

The Arab-Israeli Conflict from Oslo to the Gaza War

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It is convenient to place the start of the conflict in Palestine in 1908, when the Zionist Organization was established in the country and the first violent clashes took place in Jaffa. Of course, Jewish colonization had begun a quarter of a century earlier, but it was not then perceived as expressing a political project. The period from 1908 to 1948 can be called “the struggle for Palestine,” the title of a classic work on the subject. It covers the end of the Ottoman Empire and the entire British Mandate. Unable to find a political solution, the Mandate was forced to involve the Arab states in managing the issue from 1936 onwards.

The 1948 war lent the Arab countries a major role, while Palestinian political representation found itself sidelined. The 1949 Rhodes Armistice Agreements, whose contents were defined as purely military, created an entire series of specific inter-state disputes, in particular over demilitarized zones (DMZ) and waterways (Suez Canal, Gulf of Aqaba). The Palestinian dimension remained present, but was centred on the matter of the return of refugees. Israel was definitively opposed to such a return, which would have been suicide for the new State. In other words, the Jewish State was only made possible by the expulsion of the Palestinian Arab population and the confiscation of their property.

This was the Arab-Israeli period, strictly speaking, and the wars of 1956 and 1967 were directly linked to the Rhodes disputes. In the early 1960s, the Palestinian national movement was reborn through the creation of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964 and the start of Fatah’s armed struggle in 1965.

In 1964, the Arab states adopted the slogan of Palestinian liberation, which was largely subordinate to the achievement of Arab unity, and this seemed increasingly unlikely.

The war of June 1967 reintroduced the Palestinian dimension with the Israeli conquest of the whole of Mandatory Palestine. It was accompanied by the emergence of the Palestinian resistance, which defined itself as a revolution. On the other hand, the watchword of the Arab states was “the liquidation of the consequences of aggression,” in other words, the recovery of the lost territories. This was in contradiction with the liberation of Palestine, which led to the 1970-71 confrontation in Jordan (Black September).

The 1973 war pitted the Arab states against Israel, but to avoid another Black September, in 1974 the Arab states recognized the PLO, led by Yasser Arafat (also leader of Fatah), as the sole representative of the Palestinian people, making it an indispensable party to the peace process.

From then on, Israel refused to negotiate with the PLO. The Camp David Accords of 1978 and the Washington Treaty of 1979 attempted to circumvent this obstacle by advocating Palestinian autonomy devoid of any sovereignty. Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in 1982 was aimed at destroying the PLO and can be considered the first Israeli-Palestinian war. The Arab-Israeli conflict gradually gave way to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Negotiations in the 1980s attempted to bring the Palestinians into the process through a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation, but Israel wanted to determine its composition. In the end, it took the first intifada, the 1991 Gulf War and American hegemony to enable a Palestinian-Jordanian delegation to be formed at the Madrid conference, which continued its work in Washington.

Oslo

The new Israeli Labour government formed under the leadership of Yitzhak Rabin in July 1992 spoke of the principle of a phased autonomy process with elections, but refused to address any fundamental issues such as Palestinian self-determination, or the degree of sovereignty they would be granted. This deadlock benefitted Hamas (Islamic resistance movement) and the Islamic Jihad, who continued the armed struggle. Parallel clandestine negotiations were held in Oslo with representatives of the PLO.

The Oslo process was based on a dynamic of negotiation in which each of the parties sought to establish a climate of trust, while at the same time carefully defending their national interests. The points of reference for the discussions were not new; they included all the proposals and ideas put forward since Camp David. The only real novelty was the fact that it was the PLO that was speaking on behalf of the Palestinians. The price to be paid was a heavy one, since it included all the demands made by Rabin since he came to power, a step-by-step autonomy process, and deferment of substantive issues, such as Jerusalem and the national rights of the Palestinians, to the final negotiations.

An agreement was signed in Washington on 13 September 1993. The PLO recognized the right of the State of Israel to live in peace and security. The only major Israeli commitment was to officially recognize the existence of a Palestinian people, a fundamental break in the history of Zionism.

The aim of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations was, among other things, to establish a Palestinian Interim Self-Governing Authority, a Council elected by the Palestinian People in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, for a transitional period not exceeding five years, leading to a permanent settlement based on Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338.

