was initially ostracized by the Arab World, but by the late 1980s most Arab countries had restored diplomatic relations and the Arab League again welcomed Egypt as a member.

In June 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon. Israeli forces drove all the way to Beirut, the Lebanese capital, and forced most PLO fighters out of Lebanon. Israel hoped to destroy the PLO state-within-a-state in southern Lebanon, install a pro-Israeli regime of Christian Lebanese politicians, and end attacks against northern Israel. The United States helped facilitate the PLO's evacuation, and, the PLO moved its headquarters to distant Tunisia. Lebanon's President-elect, Bashir Gemayel, a Maronite Christian, was assassinated on September 1982 just after international peacekeepers had left the country. This was followed by a Maronite massacre of 900 or more Palestinian refugees in two refugee camps, Sabra and Chatilla. Israeli forces indirectly aided the Maronite militias, and US and other peacekeepers soon returned. The US forces stayed until large truck bombs against the US Embassy and US Marine Barracks killed hundreds and caused President Ronald Reagan to withdraw US forces in early 1984. Israeli troops pulled back to a strip of land in southern Lebanon along the Israeli border. One result of the Israeli invasion was the dramatic growth of a Shiite Lebanese militia and political movement, Hezbollah (Party of God).

The 1980s saw many failed diplomatic plans. On September 1, 1982, Reagan issued a plan for solving the conflict. The eight-point Fahd Plan of 1981, named for Saudi Crown Prince (and later King) Fahd, was adopted in modified form by the Arab League in 1982 (and then became known as the Fez Initiative). In 1985-1986, Israel's Shimon Peres and Jordan's King Hussein came to the secret London Agreement but that too failed to lead to a breakthrough. In January 1988, George Shultz, the US Secretary of State, issued a plan based on an international diplomatic conference and a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. Israel continued to build settlements in the 1980s, and the United States downgraded its criticism, calling them obstacles to peace rather than illegal.

In December 1987, a traffic accident led to a spontaneous Palestinian uprising (intifada) that caught both Israel and the PLO off guard. Using mainly rocks, tires, and Molotov cocktails (petrol bombs), Palestinians clashed with Israel's military forces in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The uprising, now known as the first intifada, led to the creation of many civilian Palestinian organizations to organize the protests, help the wounded and bereaved families, and provide food. These organizations started to create a rival center of power inside the territories in contrast with the outside PLO leadership. Merchants also used commercial strikes (shop closings) and tax strikes (non-payment to Israel) to protest the Israeli occupation. Israel responded with house demolitions, expulsions of leaders, mass arrests and detentions, and curfews. Israeli forces tried to disperse protesters with live ammunition, rubber bullets, and tear gas. Over time, the PLO successfully gained control of the organization of the intifada.

After years of secret talks but no official negotiations, the United States and PLO opened talks in late 1988. In 1975, the United States placed conditions on holding a dialogue

with the PLO: acceptance UN resolution 242 (from 1967) and recognition of Israel. In 1984, the US Congress endorsed the earlier conditions and added the renunciation of terrorism. In November 1988, the Palestine National Council, the Palestinian parliament-in-exile, issued a declaration of independence that moved the PLO position closer to the American one. After several more statements by Arafat in December, the United States and PLO began the talks, but they collapsed in 1990 after a Palestinian terror attack against Israel.

The intifada served as the vehicle for the emergence of a Palestinian rival to the PLO, Hamas. Hamas, an Islamic fundamentalist or Islamist movement, sought to increase the role of Islam in Palestinian society, did not recognize Israel, and provided for the religious, welfare, and educational needs of many Palestinians. Israel initially looked upon Hamas with favor as a potential counter-weight to the PLO.

As the intifada continued, Israelis began to recognize the human, political, and economic costs of continued occupation. Palestinians also learned the limits of the use of force as they were unable to bring the Israeli occupation to an end through the intifada alone.

The intifada dovetailed with two other events that dramatically altered the regional balance of power. In April 1987, the Soviet Union told Syria that it could no longer subsidize the sale of arms to Arab parties. This spelled the end of the Arab hope of conventional military parity with Israel. Soviet client states in Eastern Europe left the communist world in 1989-1990, and the Soviet Union collapsed altogether in December 1991. Meanwhile, in August 1990, Iraq invaded and occupied Kuwait. In early 1991, the United States led a coalition that successfully expelled Iraq from Kuwait – the 1991 Persian Gulf War. That coalition included Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. Both Jordan and the PLO favored Iraq and quickly sought to get back in the good graces of the United States after the war.

