

A Historical Perspective on the Arab-Israeli Conflict and Peace Process

Lesson V: Unresolved Issues in the Arab-Israeli Conflict

Unresolved Issues in the Arab-Israeli Conflict

Progress has been made toward solving the broader Arab-Israeli regional conflict. Egypt and Jordan, which were among the five Arab states that invaded Israel when it declared independence in 1948, both have peace treaties with Israel today. Israel has endorsed the idea of an independent Palestinian state, a key Arab demand, and has supported the creation of a Palestinian government called the Palestinian Authority. The Arab League, which declared in the Khartoum Resolution of 1967 that Arab states would not make peace with Israel, would not recognize Israel, and would not negotiate with Israel, has now stated that the Arab states would accept peace if Israel meets the demands in the Arab Peace Initiative. In addition to fundamental issues between some of Israel's Arab neighbors and Israel, a comprehensive peace also remains difficult to achieve because of the major unresolved issues that divide Israel and the Palestinians.

Diplomatic Relations

Since its founding in 1945, the Arab League has maintained a hostile stance toward Israel and an official economic boycott. After the 1967 War, the league passed the Khartoum resolution calling for no peace, no recognition, and no negotiations with Israel. Currently, only Egypt, Jordan, and Mauritania have diplomatic relations with Israel (following the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty, the league suspended Egypt's membership for a decade).

In March 2002, the Arab League proposed and endorsed the Arab Peace Initiative, a plan including full recognition of Israel by all Arab League states. The proposal offered Israel peace in return for Israeli withdrawal from all territories captured in the 1967 War, recognition of an independent Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital, and a "just solution" for Palestinian refugees. The proposal is viewed by some as a major breakthrough given the stance of Arab nations since the Khartoum Resolution in 1967.

Israel welcomed the proposal, but does not accept all of its demands, particularly that it withdraw to the pre-1967 borders as a precondition to negotiations. Many Israelis doubt the sincerity of the Arab League peace plan in light of ongoing incitement by Arab leaders and Arab media, inaccurate and revisionist information in Arab school textbooks, hostile public demonstrations, and intermittent attacks by some Arab League member states on Israel.

Final Borders

In the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel gained control of Gaza and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria. Following the war, Israel stated that it would return most of the land in exchange for peace and recognition of its right to exist as an independent state. Israel's territorial gains in 1967 provided it with borders that could be defended more easily against invading armies. It also provided better sites for radar to detect and respond to incoming air attacks. Israel argues that it has been attacked and threatened by its neighbors since its founding, that it gained the territory in a war of self-defense, and that binding UN resolutions recognize its right to secure borders. Accordingly, the government of Israel argues that it must retain control of some post-1967 areas to ensure the country's security.

Israel completely withdrew from the Sinai Peninsula after Egypt and Israel signed a peace treaty in 1979 and it completely withdrew from Gaza in 2005.

Arab leaders state that Israel must completely withdraw to pre-1967 borders. They argue that Israel cannot keep any land gained by war, no matter the circumstances.

Disagreements about final borders affect negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians over the future of the

Subject-Specific Vocabulary

The *green line* refers to the military demarcation lines established in the 1949 Armistice Agreements between Israel its neighbors (Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria) after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. The *green line* became significant in Israel after the Six-Day War in 1967, when, as a result of the war, Israel gained territories beyond the green line.