As soon as the Declaration of Principles were to come into force and the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip made effective, the transfer of authority would begin: this was to concern the areas of education, culture, health, social affairs, direct taxation and tourism. The Palestinians would form a police force. Further transfers would be negotiated. An interim agreement would define the powers of the elected council. The Israelis would retain overall responsibility for the territory. They would withdraw from populated areas. Palestinians in

Jerusalem would have the right to participate in elections. In all areas of the economy and development, the two parties would have to cooperate.

The text of the agreements was sufficiently ambiguous to allow one to believe in a process of decolonization leading to an independent Palestinian state or, on the contrary, in a new version of the 1968 Allon Plan subcontracting the management of the civil affairs of a Palestinian enclave inside Israel which would annex a significant part of the occupied territories.

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The idea was that over the subsequent five years, a climate of trust could be established between the two partners that would enable them to reach a final agreement covering the three most difficult issues: settlements, refugees and Jerusalem. But the desire on both sides to establish faits accomplis in order to be in a better position for the final settlement could, on the contrary, create growing mistrust.

The vision of Rabin and Peres, who was his second in government, was to abandon the project of a "Greater Israel" extending over the whole of former Mandatory Palestine in favour of a more realistic vision of relations on the ground with a more or less subordinate Palestinian partner. On the whole, they remained within the framework of the Allon plan. However, by adopting this "political" perspective, they went up against the Zionist "mystics," who wanted the entire territory without having really decided on the fate of the Arab population.

For both the Americans and the Israelis, Oslo somehow ruled out international law, which considered that any changes imposed in the occupied territories, including Jerusalem, were illegal, null and void. But for the Palestinians, international law was their main strength. Any concession, however small, would risk wiping out the whole. There could be no haggling on this point, and any measures taken during the interim period would be revocable when the final settlement were reached.

There were many immediate difficulties. Israel's security situation meant that it had to maintain tight control over the territories, while the Islamists continued their attacks. On 25 February 1994, a Jewish settler from Hebron, Baruch Goldstein, opened fire on Muslim worshippers praying at the Tomb of the Patriarchs. He died in the ensuing confusion. The Israeli police opened fire on Palestinian protesters. Dozens of Palestinians were killed. Rabin missed the historic opportunity to put an end to the extremist settlement of Hebron, demonstrating that he did not have the makings of a Ben Gurion capable of having a long-term vision and implementing it.

On 4 May 1994, the interim agreement was signed in Cairo. The Israeli army was to withdraw immediately from the Gaza Strip and the Jericho area. A 24-member Palestinian Authority would be responsible for implementing all the powers and competences transferred by the Israelis. A strong Palestinian police force would be responsible for maintaining law and order in cooperation with the Israeli army. The five-year interim period provided for in the Declaration of Principles began on this date – the end point was therefore to be 4 May 1999.

Oslo 2

In July, Arafat and the PLO leadership took up office in Gaza and Jericho. The fact remained that 73.6% of the 5,700 square kilometres that form the occupied West Bank were under Israeli control. The attacks carried out by Islamists led to a strengthening of Israeli control.

Jordan led a skilful negotiation resulting in a peace treaty signed on 27 October, 1994, but Jordanian public opinion remained deeply hostile to Israel.

The so-called Oslo 2 agreement was signed at the White House on 28 September 1995. The West Bank was divided into three zones: Zone A, representing 3% of the territory, would be under direct Palestinian control. This area included major Arab conurbations. Zone B (24%) was to be under mixed control; and Zone C (73%), under Israeli control. The Israeli withdrawal began immediately, so as to allow elections to be held.

On 4 November 1995, Rabin was assassinated by a right-wing extremist. Peres succeeded him as Prime Minister. The Palestinian elections were held

on 20 January 1996. Arafat was elected President of the Palestinian Authority with 88% of the vote and his candidates won three quarters of the seats. Abstention was low, around 20%, except in Jerusalem, where only 42% of voters were able to go to the polls. The electoral system, with its small electoral districts and single-round voting, favoured local roots to the detriment of the main ideological currents.

Peres gave priority to negotiations with Syria, which were taking place in the United States, and authorized the resumption of targeted assassinations of Islamist leaders. This provoked a whole series of particularly deadly attacks on the Israeli population. On 10 April 1996, Peres launched Operation Grapes of Wrath against Lebanon. The aim was to hit the civilian population in order to get them to stop supporting the resistance. All regions of Lebanon were hit and economic infrastructures such as power stations were targeted. Lebanese civilian casualties were considerable, provoking international outrage. A ceasefire came into force on 26 April.