After the 1991 Gulf War, President George H. W. Bush called on Arabs and Israelis to come to high-level negotiations. After significant US diplomatic efforts, the parties met at Madrid, Spain in late October 1991. This led to many unproductive rounds of bilateral talks between Israel and its Arab neighbors. The PLO was not allowed to participate in the talks directly. Instead, Israel negotiated with a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. The Madrid talks also included a multilateral track with talks on economics, the environment, refugees, arms control and regional security, and water.

In the summer of 1993 in Oslo, Norway, secret, exploratory Israeli-Palestinian talks led to a major breakthrough. As a result, Israel and the PLO signed the Declaration of Principles (DOP), or Oslo I, at the White House on September 13, 1993. The PLO also recognized Israel's right to exist, rejected terrorism, and endorsed UNSC Resolution 242 (1967). Israel recognized the PLO as its negotiating partner. The DOP called for Israeli withdrawal from unspecified territory in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the creation of a Palestinian quasi-governmental entity (the Palestinian Authority), and Palestinian efforts to clamp down on terrorism against Israel. This would take place during a five-year interim phase in which the parties would also negotiate the core or final status issues: the

status of Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees, and borders. The agreement did not recognize Palestinian self-determination or call for a Palestinian state.

The Oslo process continued from 1993 until 2001 but did not lead to a two-state solution to the conflict (two states: Israel and Palestine). With constant American mediation, the two sides negotiated several other agreements to implement Oslo I, including the Gaza-Jericho agreement (May 1994) and Oslo II (September 1995). The Oslo II agreement divided the West Bank, except East Jerusalem and parts of Hebron, into Areas A, B, and C. In Area A, the Palestinian Authority (PA) was in charge of civil affairs and maintaining order. In Area B, the PA was only charged with civil affairs while Israel retained responsibility for security and order. In Area C, Israel remained in full control. By 2000, Israel retained 59% of the West Bank as Area C.

After the Israeli Prime Minister, the left-of-center Yitzhak Rabin, was assassinated in November 1995, the right-wing Likud party soon took power and slowed the process. The next two agreements, the Wye River memorandum (1997) and the Hebron protocol (1998) dealt with implementing more narrow slices of previously agreed to but unfulfilled commitments. During the Oslo years, Israel complained about continued Palestinian terrorism and incitement and the inadequate response of the Palestinian Authority to both. Palestinians complained about continued Israeli settlement expansion, the growth of checkpoints that inhibited travel both out of and within the West Bank itself, and the long delays in implementing agreements.

The Oslo process paralleled changes on other fronts as well. In 1994, Israel and Jordan signed a peace treaty. Israel and Syria negotiated on and off for much of this period as well. Three Israeli Prime Ministers in a row – Rabin, Shimon Peres, and Benjamin Netanyahu – were grudgingly willing to withdraw to the June 4, 1967 lines on the Golan Heights, the border prior to the 1967 war, in exchange for a peace treaty, security guarantees, and normalization. In 1999, the late Rabin's Labor Party returned to power under Prime Minister Ehud Barak. Although Barak too sought peace with Syria, he was unwilling to agree to the June 4 line, and talks at Shepherdstown, West Virginia failed in late 1999. Clinton met Syrian President Hafez al-Assad in Geneva on March, 2000. When it immediately became clear to Assad that Israel was not offering to withdraw to the June 4 line, he balked and the talks fell apart though they had hardly begun.

Although Barak and Arafat signed the Sharm el-Sheikh memorandum (1999), Barak argued that Israelis and Palestinians should forgo more interim deals and move to a final agreement. In July 2000, US President Bill Clinton brought together Barak and Arafat at Camp David, hoping to follow in Carter's footsteps. During the negotiations, Israel offered 91% of the West Bank and the entire Gaza Strip for a Palestinian state. Israel would annex the other 9% and, in exchange give the Palestinians some additional land equivalent to 1% of the size of the West Bank. This would have allowed Israel to annex its largest settlements in the West Bank. Barak aspired to annex 80% of Israeli settlers as part of any deal. Because Israel planned to hold onto the Jordan Valley for several years before turning it over to the Palestinians and because the two sides calculate the size of

the West Bank differently, the initial Israeli territorial offer was more like 77% than 91-92%.¹⁴

On the Jerusalem question at Camp David, Israel offered Palestinian sovereignty in the outer Arab neighborhoods and villages of East Jerusalem. In the inner neighborhoods, the Palestinians would get control but not sovereignty. They agreed Israel would annex Jewish neighborhoods of East Jerusalem, settlements Israel had built since 1967. There was no agreement about how to divide the Jewish and Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem's Old City. The two sides also discussed security concerns and the Palestinian refugees, although they did not make much progress on the latter.

