

# Middle East in Transition

## LESSON 3: THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT UPDATE

The conflict between Arabs and Israelis continues to be a major flashpoint in the Middle East. A number of important events since the turn of the century show both the complexities of this protracted conflict as well as its importance to global peace and security ([click here to see Table 1, “Key Events in the Middle East Peace Process Since September 11”](#)).

### **Prospects for Peace: 2002–2004**

In response to escalating violence in 2002, the European Union, the United Nations, Russia, and the United States (the “Quartet”) drafted a new peace plan, dubbed the “road map” to peace. The plan called for both sides to carry out concessions at the same time. Over three years these concessions would progress to the resolution of all disputes and the creation of an independent Palestinian state. The first phase of the plan required Palestinians to make “visible efforts” to stop violence. Israelis were required to dismantle all settlements built since March 2001, as well as freeze all new settlement activity. However, introduction of the plan was postponed after Israel and the United States insisted that Palestinians first undertake major reforms in the institutions of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). In particular, they wanted PNA leader Yasser Arafat replaced.

Pressure to reform the Palestinian National Authority had been building for some time. This pressure came not only from the international community, but also from Palestinians frustrated with the corrupt and authoritarian nature of Arafat’s administration. By March 2003, the Palestinian parliament created the post of prime minister. The prime minister was made responsible for the day-to-day running of Palestinian affairs. The parliament’s approval of the new prime minister, Mahmoud Abbas, and his cabinet in late April marked a tentative but symbolic power shift away from Yasser Arafat. This change was widely viewed as a turning point in the peace process, because it satisfied a key U.S. demand for moving ahead with the “road map” peace plan. The plan was formally introduced on April 30, 2003.

Initially, there was reason for optimism. Despite strong opposition by his most ardent supporters, in May 2003 Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon persuaded his cabinet to accept the “road map.” In June, Abbas persuaded the Islamist groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad to declare a unilateral, three-month cease-fire. He also got a cease-fire agreement from Fatah, the largest Palestinian political movement, long tied to Arafat. Abbas staked his political reputation on the cease-fire.

However, in late August, a Palestinian suicide bombing in Jerusalem and Israel’s assassination of a Hamas political leader, Ismail Abu Shanab, effectively ended the cease-fire. Having lost much of his political support, Mahmoud Abbas resigned on September 6, 2003. Officially, Abbas said his resignation was due to Israel’s slowness in implementing its commitments under the “road map.” He also blamed the United States for failing to exert pressure on the Israelis. But Abbas also made it clear that his resignation was due in large part to a power struggle with Arafat that had undermined Abbas’s ability to govern. Abbas accused Arafat of refusing to turn over power, particularly over the PNA’s security forces, and of working behind the scenes to undercut his

government. Arafat was able to portray attempts by Abbas to gain authority as part of an Israeli-American conspiracy to unseat him.

Arafat quickly nominated Ahmed Qurei as the new prime minister and reassumed much of his former power. Qurei announced his opposition to the armed *Intifada* and his commitment to the “road map.” He also made it clear that Arafat would have to be involved if the peace process were to succeed. Despite having the trust of Arafat, the new prime minister faced the same fundamental dilemma as Mahmoud Abbas. Support from Israel and the United States was based on his ability to crackdown on Palestinian militants. But without some tangible benefits to show the Palestinian people, Palestinian public support would not tolerate this crackdown.

In 2004, the second Palestinian *Intifada* entered its fourth year and peace between Israelis and Palestinians seemed as far away as ever. Each side was either unable or unwilling to fulfill the first steps in the “road map” peace plan. In February, Israeli Prime Minister Sharon announced a unilateral disengagement plan. He was motivated not only by the seeming failure of the peace process and repeated terrorist attacks, but also by the demographic reality that if Israel were to hold onto Gaza and other occupied territories, it would eventually become a state in which Palestinians outnumbered Jews. Sharon did not believe that Israel could remain an occupying force over millions of Palestinians over the long term. His plan aimed to separate Israelis and Palestinians without a negotiated settlement. Sharon called for a dismantlement of Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip and the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the area. He also called for a strengthening of settlements in the West Bank. The other key component of the plan was the completion of a 400-mile-long separation barrier or wall.

The disengagement plan alternately drew praise and criticism from different parts of the Israeli and Palestinian populations. The proposal to withdraw from Gaza was strongly opposed by Sharon’s own Likud party and the settlers themselves. However, it received majority support from the Israeli population as a whole. Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei cautiously endorsed the idea provided that it was a first step to ending Israel’s occupation of all the occupied territories. However, many Palestinians, including Yasser Arafat, questioned Israel’s broader overall plan.

Israel’s security barrier is supported by many Israelis because it is widely seen as an effective deterrent against Palestinian terrorist attacks. But it is very controversial internationally and condemned by Palestinians because it does not follow the 1967 borders of the West Bank and Israel. Instead, it cuts deep into the occupied territories, effectively annexing Palestinian land that is meant to be the subject of future negotiations. The path of the barrier is also criticized because it traps Palestinian communities in separate enclaves and restricts their freedom of movement. Palestinians say the barrier turns their communities into prisons.

