

# The Middle East Peace Process

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*Opposing Viewpoints Online Collection, 2015*  
From *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*

The [Middle East](#) is a region of central importance to people of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths. It is home to the holiest sites of all three faiths. Because of this, the region—particularly the area including and surrounding Jerusalem, along the southeastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea—has been the subject of territorial disputes dating back more than two thousand years. These territorial tensions came to a climax in 1948, when the new state of [Israel](#) was formed on this disputed ground. The formation of Israel sparked sixty years of sporadic warfare interspersed with attempts to resolve the various territorial disputes peacefully. While some progress has been made, few predict a peaceful solution in the near term.

## The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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After the end of World War II in 1945, the United Nations developed a plan to establish the modern state of Israel, a permanent homeland for the Jewish people in the Middle East. However, the plan was not universally praised. First and foremost among the protestors were the [Palestinian Arabs](#)—mainly Muslim—who were already living on the land being designated for Israel. Since the intention was to establish a Jewish state, Arabs living in the new state did not believe that their interests would be represented or protected.

The proposed partition of [Palestine](#)—which contained the area slated to become Israel, and a separate Palestinian state—formed two intertwined territories. The holy city of Jerusalem was contained well within Arab territory, but the proposed plan put it under the administration of the UN for ten years. Palestinian Arabs and the surrounding Arab nations opposed the plan, and attempted to force Jewish settlers from Jerusalem. This sparked fighting between the two factions at various key locations throughout the region.

On 14 May 1948, the Jewish Agency, then the acting Jewish government, declared Israel an independent nation. The militaries of Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria attacked Israel the next day. Fighting continued for one year. As conflicts between Jewish and Arab forces increased, about 80 percent of the disputed region's Arab residents—numbering more than 700 thousand in all—fled Israel entirely. The Israeli government seized much of the privately owned land they left behind. At the same time, Jewish residents of other Arab countries found themselves facing discrimination and persecution due to the Arab-Israeli conflict; many of them relocated to Israel. In this way, the region became sharply polarized, with Israel's population overwhelmingly Jewish, and the surrounding area almost exclusively Arab.

As the war between the two sides raged on, Israeli forces took control of many areas that had originally been designated for Palestine. Since the Palestinians had never accepted the original partition plan, Israel argued, the [Israelis](#) were not limited by the partition [boundaries](#) either. By 1949, Israel occupied a large section of formerly Arab land west of Jerusalem, as well as the western portion

of the city itself. The fate of the Palestinians who fled from areas controlled by Israel would later become an important issue in peace talks between the two sides. Israel often confiscated privately owned land and property left behind by Palestinians. [Palestinian refugees](#) and their descendants still claim that they have a right to this property.

In 1967, Israel launched a successful military campaign against Arab forces known as the Six Day War. After the Six Day War, Israel occupied the few remaining [Palestinian territories](#) left over from the original partition agreement, including East Jerusalem and the surrounding [West Bank](#) area, the [Gaza Strip](#) along the Mediterranean Sea, the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt, and the Golan Heights region bordering Syria. These regions, with the exception of the Sinai Peninsula, have remained occupied for more than forty years, though international organizations do not acknowledge these areas as part of Israel.

## Steps toward Peace

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The Middle East peace process has largely focused on settling disputes regarding the areas occupied by Israel during the Six Day War. Several months after the war, the United Nations Security Council voted unanimously for a resolution refusing to acknowledge Israeli territory acquired by warfare, and calling for cooperation from all states in the area to establish a lasting peace. Dozens of proposals have been made since then, often brokered by outside nations in an attempt to maintain fairness for both sides.

The first major advance in the peace process occurred in 1978 at Camp David, a Maryland retreat reserved for the acting president of the [United States](#). U.S. president Jimmy Carter invited Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian president Anwar el-Sadat to Camp David to discuss the possibility of establishing a peace treaty between the two nations. Sadat had already visited Israel the previous year, becoming the first Arab leader to recognize its existence and plead for peace between the nations. After twelve days of talks, the parties signed two agreements known as the Camp David Accords. The first of these led to a formal peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, signed in March 1979. This was the first-ever establishment of peace between Israel and an Arab nation.

The peace treaty between Egypt and Israel was based on what has become known as a “land for peace” model. In exchange for Israel returning land to Egypt—the Sinai Peninsula, which it had occupied during the Six Day War—Egypt agreed to recognize Israel’s right to exist in peace. This same model was followed for most Middle East [peace negotiations](#) from then on.