The United States and Israel blamed Yasser Arafat for the failure of the summit. Some officials said he fundamentally did not want peace with Israel or a two-state solution. Meanwhile, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators continued negotiating in August and September 2000.

On September 28, 2000, Ariel Sharon, then the leader of Israel's Likud opposition, visited the Temple Mount in Jerusalem's Old City. The visit sparked an Israeli-Palestinian clash that intensified the next day and ultimately became the second or al-Aqsa intifada. Palestinians were fed up with the delays in the Oslo process and the checkpoints and settlements. Some Palestinian militants, including some members of Fatah led by Marwan Barghouti, thought violence would force Israel to make serious concessions on the road to a two-state solution. Israel had long been planning for the massive use of force to crush any new intifada, but Israel's heavy use of force in the second intifada's early days backfired and fanned the flames. Unlike the first intifada, the second one included a number of gun battles between Israeli and Palestinian forces.

The violent confrontations slowed the high-level diplomacy. Some efforts turned to trying to shut down the fighting but to no avail. Still, on December 23, 2000, Clinton presented his ideas for a final Israeli-Palestinian agreement. He said the ideas left office with him on January 20, 2001. Palestine should be established in the Gaza Strip and about 97% of the West Bank. He called for Israeli sovereignty in Jewish areas of Jerusalem and Palestinian sovereignty in Arab areas. He suggested that the right of return apply only to Palestine. Refugees would not have a right to return to Israel, though Israel or other third parties could choose to accept them. Others would be given financial compensation.

Both parties expressed reservations about the Clinton Plan, but first Israel and then the Palestinian Authority accepted the plan. Just after Clinton left office, from January 21-27, 2001, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators met at Taba, Egypt but ran out of time: "The sides declare that they have never been closer to reaching an agreement and it is thus our shared belief that the remaining gaps could be bridged with the resumption of negotiations following the Israeli elections." In the February 2001 Israeli elections, Barak (Labor) was soundly defeated by Sharon (Likud). Sharon chose not re-start high-level

¹⁴ Jeremy Pressman, "Visions in Collision: What Happened at Camp David and Taba?" International Security 28, no. 2 (Fall 2003), pp. 5-43 at 17.

diplomacy, saying he would not negotiate under fire. Additional US-led attempts to end the fighting, such as the Mitchell report (April 30, 2001) and Tenet plan (June 2001) failed.

Over time, the second intifada lost its grassroots and collective thrust. The Palestinian side came to rely on suicide bombings and armed attacks. Hamas and Islamic Jihad (the Islamists) and the Al-aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, a nationalist off-shoot of Fatah, even cooperated on some terrorist attacks. Israel re-occupied areas from which it had withdrawn during the Oslo years, the so-called Area A.

During his first term in office, President George W. Bush came more and more to accept the Israeli perspective. He did little to try to re-start high-level diplomatic talks and, with a June 24, 2002 speech, called on the Palestinian people to replace Arafat. Israel and the United States refused to deal with Arafat, and Arafat spent the last years of his life stuck in Ramallah in the West Bank. On April 30, 2003, the Quartet of the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations issued the Roadmap to peace, a blueprint for ending the conflict and Palestinian statehood.¹⁵ On April 14, 2004, Bush wrote Sharon that a solution to the Palestinian refugee question "will need to be found through the establishment of a Palestinian state, and the settling of Palestinian refugees there, rather than in Israel." Bush added: "In light of new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli populations centers, it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949..."

Sharon will be remembered for at least two lasting initiatives, both of which were the ideas of others that he initially opposed. Israel began building a separation fence (or) in the West Bank that cut deep into the West Bank rather than sticking to the Green Line, the pre-1967 war border between Israel and the West Bank. The wall initially put about 15% of the West Bank on the 'Israeli' side of the barrier but after international and Israeli court decisions, Israel moved the route and incorporated a smaller amount on the 'Israeli' side. The wall's route included East Jerusalem and its 200,000 Palestinians on the 'Israeli' side. The barrier further encircled many Palestinian cities and towns already choked off by settlements, Jewish-only bypass roads, and checkpoints.

The second idea was a unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. In the January 2003 Israeli election, Sharon's leading opponent, Amram Mitzna, advocated the idea, but Sharon and the majority of the Israeli public rejected it. In 2004, after Sharon started to feel the pressure of grassroots peace initiatives (The People's Voice and the Geneva Initiative) and insider opposition (a protest letter from tens of Israeli air force pilots and a highly critical newspaper interview with four previous heads of Israel's internal security service, the Shin Bet), he unveiled his own Gaza disengagement plan and fought successfully for support from within his cabinet and the parliament. Many members of his Likud party opposed the move, but the Israeli public strongly backed the idea and Sharon pledged to dismantle all Israeli settlements in Gaza and four small ones in the northern West Bank near the Palestinian city of Jenin.