The early Israeli elections on 29 May saw the victory of the Israeli right-wing Likud party led by Netanyahu, who became Prime Minister.

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His government's programme included a triple negation: no to a Palestinian state, no to any concession on the Golan Heights, no to the division of Jerusalem. It provided for the intensive pursuit of colonization and the maintenance of the Jordan Valley as Israel's eastern border, whatever the outcome of negotiations. A climate of violence ensued, despite the conciliatory efforts of the Americans. They finally reached a new agreement on 23 October 1998, but it was only very partially implemented by the Israelis. In the Israeli elections of 17 May 1999, the leader of the Labour party, General Ehud Barak, won with 56% of the votes. He was able to mobilize support-

ers of peace with the Palestinians to his advantage, while at the same time presenting himself as the military guarantor of Israelis' security.

The first negotiations only obtained an extension of deadlines: a final negotiation with a framework agreement signed by 13 February 2000, and the final agreement by 13 September 2000.

In early 2000, Barak devoted his efforts to Syria. He came up against the difficulty of defining the 4 June 1967 line, which was to be the line for Israel's withdrawal from the Golan Heights. This led to a total failure on 26 March 2000.

In July, Bill Clinton organized a new summit at Camp David, which was supposed to be able to deal with all the issues. It was extraordinarily poorly prepared by the Americans and Israelis and took place in total confusion.

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The asymmetry of the positions made the problem unsurmountable. The Israelis controlled the entire territory and therefore had the impression that they were yielding without any quid pro quo. But for the Palestinians, the quid pro quo had already been given by relinquishing 78% of Mandatory Palestine. They were being offered a landlocked state within Israeli territory, with no territorial contact with its Arab neighbours, and probably split into several sections. As for Jerusalem, it was at least as important to them as it was to the Jews. The Americans belatedly realized this when all their Arab allies (Mubarak, Abdallah II) refused to put pressure on Arafat regarding Jerusalem.

Clinton and Barak blamed Arafat for the failure. Nevertheless, negotiations resumed in September and seemed to be making good progress.

The Second Intifada

On 28 September 2000, Ariel Sharon, who had taken over the leadership of the Likud party, visited the al-Aqsa Mosque compound (Esplanade of Mosques) in Jerusalem, which was taken as a major provocation by Muslims. The following day, protest demonstrations were harshly repressed, triggering an escalation of violence.

The uprising was not premeditated. It was the result of a general worsening of the situation of the Palestinians since the start of the Oslo Process and the expansion of colonization in the West Bank. Despite diplomatic efforts, the violence was escalating and Arafat no longer had the means to control the situation.

On 23 December, the American President defined what would become the Clinton Parameters: the Palestinian State would have to comprise between 94% and 96% of the West Bank and would receive territorial compensation equivalent to the Israeli annexations, where 80% of the settlers would be grouped. The withdrawal would take place over a period of 36 months, with the presence of an international force. The Arab quarters of Jerusalem would be handed over to the Palestinians, who would have sovereignty over the Esplanade of the Mosques. Israel would have to recognize the moral and material suffering of the Palestinian people as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War – but not the responsibility – and the need to help the international community address the problem. The right of return for refugees would apply to the whole of Palestine, but Israel would have the sovereign right to determine the number of refugees to be resettled on its soil.

On 6 February 2001, Sharon was elected Prime Minister and formed a coalition government in March. From then on, the violence intensified. The Israeli army reoccupied the West Bank and Islamist movements stepped up their suicide attacks in Israel proper. Each group became increasingly withdrawn. On 28 March 2003, the Arab League summit in Beirut adopted the Saudi plan for total peace with Israel in return for a total withdrawal from the occupied territories, which Israel immediately refused.

On 23 June 2002, the Israeli government announced the construction of a "security barrier" that would cut well into the West Bank.

As the uprising dwindled due to the scale of the repression, the George W. Bush administration at-

tempted to relaunch the political process by marginalizing Arafat. This was achieved by setting up a quartet made up of the United States, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations, tasked with drawing up a “roadmap” published on 30 April 2003 in the wake of the American invasion of Iraq. It included the two-state solution, an end to violence and terrorism, and a freeze on settlement. Once the Palestinian Authority were restored and Palestinian elections held, there was to be a permanent status agreement and an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in 2005. At the same time, discussions led by representatives of the two “civil societies” resulted in a draft agreement published in Geneva in mid-October 2003. Its aim was to map out the “Clinton Parameters.” It was immediately rejected by the Sharon government. Hardliners on both sides denounced a betrayal by people with no mandate and no representation. More specific criticism focused on a number of points, such as security arrangements and the management of common resources.