The United States largely backed the disengagement plan. Also, during a meeting with Sharon in April 2004, President Bush declared that a final settlement should not require that Israel withdraw to the 1967 borders and that Palestinian refugees should not have the right of return to their homes. These statements infuriated Palestinian leaders who said that Israel and the United States had no right to determine the terms of a final settlement. The United States defended its policy, saying that it was only describing what was realistic given the facts on the ground.

## **Prospects for Peace: 2005–2007**

A turning point in Israeli-Palestinian relations came in November 2004 when Arafat died in a Paris hospital. In January 2005, former Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas won the Palestinian presidential election. This victory raised hopes that the peace process could finally get back on track. The United States and Israel quickly expressed their willingness to work with Abbas.

Abbas then deployed Palestinian police throughout Gaza in an attempt to stop attacks on Israeli settlers. Israel responded by stopping its offensive military operations. These steps led to a summit between Abbas and Sharon in Egypt in February 2005. At the summit, the two leaders declared a cease-fire and pledged to work toward the creation of an independent Palestinian state. Indeed, throughout 2005 and into 2006, a tentative calm prevailed, but significant tensions remained. Two key factors were added to the complex conflict.

First, Abbas's political power became increasingly threatened by the rising popularity of Hamas. In response, Abbas tried to get Hamas to enter the political arena. As a result, throughout 2005, Hamas participated in municipal elections, gaining significant representation. Based on Hamas's strong showing in the local elections, the group was widely expected to do well in national parliamentary elections, scheduled for July 2005. But in June, Abbas announced that he was postponing the elections. This decision was widely viewed as a political maneuver designed to reverse the momentum of Hamas. The prospect of a Palestinian National Authority ruled by Hamas alarmed not only Abbas and the old guard in Fatah, but also Israel and the United States. Indeed, when parliamentary elections were held in January 2006, Hamas won a decisive victory, creating a crisis for the international community, which provides nearly half of the Palestinian government's budget.<sup>1</sup> After Hamas's Ismail Haniya was sworn in as prime minister in March, Western donors cut off direct aid. Israel refused to deal with the Hamas government.

Second, the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza was completed in September 2005. Roughly 9,000 Israeli settlers were required to leave, and the Israeli army largely destroyed their settlements. Then, in November 2005, Israeli Prime Minister Sharon made the dramatic decision to break with Likud and form a centrist party, Kadima. However, Sharon suffered a severe stroke in January 2006. His deputy, Ehud Olmert, took over, and led Kadima to an election victory in March. Olmert vowed to continue Sharon's plans for Israel, including withdrawing from more territory and establishing final borders.

Amidst escalating tensions in June 2006, Palestinian militants, including militants associated with the military wing of Hamas, killed two Israeli soldiers, wounded three, and kidnapped another in an attack on an Israeli army outpost near Gaza. The move sparked significant Israeli incursions into Gaza in an attempt to rescue the soldier and stop Palestinian rocket fire into Israel. Then, in July, the Lebanese extremist group Hezbollah launched an attack into Israel, leaving eight Israeli soldiers dead and two captured. Israel responded by undertaking a massive bombing campaign in Lebanon, blocking Lebanese ports, and sending forces into southern Lebanon for the first time in six years. Israel was now essentially fighting a two-front battle. Hezbollah countered Israeli tactics by firing thousands of rockets into Israel. Concern over the deepening crisis led the United Nations to negotiate a cease-fire between Israel and Hezbollah, which went into effect in August. While Israel did not meet its goals of debilitating Hezbollah

and freeing the captured Israeli soldiers, the group was forced to retreat further from the Israeli border and a strengthened UN multinational force was put into place in southern Lebanon.

In November 2006, a surprise cease-fire agreement between Israeli and Palestinian leaders resulted in an Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. In December, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas held their first formal meeting in an effort to revive the peace process. Still, major steps toward peace have been stymied as both Israelis and the Palestinians grapple with their next steps. The captured Israeli soldier has not been released. Antagonism between Fatah and Hamas led to significant violence between them beginning in late 2006. While the Saudi government helped foster an agreement on forming a unity government between the two sides in March, the guiding document for this coalition did not meet the international community's demands that Hamas recognize Israel, renounce violence, and accept previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements.

In April 2007, an official Israeli investigative commission accused Prime Minister Olmert of "a serious failure in exercising judgment, responsibility and prudence" in the management of the war with Lebanon in summer 2006. The report spurred calls for Olmert's resignation, but he remains in power. On the other side of the divide, complex factional rivalries and the inability for Hamas leaders to accept Israel and renounce violence led to renewed violence between Fatah and Hamas in May and June. Hamas forces took firm control in the Gaza Strip, with Fatah holding sway in the West Bank. After the battle, President Abbas dismissed the Hamas-led unity government and appointed an emergency government led by Salam Fayyad.

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Wilson, "5 Palestinians Killed in Gaza Strip; Deaths Are First in Two Weeks to Result From Factional Fighting," *Washington Post*, January 4, 2007.