¹⁵ The Roadmap also uses the date May 1, 2003.

On November 11, 2004, Arafat died. He was replaced by Mahmoud Abbas who was elected Palestinian President in January 2005. Abbas had long opposed the militarization of the intifada and greater calm prevailed in early 2005. That summer, Israel evacuated its civilian settlements in Gaza; the withdrawal was called “Disengagement.”

In 2006, Hamas won a majority of seats in the Palestinian parliament. That summer, Hezbollah and Israel fought a war. In 2007, Hamas and Fatah openly fought as Fatah sought to thwart Hamas power. The result was that Hamas ruled Palestinians in Gaza and Fatah ruled Palestinians in the West Bank. Israel, with Egypt’s help, kept tight restrictions on the entry and exit of goods and people to/from Gaza. Israel and the Palestinian Authority, led by Abbas, conducted high-level negotiations in 2008 (after the late 2007 Annapolis conference orchestrated under President GW Bush). The talks failed.

Hamas and Israel fought major military confrontations in 2008-09, 2012, and 2014 and lesser ones as well. Under President Barack Obama, the United States mediated unsuccessful Israeli-Palestinian talks in 2010 (briefly) and in 2013-14.

This survey of the Arab-Israeli conflict suggests two ways to break the conflict into periods. The first is to consider which side was content with the status quo and which side had revisionist aims (revising or overturning the status quo).¹⁶ Prior to 1948, the Arab side defended the status quo while Zionists sought to change it with the establishment of a Jewish state. When the latter succeeded in 1948, the parties switched positions with the Jews trying to defend the status quo because that reality now included Israel. In contrast, many Arab parties sought to return to the status quo ante by refusing to recognize Israel or normalize relations.

After the 1967 war, the situation was mixed on both sides. Some Palestinians still sought to destroy Israel while others hoped for a two-state solution and accepted Israel’s pre-1967 borders. Egypt broke ranks with other Arab states and signed a peace treaty with Israel, thereby dropping Egypt’s revisionist aims. Though some Israelis embraced the land-for-peace formula, others gravitated toward the Greater Israel concept and the settlement of the occupied territories. In a sense, most Israelis were revisionist but in opposite directions: some hoped Israel would move back toward its pre-1967 size while others wanted Israel to officially expand its borders.

A second way of framing the relationship is by considering the primary axis of conflict - though this is not to imply that the secondary axis of the day is not also important for understanding the situation. Prior to 1948, the conflict had a local character with tension between the Jewish and Arab residents of Palestine. With Israel’s independence in 1948, the emphasis shifted toward an inter-state conflict between Israel and the Arab States. The two sides fought inter-state wars in 1948, 1956, 1967, 1968-1970, and 1973. This second phase began to wane with the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in 1979 and the end of Syria’s quest for conventional military parity in 1987. The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon had a mix of inter-state and Israeli-Palestinian elements. The outbreak of the

¹⁶ I am indebted to Benjamin Miller for his writings on this idea.

(first) intifada in December 1987 indicated a new, third phase was at hand that again brought the local angle back into the primary spotlight: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This trend continued with the Oslo process in the 1990s and the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000.

At the end of the day, the most obvious consequence of the conflict has been the many lives lost on both sides. But at a deeper level, it has also prevented either Israelis or Palestinians from assuming a normal place in politics. Palestinians still lack a nation-state, the basic unit of international affairs. They are widely dispersed, and the original generation that lost their homes in 1948 is gradually dying off. Israel is a powerful state with a strong military and economy, but it too lacks a sense of normalcy with its neighbors and its wider region. Recognition, legitimacy, and normalcy remain elusive objectives.

Internally, the conflict has also been divisive. Many Israelis and Arabs have been part of the global religious resurgence, and this has exacerbated domestic divides. Religious West Bank settlers, ultra-orthodox Jews, and Hamas and other Islamists challenge liberal and secular-nationalist visions for society. Social splits, as well as calls for greater openness and accountability, have long been relegated to secondary status in the face of the all-consuming conflict. Such fissures periodically emerge but are often sidestepped in the name of unity against the Israeli or Arab enemy. Were the Arab-Israeli conflict ever to come to a close, the domestic challenges would put any future leader to the test.

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