In 2004, the violence continued and the roadmap was not implemented. Sharon announced unilateral redeployments in the name of security. President G. W. Bush accepted the principle that there would be no resettlement of Palestinian refugees within Israeli territory and that the large settlement blocs in the West Bank would be annexed by Israel.

On 11 December 2004, Arafat died, putting an apparent end to the main obstacle to the implementation of the roadmap. Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) succeeded him as leader of Fatah and as President of the PLO and the Palestinian Authority. The year 2005 was dominated by a showdown over the evacuation of the settlements in the Gaza Strip (8,000 to 9,000 people), which finally took place in August. The Gaza Strip became a territory totally cut off from the outside world, with Israel controlling all access to it, including by sea. Netanyahu became the leader of Likud and Sharon founded a new, more centrist party, Kadima, with Ehud Olmert and Tzipi Livni.

Sharon suffered a stroke and fell into a coma on 4 January 2006. Olmert succeeded him as Prime Minister.

The Failure of the Peace Process

Mahmoud Abbas does not have the prestige of his predecessor and is an outspoken advocate of a

peaceful solution, but he inherited a confused situation in which many elements of Fatah were behaving as independent militias. Israel and the international community urged him to put an end to terrorism, but this would mean a civil war that he did not really have the means to win.

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Hamas and Islamic Jihad saw themselves as a resistance movement waging a liberation struggle that implied the rejection of the Oslo Accords and, by extension, of the legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority. A truce was agreed with the Palestinian Authority in 2005 on the basis of Hamas’s participation in the January 2006 elections. The Islamist organization benefitted from the unitary nature of the Israeli withdrawal, which enabled it to claim victory for armed struggle over negotiation.

Hamas won the elections in January 2006. For the United States, Israel and the Quartet, there was no question of accepting a Hamas government or a government of national unity. They put pressure on Fatah to launch a civil war, which finally took place in June 2007. Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian Authority retained only areas A and B of the West Bank. Fratricidal fighting since the 2006 elections has left over 600 Palestinian casualties. The Gaza Strip has been placed under a blockade since then, and vital goods such as medicine and food limited to what is necessary to avoid a humanitarian crisis.

For his part, Ehud Olmert formed a Kadima-Labour coalition government in April 2006. He led a war against Lebanon’s Hezbollah in July 2006 and emerged politically weakened, with each side claiming victory. In the years that followed, mutual deterrence was established between the two belligerents. Olmert and Abbas began negotiations on the basis of the roadmap. The Americans convened an inter-

national conference in Annapolis on 27 November 2007 to encourage them. Substantial progress was made, but major differences remained over the extent of land swaps, the status of the Muslim quarters of Jerusalem and the refugee question. Accused of corruption, Olmert announced his resignation in September 2008 while continuing to manage current affairs.

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Hamas, which is in power in the Gaza Strip, was re-establishing public order and banning all forms of opposition, whether from Fatah or the Salafist jihadist groups who identify with the Islamic State. By force of circumstance, the movement was obliged to take charge of the general administration of the territory. In turn, it found itself caught in the dilemma between managing society and carrying out actions of resistance. An entire network of tunnels to the Sinai was built to offset the effects of the blockade, or de facto siege, as Hilary Clinton put it. Resistance was expressed above all by the firing of rockets, most often in reaction to Israeli actions on the West Bank or in Jerusalem. The Israelis gradually developed a costly air interception system, the "Iron Dome," generously funded by the United States.

At the end of December 2008, the Israeli army launched "Operation Cast Lead" to put an end to the rocket attacks and restore its deterrence capabilities. Around 1,400 Palestinians, including 300 children, were killed in three weeks.

Netanyahu won the 2009 elections and took office as Prime Minister in April. He was determined to put an end to any plans for a Palestinian state and encouraged the colonization of the West Bank. The Obama administration called for a settlement freeze, while Netanyahu dithered and then provocatively launched a major housing programme in West Jerusalem.

Hamas was weakened by its support for the Syrian revolution in 2011, which cost it the suspension of Iranian financial aid, and by the failure of the Muslim

Brotherhood government in Egypt in 2013. Periodic attempts at reconciliation with the Palestinian Authority failed due to funding issues and Israeli opposition.