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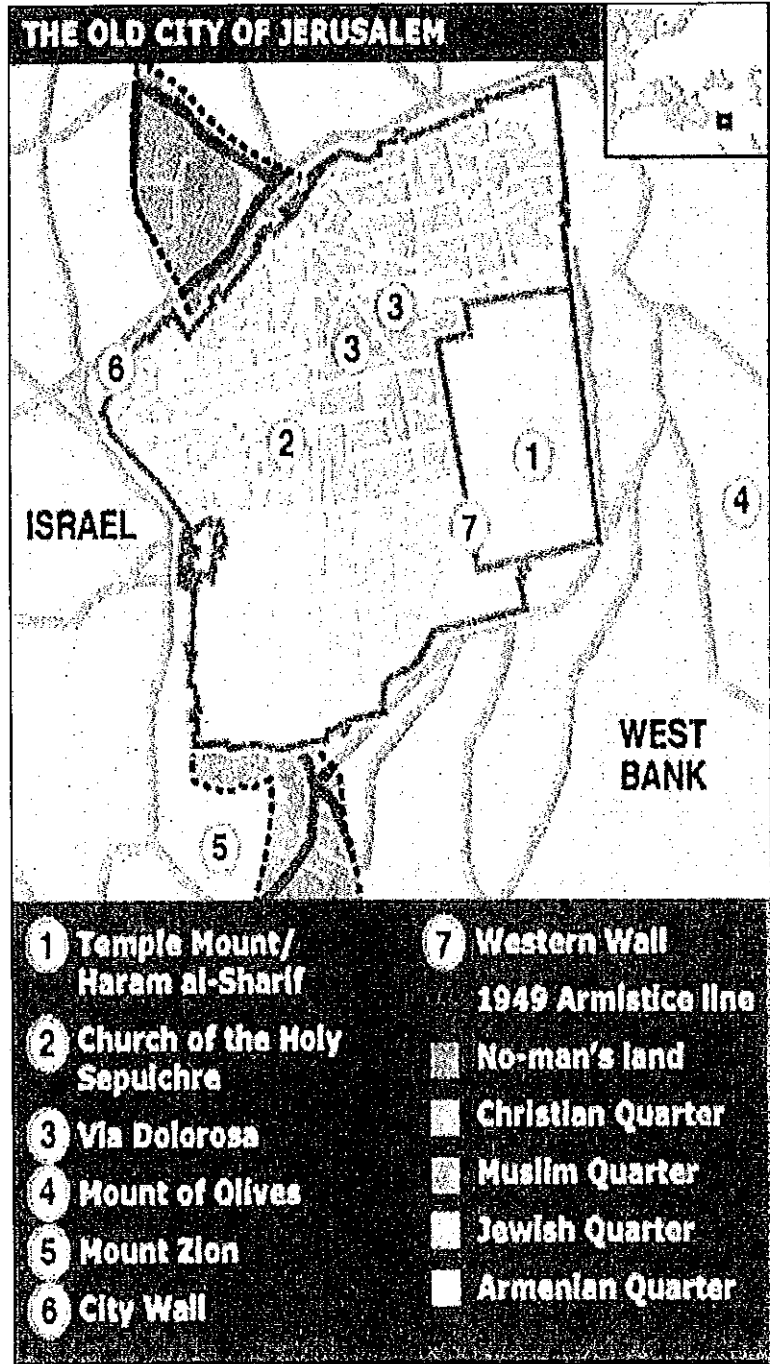
West Bank (Jordan relinquished its claim to the West Bank in 1988) and negotiations between Israel and Syria over the Golan Heights. Practically speaking, all negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians have included the principle of land swaps, with Israel retaining large settlement blocks near the *green line* (the Armistice demarcation lines from 1949) in exchange for giving the Palestinians comparable amounts of land from Israel.

Jerusalem

Jerusalem is a holy city for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The majority of the holy sites for all three religions are in a section of East Jerusalem called the Old City. Israeli law ensures that all religious groups have access to and control over their own holy sites.

Palestinians demand that Israel recognize an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. Israel has endorsed the idea of an independent Palestinian state, but most Israelis feel that Jerusalem should remain Israel's undivided capital. They argue that Judaism's most important holy sites are in East Jerusalem, that Jerusalem was the undivided capital of previous Jewish states, that Jews everywhere have expressed deep connections to Jerusalem for millennia, and that Jews lived in East Jerusalem from antiquity until 1948. In 1948, the Jewish community in East Jerusalem was evicted by the conquering Jordanian army. From that time until June 1967, Jews were not allowed to enter East Jerusalem where the Jewish holy sites are located. As a result, most Israeli Jews are reluctant to give up control.

Palestinians argue that some of the most holy Islamic sites are in East Jerusalem and must be part of a Palestinian state. Palestinians say that they will maintain free access to the religious sites of all religious groups. They also highlight the facts that Jerusalem is an important cultural center for Palestinians and that most of the residents of East Jerusalem are Palestinian.



Jerusalem's Holy Sites. Source: BBC News

Refugees

Another major unresolved issue is the status of the approximately 700,000 Palestinian refugees who fled their homes in 1948. Today, the number of refugees and their descendants approaches 4 million individuals who live in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, other Arab countries, the West Bank, Gaza, and elsewhere (including the U.S. and Europe). They claim a "right of return" to Israel that Israel rejects.

Most Israelis argue that there would be no refugees if Arabs had accepted the UN Partition Plan and had not attacked the fledgling State of Israel causing the 1948 war. They note that the Israeli Declaration of Independence guaranteed full equality for non-Jews and that approximately 20% of Israel's citizens are Arabs who chose to remain in Israel during the war and their descendants. Most Arabs counter that Israeli forces played a role in creating the refugee population and the cause of the conflict should not affect the right of refugees.

Two populations of refugees - Palestinian Arabs as well as Jews from Arab countries - emerged as a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The vast majority of the 800,000 Jewish refugees from the Middle East and North Africa do not seek to return to their former homelands where they were persecuted. As with most other displaced populations in modern times they have integrated fully in their new homes. Israel argues that other groups in similar situations have not had the right to return. It also says that binding UN Resolutions do not speak of a "right of return," but rather reference a "just settlement of the refugee problem." Israelis point out that this vague wording equally applies to the comparable number of Jewish refugees who fled from Arab countries due to persecution. Many Israelis feel that since they absorbed Jewish refugees from Arab states, the West Bank, Gaza, and neighboring Arab states should have absorbed Palestinian Arab refugees.

Academic Vocabulary
A refugee is defined as a person who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country or return there because there is a fear of persecution..."
1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (the Refugee Convention).

