

Is peace in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip possible?

By Ishaani Agarwal

Zionism, initially proposed by secular Jews in Europe with a greater impact from Theodor Herzl's *The Jewish State* in 1896, was envisioned more as a haven for Jews than as the foundation for a religiously defined nation. This vision did not conflict with historical precedents of relative harmony among Jews, Christians, and Muslims under Ottoman rule. Given this backdrop, the question arises: how did religion become a focal point in the ensuing conflict? If religious differences are indeed at the core, what pathways exist for resolution, considering the persistence of these issues? Alternatively, if religion is not the fundamental cause, what are the underlying factors driving the conflict?

Let us consider potential causes of the conflict beyond religion. Control over land has long been a source of strife, as it is essential for livelihood. After the Nazi period, Jews were in desperate need of a safe haven, which the British provided by offering them territory after they took control from the Ottoman Empire. It is often alleged that Jews have been progressively occupying more land from Palestinians, leaving the latter with significantly diminished territory.

The Jewish community, which had considerable social capital and prominence in various fields in Europe, succeeded in building a sustainable and efficient nation. However, this success has come at a great cost to the Palestinians. Israel's actions have often been seen as cruel, focusing on expansion without adequately considering the rights and livelihoods of the native population. This approach has drawn parallels to the territorial aggressions seen under Hitler.

The establishment of religious institutions by the British during their colonial rule, after displacing the Ottomans, has been seen as exacerbating the conflict. These institutions became tools in a deeper struggle over livelihood and territory, rather than being the root cause of the conflict itself. The influx of Jewish immigrants into Ottoman Palestine following the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and the Holocaust during World War II exacerbated tensions among the indigenous population. Notably, in 1915, Sir Henry McMahon, the British High Commissioner in Egypt, had promised Sherif Hussein of Mecca an independent state that included Palestine in exchange for his support in defeating the Ottoman Turks. This overlapping of territorial promises and the consequent

competition for economic resources have fundamentally underpinned the conflicts and wars that persist to this day.

In 1947, amid escalating violence, the U.N. General Assembly voted for the establishment of two states in Palestine, one Jewish and the other Arab which was unsuccessful (Robinson, 2023). Subsequently, Israel declared independence, leading to further migration of Jews and sparking a war with neighboring Arab states. Palestinian Arabs view Israel's establishment and its victory in the 1948 war as the Nakba, or catastrophe, accusing Western powers, including the U.S. and U.K., of assisting in the usurpation of their ancestral homeland. This period witnessed the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians.

Since the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, numerous conflicts have erupted between Arabs and Jews. The Suez Crisis in 1956 saw Israel, with British and French support, invade the Sinai Peninsula after Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal. In the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel defeated Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, capturing Gaza, the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights. The 1973 Yom Kippur War began with a surprise attack by Egypt and Syria on Israel, but a UN resolution eventually ended the conflict. The Camp David Accords of 1978 significantly improved the relations between Israel and its neighbors but never addressed the question of Palestinian self-determination rights. In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon to expel the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The First Palestinian Intifada in 1987 against Israeli occupation led to the Oslo Peace Accords and the formation of the Palestinian Authority. The Second Palestinian Intifada in 2000 saw prolonged violence until a ceasefire and Israel's withdrawal from Gaza in 2005. The Second Lebanon War in 2006 involved conflict with Hezbollah, ending with a UN-brokered ceasefire. Israel has also faced repeated conflicts with Hamas, particularly in 2008, 2012, 2014, 2021, and 2023. The recent brutal attack on Rafah (2024) by Israel, resulting in significant civilian casualties, sparked a widespread social media campaign under the hashtag "All eyes on Rafah". This highlights the harrowing realities of the situation. However, Israel asserts that their actions are in response to the previous attack by Hamas and serve as a voice for the hostages taken during that incident.

The internal divisions among Palestinians, particularly, between Fatah¹ and Hamas², further complicated efforts to achieve a unified approach to negotiations with Israel. While attempts were made to establish a unity government, deep-seated ideological differences and power struggles often derailed such initiatives, perpetuating a sense of political paralysis and disillusionment among the Palestinian populace (Dubnov et al., 2024).

In addition to that, the Trump administration's departure from the longstanding U.S. policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict injected new dynamics into the region. The decision to relocate the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem and the subsequent recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital drew widespread condemnation from the international community and further strained efforts to revive peace talks.

Meanwhile, the Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between Israel and several Arab states, represented a significant diplomatic breakthrough but also underscored the marginalization of the Palestinian cause on the regional stage. While some viewed these developments as a step towards stability and economic prosperity, others saw them as a betrayal of longstanding Arab solidarity with the Palestinian people.