In November 2012, Israel's Operation Pillar of Defence demonstrated Hamas's growing military capabilities. In 2014, Operation Protective Edge killed more than 2,220 Palestinians, including 1,492 civilians, among them 551 children. On the Israeli side, 66 soldiers and five civilians were killed.

The Gaza Strip was devastated by Israeli bombing. The destruction of civilian installations was intended to put pressure on Hamas to give in. Netanyahu justified this policy, which targets the whole of the Gaza Strip and its population:

"Our policy towards Hamas is simple: if they fire, they will be hit, and not just hit, but hit very hard. And if Hamas doesn't understand that today, it will tomorrow. And if not tomorrow, then the day after tomorrow, because in the Middle East, one needs not just military power, but endurance and patience."

After 51 days of fighting, each side declared victory. Israel did not give in to the demand to lift the blockade, Hamas did not renounce violence.

The Secretary of State in Obama's second term, John Kerry, in turn, embarked on lengthy negotiations in 2013. The aim would be to improve the Palestinians' economic situation and establish a Palestinian state within an Israeli security framework. As usual, the Israelis wanted to negotiate the terms with the Americans and then impose them on the Palestinians. As soon as the issue of Jerusalem was raised, the process stalled. Attempts to go through parallel channels, as in Oslo, came to nothing.

In the summer of 2014, a new clash with Hamas resulted in hundreds of civilian casualties in the Gaza Strip. John Kerry discovered a little late that Netanyahu's actions had consisted of systematically destroying all the achievements of the Oslo process in the West Bank. Nevertheless, he continued to blame the Palestinians for inciting violence. The political impasse lay in the fact that Abbas wanted to deal exclusively with borders and territories, while Netanyahu only wanted to discuss Israeli security, which implied maintaining an Israeli military presence in the West Bank for at least several decades.

Attempts at inter-Palestinian reconciliation were made from time to time without any concrete results. Israel authorized the passage of substantial financial aid from Qatar and the limited employment of labour from the Gaza Strip in Israel. This was a controlled easing of the blockade for “humanitarian” reasons and above all to avoid a rapprochement between the two Palestinian entities. Hamas would have to become a subcontractor of Israel in the same way as Fatah is, de facto, in the West Bank.

In 2018, Hamas organized “return marches” along the separation barrier. The Israeli army fired on them, killing more than 200 people.

The Trump administration was determined to broker a final agreement between the Israelis and Palestinians, but allowed the Netanyahu government to accelerate colonization of the West Bank. In December 2017, it decided to transfer the American embassy to Jerusalem, which put an end to political relations between the United States and the Palestinian Authority. Within a few months, the bulk of American aid to the Palestinians was suspended.

In April 2019, the United States recognized Israel’s 1981 annexation of the Golan Heights, and there was growing talk of the forthcoming annexation of a large part of the West Bank.

The Abraham Accords

In January 2020, the Trump plan was announced. It included a completely landlocked Palestinian state made up of strips of territory, with Israel annexing the settlements. Compensation would be provided by the expansion of the Gaza Strip into the Negev desert. Jerusalem would still belong to Israel and there would be no guarantee that the Muslim holy sites would not be encroached upon by the Jews.

The Palestinians rejected this in its entirety, while Netanyahu was only interested in annexations. He wanted to proceed immediately without implementing the

rest of the plan. A crisis ensued with the Trump administration. Ultimately, the solution was found in the normalization of relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, largely giving concrete form to a de facto situation associated in particular with a shared hostility towards Iran. The Emirates thus obtained a “suspension” of the annexations for an unspecified period (August 2020).

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This led to the Abraham Accords, which Bahrain, Sudan and, a little later, Morocco joined. The actions of these countries, several thousand kilometres away, are supposed to ease the plight of the Palestinians, who have not been consulted and see nothing coming.

The Biden administration was pursuing Trump’s policy of seeking new Muslim partners for the Abraham Accords, in particular Saudi Arabia, which was setting conditions. Some gestures were made towards the Palestinian Authority with the resumption of political contacts and the granting of financial aid. The idea of an improvement in the economic situation of the Palestinians was taken up again to calm their apprehensions. In fact, the situation in the West Bank continued to worsen, with multiple acts of violence and renewed Israeli encroachment on the Esplanade of the Mosques. Throughout this period, Hamas maintained a low profile, seemingly content with its position as manager of the Gaza Strip. After 7 October, the Americans started to show concern about the collapse of the Palestinian Authority, for which they had been largely responsible over the last twenty years.