Many Palestinians argue that there is a "right to return" to Israel proper and that the refugees and their descendants should be compensated. Some Palestinians support this in the hopes of changing the demographics in such a way that Israel would no longer have a Jewish majority. Recognizing this, many Israelis reject this demand which they see as tantamount to the destruction of Israel and Jewish self-determination. Some Palestinians focus on securing a right of return for all refugees and displaced Palestinians to an independent state in the West Bank and Gaza. Israel supports a Palestinian return to a future independent Palestinian state, but not to Israel. Some Palestinians and Israelis have suggested that recognizing the plight of the Palestinian refugees and giving them some form of monetary compensation might be a solution, while other Israelis feel this is too much of a concession and other Palestinians feel this is insufficient.

Security Needs

The sides disagree about how to balance Israel's security needs with Palestinian independence. Israel argues that it is prepared to give up territory for the promise of peace, asserting that its citizens need to feel confident that they will be safe in their country. For example, Israelis insist that the West Bank must be demilitarized with no heavy weapons such as tanks. They point out that within its 1967 borders Israel is only nine miles wide at its narrowest point making it difficult to respond to an attack and leaving Israel vulnerable to being cut in half by invading armies.

Palestinians insist that their state should not be different from other states, so there should not be any restrictions or bans on heavy weapons.

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Lesson V: Unresolved Issues in the Arab-Israeli Conflict

Settlements

Returning to the 1967 borders is also complicated by the existence of Israeli communities in the West Bank known as settlements. Israel originally established settlements to serve as security outposts for Israel's main population areas and to restore Jewish communities that were destroyed when Arab states invaded in 1948. However, beginning in the 1970s, the number of settlements grew. Israelis move to settlements for a variety of reasons. Some are motivated by ideology, which holds that Jews should have the right to live anywhere in the historical Jewish homeland where important Jewish history took place. Many other Israelis are motivated by cost of living considerations and the availability of more affordable housing close to Israel's major cities. Israeli opinion on the settlements is not monolithic. However, most Israelis see a difference between building in parts of Jerusalem or in the communities just over the green line and between the more remote/isolated settlements in the West Bank.

Most Arabs feel that settlements are illegal and that Israelis cannot live on land gained in the 1967 War. The Palestinian Authority has gone so far as to make selling land to Jews a capital offense, punishable by death. Palestinians view all building beyond the green line as a provocation and say that it is a sign of Israel's lack of commitment to the two-state solution. They also criticize Israel for its security measures to protect Israelis in the West Bank. For example, Palestinians argue that checkpoints designed to stop attackers make travel more difficult for Palestinians.

While Israel insists on the legality of the settlements, it is willing to discuss removing them and negotiations have included discussion on this topic. Israel notes that it proved its willingness dismantle settlements for peace as it withdrew completely from the Sinai Peninsula following its peace treaty with Egypt and from Gaza in 2005.

Israeli and Palestinian peace negotiators have accepted the principle of a land-swap in which Israel would give up land elsewhere in exchange for keeping large settlements. However, the two sides have not been able to agree on precisely which land would be swapped.

Water Resources

The right to use water resources is a major political issue that impacts the Arab-Israeli conflict and peace process. For example, in 1964, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon attempted to divert rivers that supplied Israel with water. After issuing warnings, Israel launched military strikes to prevent the plan. Agreements over how to share water resources were important parts of the 1994 peace treaty between Israel and Jordan and of the 1995 agreement between Israel and the Palestinians known as Oslo II. They also influence peace talks between Syria and Israel. In 1967, Israel expressed willingness to withdraw from the Golan Heights in exchange for peace, but this offer was rebuffed with the Khartoum Resolution by the Arab states. Syria insists that Israel withdraw completely to the pre-1967 lines which would give Syria partial control over the Sea of Galilee, one of Israel's major water resources. Given the water shortages in the region, this is a critical matter.

"Once you build trust on one issue – water in our case – there's no limitation as to where that trust can take you," Gidon Bromberg, Israeli director of EcoPeace Middle East.

"We can't wait until peace arrives someday. The problems faced by the environment and the people here are just too urgent." Munqeth Mehyar, Jordanian director of EcoPeace Middle East.

"War will not generate water, but peace can." Nader Al-Khateeb, Palestinian director of EcoPeace Middle East.

EcoPeace Middle East brings together Israeli, Jordanian, and Palestinian environmentalists, promoting cooperative efforts to protect the region's shared environmental heritage.

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Lesson V: Unresolved Issues in the Arab-Israeli Conflict

The distribution of water resources also impacts negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Underground aquifers cross the borders between Israel and the West Bank and between Israel and Gaza.

Though the Palestinian Authority and Israel agreed to share this water in the 1995 Oslo II agreement, many Palestinians feel the agreement should be changed because it gives Israel a larger share of the water. Palestinians note that Oslo II was an interim agreement and that the final agreement should give them rights to more of the water. Many Israelis feel the issue was already the subject of negotiations that reached a mutually agreed upon decision and should not be renegotiated.

This is a sensitive subject due to the scarcity of water in the region but one which has shown promising examples of regional cooperation among Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority primarily through the work of grass-roots, non-governmental organizations.