The events of May 2021, including the forced evictions of Palestinian families in East Jerusalem and subsequent violence, highlighted the ongoing tensions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The disproportionate force used by Israeli security forces and Hamas's indiscriminate rocket attacks worsened the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, deepening Palestinian despair. The rise of Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right government signaled tougher Israeli policies towards Palestinians and dimmed hopes for a two-state solution. The government's support for settlement expansion and discriminatory practices against marginalized communities intensified internal divisions and drew condemnation from human rights organizations and the international community.

What were the shortcomings of the earlier agreements?

The initial Oslo Accord of 1993, while addressing the establishment of Palestinian self-governance and the prospect of direct, free, and general political elections, fell short of clarifying how these democratic principles would be upheld. It left unanswered questions about whether Palestine

¹ Fatah is a political organization of Arab Palestinians founded in the 1950s to fight against Israeli control.

² Hamas was a militant Islamist movement connected with the Muslim Brotherhood, which rose against the Palestine Liberation Organization's failure to negotiate peace with Israel.

would evolve into a democratic state or remain under Israeli suzerainty (Cordesman, 2023). Similarly, the subsequent accord in 1995 outlined that Israel and the newly 'elected' Palestine Council would exercise their respective powers as per the agreement. However, while the Oslo Accords discussed the importance of democratic elections, they failed to adequately address issues concerning the establishment of the rule of law and human rights (Cordesman, 2023).

The absence of provisions ensuring the protection of human rights and establishing a robust legal framework raised concerns, especially given the history of human rights abuses in the region. Despite calls from the international community and the United Nations Secretary-General reaffirming the imperative of a two-state solution as the most viable path to peace, the efficacy of this approach needs revision (Hille & Strauss, 2023). The traditional model of peace, centered around the two-state solution, may be losing its relevance in light of ongoing challenges and emerging complexities in the region (Indyk, 2024).

Hamas gained power in Gaza in 2006-2007 partly due to the PLO's inefficiency and corruption. However, Hamas's militant actions against Israel from 2007 to 2023 prompted Israel to impose security measures, worsening the living conditions of ordinary Gazans. This situation, combined with Israeli resentment and hardline policies, suggests that Israel may resort to isolating or occupying Gaza, intensifying economic and security pressures, expanding settlements, and imposing stricter measures on Palestinians. Despite diplomatic rhetoric, focusing on the two-state solution seems futile, given the long-standing history of failed peace efforts since the Camp David Accords in 1978. These attempts have only fueled new conflicts and tensions between Israel and the Palestinians, hindering the establishment of a stable political and economic structure for Palestinians while posing a persistent threat to Israel's security.

Can there be peace?

In light of Benjamin Netanyahu's address to the Israeli public, where he called for preparedness for a potential 'second war of Independence,' it becomes evident that the traditional two-state solution may not be viable unless Israel takes on the role of a responsible security guarantor in the region. The escalating tensions raise concerns about the persecution of Palestinians and the possibility of further land appropriation in the West Bank. Moreover, with Iran's proximity to Hamas and its historical animosity towards Israel, there is a looming threat of the conflict

expanding into the larger Middle Eastern battleground (Sachs, 2024). The recent alleged Iranian involvement in attacks on Israel underscores the potential for escalation towards this dire scenario. Given these challenges, it becomes imperative to consider alternative approaches to foster stability and mitigate the ongoing crisis. One such approach involves pressuring Israel to halt settlement expansion and ease restrictions on Palestinian civil liberties, both within Israel and in the West Bank. Additionally, efforts to alleviate economic isolation in Gaza while acknowledging Israel's legitimate security concerns are crucial steps toward de-escalation (Cordesman, 2023). Blame games should be avoided, and instead, the focus should be on mitigating the impact of actions by both Hamas and Israel while providing substantial post-war aid to Palestinians contingent upon their commitment to non-violence and transparent management.

Addressing the root causes of Gaza's poverty and unemployment, which contribute to support for Hamas, is urgent, as is tackling economic disparities in the West Bank. However, beyond immediate humanitarian assistance, a more comprehensive solution is needed. One alternative proposed is for the United States to recognize Palestine as a state and initiate a diplomatic process to establish an interim government (Kibrik, 2023). This approach could dissuade Israel from further annexation and provide the Palestinian Authority with the necessary diplomatic clout to counter Hamas's influence, thus creating essential political stability as a foundation for pursuing the long-term goal of a two-state solution (Abulof, 2023).

In conclusion, while the prospects for a traditional two-state solution may seem increasingly bleak in the face of escalating tensions and regional complexities, there are alternative paths forward. By focusing on immediate actions to alleviate humanitarian suffering, address security concerns, and foster political stability, there remains hope for a more constructive approach to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, it will require concerted efforts, bold diplomatic initiatives, and a commitment from all parties involved to chart a new course toward lasting peace in the region.

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