

Israeli-Palestinian Conflict 101

Q: What is the Palestinian-Israeli conflict really about?

A: The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is, in essence, a conflict over territory. Although religion plays a role in defining the identities of the parties to the conflict, and for some Jews, in justifying their claims to the land, the conflict is not, fundamentally, a religious conflict.

Q: What exactly is "the occupation"?

A: In 1967, Israel defeated the neighboring Arab countries in a war that lasted only six days. At the end of that war, Israel had captured the West Bank (which includes the Eastern half of Jerusalem), the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights. (It also captured the Sinai Peninsula, but this was later returned to Egypt as part of a peace accord that holds to this day). Some of this territory was annexed, specifically the Golan Heights and East Jerusalem.

The rest of the West Bank has been under a military occupation ever since. This means that the Israeli army has complete control over these areas. Palestinians in these regions have no guarantee of civil rights. They have no government of their own other than what Israel will allow. Israel can impose total curfews on any part or all of the territory. This prevents people from traveling to work, to market or to see family members. It can prevent medical care from reaching people, and people from reaching hospitals.

Gaza retained a Jewish settler population and was under total military control until the Israeli government unilaterally withdrew soldiers and some 8,000 settlers in 2005. Israel, however, has retained full military control over Gaza's borders, airspace, and coastline, thus retaining "effective control" and thereby meeting the official definition of occupation. (See more about Gaza withdrawal and closure below.)

In addition, Israel has settled hundreds of thousands of its own citizens in these lands, in defiance of international law. [Click here to download an introduction to the settlement issue.](#) [5]

Q: Are Palestinian and Jewish citizens of Israel treated equally?

A: No. Although [Palestinian citizens of Israel](#) [6] are entitled to vote and participate in Israeli political life, and several Palestinians are members of the Knesset (the Israeli parliament), they do not receive the same treatment as the Jewish citizens at the hands of the government. Israel still applies 20 laws that privilege Jews over Arabs. For example, the 1950 Law of Return grants automatic citizenship rights to Jews from anywhere in the world upon request, while denying that same right to Palestinians. The Basic Law of Human Dignity and Freedom ensures that Israel is the state of the "Jewish

people," not its citizens. This law was passed in 1992 to serve as a "bill of rights," as Israel does not have a written constitution.

Israel's flag and other national symbols are Jewish religious symbols, not neutral or national ones that represent all the citizens of the state. Government resources, meanwhile, are disproportionately directed to Jews and not to Arabs, one factor in causing the Palestinians of Israel to suffer the lowest living standards in Israeli society by all economic indicators.

Human Rights Watch has compiled an extensive study of Israel's policy of "separate, not equal" schools for Palestinian children, finding that "Government-run Arab schools are a world apart from government-run Jewish schools. In virtually every respect, Palestinian Arab children get an education inferior to that of Jewish children, and their relatively poor performance in school reflects this."

Nearly 25% of Israel's population is not Jewish.

As many as 100 Palestinian villages in Israel, many of which pre-date the founding of the state, are not recognized by the Israeli government, and are not listed on maps and receive no services (water, electricity, sanitation, roads, etc.) from the government. More than 70,000 Palestinians live in these unrecognized villages. Meanwhile, hundreds of new Jewish towns have been established on lands confiscated from Palestinians.

Q: Did the PLO reject a "generous offer" for peace at Camp David in 2000?

A: No. In fact, there was no Israeli "offer" at all, in the sense of a comprehensive plan to resolve all outstanding differences between the parties. To the extent that Israeli positions on discrete issues could be discerned, they were not "generous." Finally, while Palestinian negotiators did not agree to Israeli demands, they did not "reject" them, but sought to continue negotiations, and offered solutions based on long-accepted principles of international law and justice.

Q: What is an *intifada*?

A: *Intifada* is an Arabic word derived from a verb meaning "to shake off," and is the term used to describe the two major uprisings against Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Q: Haven't Jews and Arabs been fighting for thousands of years? Is there really an answer?

A: In fact, Jews and Arabs have been fighting for only about a century. While Jews were facing repeated expulsion and persecution in Europe, Jews in the Muslim world, though still facing some problems, were faring much better. Jews, as People of the Book under Islamic law, were entitled to legal protections and certain rights. To be sure, they were

not the equals of Muslims, and there were incidents of anti-Semitism in many parts of the Muslim and Arab world through the centuries, some of them serious. But both the severity and the frequency of these were far lower than in Europe.

There is no doubt that the ongoing and brutal conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as the neighboring Arab states, has created a great deal of hatred on both sides. But it is simply false to say that history shows that Jews and Arabs cannot live together. They have before, and, in a modern, secular state, may well be able to do so on a much more equal footing than existed in the past.

Q: What do Palestinians seek?

A: Palestinians, depending on where they live, face different challenges and thus have different concerns. However, what they all have in common is a basic desire for freedom and equal rights.