In 1991, Israel and Arab nations participated in the Madrid Conference, an attempt to forge meaningful peace agreements similar to the one made between Egypt and Israel. This series of meetings led to another in Oslo, Norway, in 1993, in which Israeli leaders first sat down with leaders of the [Palestine Liberation Organization](#) (PLO), a political and paramilitary organization founded in 1964. The PLO sought a permanent, recognized state of Palestine as its goal; however, Israel and other countries considered the PLO a terrorist organization. With the signing of the Oslo Accords, the PLO agreed to recognize Israel as a state and condemn violence as a tactic against it. In return, Israel agreed to withdraw its troops from some occupied areas of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and allow the PLO to

administer the areas with the ultimate goal being Palestinian governance over those regions. The following year, talks initiated at the Madrid Conference also resulted in a peace agreement between Israel and its neighbor to the east, Jordan.

However, the spirit of peace and compromise that resulted in the Oslo Accords did not last. The Israeli government narrowly endorsed the agreement, but a substantial percentage of Israelis disagreed with the plan. Likewise, several Palestinian political groups—PLO rivals that were not represented during the negotiations—refused to recognize Israel as a legitimate state, undermining the core of the agreement. Palestinian attacks against Israeli citizens increased.

## New Conflicts and Setbacks

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In September 2000, tensions between Palestinians and Israelis flared once again. A wave of riots and attacks spread throughout Israeli-[occupied territories](#) in Palestine, with each side interpreting the violence differently. To Palestinians, the uprising was a rebellion against Israeli occupation and an attempt to establish their own independent state. To Israelis, it was unprovoked terrorist activity that required a swift and aggressive response.

Amidst the turmoil, the UN devised a new plan aimed at establishing peace in the Middle East. The plan, put into effect in 2003, was known as the “Road Map for Peace.” The plan placed an emphasis on Palestine achieving fully recognized statehood by curbing violence and demonstrating the ability to govern itself peacefully. In turn, the deal brokers hoped to convince Israel to withdraw from occupied territories and establish clear, internationally accepted borders between the two states.

In March 2003, the PLO appointed Mahmoud Abbas as prime minister; this allowed peace talks to take place with a single, recognized leader that both sides accepted as a reasonable negotiator. By 2005, Israel withdrew its military and citizenry from the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank. Elections were held to set up a new Palestinian government. However, fighting broke out between two Palestinian political parties, the relatively moderate Fatah and the virulently anti-Israel party [Hamas](#). In 2007, Hamas seized control of the Gaza Strip, prompting Israel to blockade the area in self defense. Egypt also blockaded its border with the Gaza Strip. Since 2007, Hamas has used the Gaza Strip as a base for numerous rocket attacks on Israeli targets.

The Israeli blockade devastated the Gaza Strip economically and led to what is widely regarded as a humanitarian disaster, as residents must live without basic public services, regular electricity, and reliable access to clean water. The suffering of the trapped citizens of Gaza turned world opinion against Israel and added another hurdle to the peace process. The situation was further complicated on 31 May 2010, when Israel launched a military raid on the Turkish-flagged *Mavi Marmara*, part of a flotilla of ships carrying humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip in defiance of the blockade. The flotilla’s organizers ignored Israeli warnings that the ships would not be allowed to reach the Gaza Strip. Israeli commandos boarded the *Mavi Marmara* from helicopters. A fight between commandos and passengers on the ship ensued during which nine of the passengers were killed. The incident sparked a new wave of international condemnation. The UN Security Council immediately called for an investigation.

Despite these setbacks, U.S. president Barack Obama pushed Israel and Palestine to restart peace negotiations with assistance from American diplomats. The main peace plan still endorsed by the United States and other peace brokers is the “two-state” solution, with Palestine recognized as an independent state. Talks resumed on 2 September 2010, but quickly stalled again over the issue of settlement building. The Palestinians have repeatedly stated that a halt to settlement building in disputed territory is a precondition for their participation in peace talks. Israel, however, let a moratorium on settlement building expire in late September, just as new peace talks had begun. Despite intense pressure from the United States, Israel refused to freeze new settlement building, and the latest effort to bring peace to the Middle East collapsed.

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**Source Citation**

"The Middle East Peace Process." *Opposing Viewpoints Online Collection*, Gale, 2015. *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*, [link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/PC3010999018/OVIC?u=holl99585&xid=6e1d4a9c](http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/PC3010999018/OVIC?u=holl99585&xid=6e1d4a9c). Accessed 28 Dec. 2016.

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|PC3010999018