Palestinians living in Israel seek rights that are equal to Jewish citizens of the state as well as self-determination. Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip seek an end to the Israeli military's domination of every aspect of their daily lives - whether through direct military occupation, as in the West Bank, or control from without, as in the case of the Gaza Strip - and rights to freedom and national self-determination, equal to those of other national groups. And Palestinian refugees and others living in exile want the right to return to their homes, if they so desire, or to receive compensation and support for resettlement, just like other refugee populations in the world.

Q: What was the Gaza disengagement, and how has it affected Palestinians?

A: The Gaza disengagement was part of a unilateral plan adopted by the Israeli government without consultation with the Palestinians, although with the approval of the U.S. government. The disengagement began in August 2005, when Israel evacuated approximately 8,500 civilians from 21 settlements in the Gaza Strip, and 500 more from four small settlements in the northern part of the West Bank - about 2% of the total number of Israeli settlers in the Palestinian territories.

Israeli troops began to deploy outside of the Gaza Strip, while still controlling its coastline, borders, and airspace. Israel continues to provide Gaza water, electricity, and other vital services. Israel also claims the right to intervene militarily, including preemptively, in "self-defense."

In a sense, this represents a change in the form of military occupation from direct to indirect control. Dov Weisglass, a close adviser of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, stated in an interview with the newspaper Ha'aretz in October 2004 that the plan was intended to put the peace process in "formaldehyde," to postpone the creation of a Palestinian state indefinitely, and to relieve pressure on Israel to make further withdrawals from the West Bank

Many Palestinians see the Gaza disengagement and the intensification of colonization of the West Bank as two faces of a unified policy whereby Israel will rid itself of responsibility for Palestinians, while maximizing its control of their land.

After Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip in 2007, Israel closed Gaza's border crossings. They began severely limiting food, fuel, medical and other supplies. The free flow of people has been severely limited as well. This closure has been widely condemned as a form of collective punishment in violation of international and Israeli law. Some restrictions were loosened after the Mavi Marmara incident in which members of a flotilla bringing aid to Gaza were killed by the Israeli military. Nonetheless, the closure continues with no end in sight, and according to the UN and Save the Children, 10% of children suffer from stunting (long-term exposure to chronic malnutrition), 39% of people lived below the poverty line and more than 90% of the water supplied through Gaza's aquifer does not meet the safety standards of the World Health Organization and is unfit for drinking.

Download human rights group Gisha's [fact sheet](#) [7] on the Gaza closure.
See Professor Stephen Shalom's [quiz on Gaza](#) [8] for comprehensive facts and citations.

Q: What is Israel's separation wall or barrier?

A: In October 2003, Israel began construction on a "separation barrier" in the occupied West Bank, justifying it on security grounds. The barrier consists, in places, of a wall twenty-five feet high, razor wire, trenches, sniper towers, electrified fences, military roads, electronic surveillance, and buffer zones that sometimes reach 100 meters in width. Much of the wall will be built on lands confiscated from Palestinian landowners within the West Bank - not within Israel's own territory. Many Palestinian homes, business, orchards, and other valuable assets in the route of the wall have been destroyed.

The wall has been challenged repeatedly before the Israeli High Court, which has several times ordered the military to re-route specific sections of the wall, although the court has held that a wall built on Palestinian lands does not, in principle, violate international law. However, the wall must be militarily justified and conform to the principle of "proportionality" (that is, that the burdens imposed on civilians are proportional to the security benefits achieved through the military's action).

The wall was also the subject of a case before the International Court of Justice. The ICJ ruling, announced in July 2004, held that the wall is illegal, must be dismantled, and ordered Israel to compensate Palestinians damaged by the wall's construction. It also called upon third-party states to ensure Israel's compliance with the judgment. Although an advisory opinion, and therefore not binding on the parties, the ICJ judgment is an authoritative statement of the status of the wall in international law. In the course of the opinion, all fifteen judges of the court found Israeli settlements in the Occupied Territories, including East Jerusalem, to violate international law.

The wall has become the focus of weekly protests across the West Bank over the last

five years. Led by Palestinians, these protests have used nonviolent techniques like sit-ins and roadblocks and have drawn increasing support from Israelis and internationals.;

Q: What happened during Israel's 2008 invasion of Gaza?

A: According to the Goldstone Report, and corroborated by Israeli and international human rights groups, the Israel Defence Force (IDF) and Palestinian armed groups had committed war crimes and possibly crimes against humanity. While the report condemned violations by both sides, it clearly differentiated between the moral and legal severity of the violations of the Israeli forces compared to those of Hamas and other less culpable Palestinian armed groups. "The following grave breaches of the Fourth Geneva Convention were committed by Israeli forces in Gaza: wilful killing, torture or inhuman treatment, willfully causing great suffering or serious injury to body or health, and extensive destruction of property, not justified by military necessity and carried out unlawfully and wantonly. As grave breaches these acts give rise to individual criminal responsibility."