

GLOBAL  CONFLICTS

# CHECKPOINTS



SERIOUS GAMES  
INTERACTIVE

## Topic Overview

  
**CHECKPOINTS**

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## **Topic overview: Israeli-Palestinian conflict**

The truth about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is among the most contested in the world. This quick guide does not attempt to present one objective truth but rather to provide a balanced overview of the conflict in a condensed and accessible form.

The conflict between Israelis and Palestinian has taken place over the last 4000 years in a land area referred to as Israel or Palestine depending on the time period or one's point of view. During its long history, the size, population and ownership of the area have varied greatly.

### ***History of Israel and Palestine***

To some history is a straightforward business that at its core deals with the factual accounts of past events. However, any account of past events involves a certain amount of interpretation. You may downplay some elements and stress others – indeed history is as common a battleground for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the Sinai Desert. The truth about the conflict is often supported by reference to historical sources. The choice of these references is often informed by a specific purpose, and a critical approach is therefore important to grasp the complexity of the conflict.

History is for example used to support or undermine (depending on ones agenda and viewpoint) the legitimacy of the state of Israel – the same is the case for a future Palestinian state.

### **Early history: 1500 BC - 1920 A.D**

The area was initially known as the Land of Canaan. At this time several tribes lived in the areas. The Land of Canaan was part of the Egyptian empire until 1500 BC. At this time the 12 Hebrew tribes invaded from Egypt and the Kingdom of David was established, but constantly challenged by invading armies and civil war. Until 640 AD the invading armies included the Babylonian Empire, the Persian Empire, the Macedonian Empire, the Byzantine Empire and the Roman Empire of which several were more or less successful in subduing the ancient Israel.

In 640 AD with the newly founded Islam in the back the Arabs conquered the land and lay the ground to the Arab Moslem majority today. For more than a 1000 years the land changed hand between different Moslem conquerors (except the crusader states from 1096-1291 AD) with the Ottoman Empire as the last. The Ottoman Empire had to relinquished control in 1917 with its defeat in First World War. The two victors France and the United Kingdom enacted the Sykes-Picot agreement. In the agreement the Middle East was split into spheres of influence belonging to each of the two powers. In 1917 the Balfour Declaration was also written by United Kingdom. The Balfour Declaration was really a classified letter that expressed the first more formal support from a major state for the establishment of a Jewish state.

### **Recent history: 1920 - 1979 A.D**

United Kingdom established the British Palestine Mandate in 1920 that lasted until 1948 where the United Nations decided that the land of Israel/Palestine should be split into an Arab State and a Jewish state. The United Nations decision came after a large inflow of Jewish settlers and refugees that steadily increased from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The immigration exploded in numbers with Second World War and the holocaust where millions of Jews were killed by Nazi-Germany.

The modern state of Israel was born in blood, war and terror from the start. The Jews on

one side desperate for a safe haven after the atrocities of Second World War willing to go to extremes to secure a homeland. On the other side the Arabs just as bewildered and desperate to hold on to what they found to be their rightful land. Within weeks after the declaration of the state of Israel the surrounding Arab states invaded the fledgling state. However, after initial Arab victories Israel came out victorious and dealt the Arab states a devastating blow they are still recovering from. This also laid the foundation to the current refugee problem as between 400.000 and 800.000 Palestinians became refugees in neighboring countries unwilling to assimilate them. The conflict also caused an indefensible situation for upwards of 800.000 of Jews living in Arab countries. Almost 500.000 of these settled in Israel up through the 1970s with support from the state of Israel. The young state of Israel also had a huge intake of Russian Jews from 1970s and until today more than 1 millions Russian Jews have settled in Israel.

The years after the establishment of the modern state of Israel were tormented by a number of wars (1947-49, 1956, 1967, 1969-70, 1973, 1982 and 2006) between Israel and its neighbors, which expanded the area of Israel considerable. The Six Days war in 1967 established Israel as the leading military force in the region. The last major war in 1973 put Israel on the brink on destruction but in the end Israel prevailed. The war in 1973 led to the conclusion of peace with Egypt in 1979, where Israel handed back the Sinai Dessert conquered in the Six Days War. Israel concluded peace with Jordan in 1994 but is still officially at war with their neighbors Syria and Lebanon.

The many wars led to the refugee problem, the forming of a Palestinian liberation movement, the establishment of Israeli settlements and the increasing amount of terrorism.

### **Modern history: 1980 -**

From the late 1970s the Palestinians increasingly felt left to their own devices to ensure the founding of their own state. Although, supported by the Arab countries and many major powers they felt low on the list of priorities. The defeat of the Arab nations became the real birth of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) that gained in power with Yassir Arafat who took the faith of the Palestinians into his own hands with a militant line. Over the years Palestinian nationalism expanded, and in connection with harder economic times in the mid 1980s led to the first popular uprising, known as the first Intifada that broke out in 1987. The first Intifada slowed down in 1991. In 1994 one of the most ambitious peace attempts so far was signed in Oslo. The Oslo accords created the Palestinian National Authority that was given power to negotiate with Israel and to govern areas of the Gaza and the West Bank that were evacuated by Israel. The following years Israel in line with the peace agreement withdrew from some areas but increasingly the peace process came to a stop.

In 2000 United States hosted a meeting in Camp David where the final settlements from the Oslo accords were to be planned. However, the talks quickly came to a standstill. The Palestinians insisted that all refugees should have the right to return to Israel, which would produce an Arab majority in Israel. Israel insisted on annexing portions of the Palestinian areas and was unwilling to dismantle most settlements. Shortly after the failure in Camp David the second Intifada broke out.

In 2005 Israel single-handedly decided to leave Gaza and dismantle its settlements that had been occupying Gaza since 1970. The retreat from Gaza was hugely debated in Israel and the exit involved several clashes between the Israeli military, uprooted settlers and sympathy groups from all of Israel.

After Israel's exit from Gaza it became clear that Hamas, a religious party and militant

organization, controlled Gaza, and would continue to strike at Israel. This was further stressed by the Hamas earthquake victory in the Palestinian elections in early 2006 that completely capsize any peace talks as Hamas are on the terror list of most countries and set on the destruction of Israel. Peace talks were further set back in 2006 when Israel invaded south Lebanon to stop rockets attacks from Hezbollah on Israeli villages and force the return of a kidnapped Israeli soldier.

Currently several peace initiatives are on the table with different sponsoring bodies including United States, Saudi Arabia, European Union and Russia. However, the vicious cycle of violence is giving all proposals a slim chance of success.

## **Major themes**

Global Conflicts: Checkpoints focuses on a number of the issues that are central in the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict but have roots far back.

### **Zionism, persecution & nationalism**

The persecution of Jews has been known throughout most of the world history with incidents in Spain, Russia, England, Poland and Germany among the highpoints the last 1000 years. It usually goes under the name anti-Semitism which refers to hostility or prejudice against Jews based on their religion, race, or ethnic group.

The persecution of Jews intensified in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when nationalism grew stronger. The presence of an alleged alien group like the Jews proved strong in uniting people under the same flag. Just what was needed in a number of countries to build a strong national state?

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century this leads to the conclusion among some Jews that a home land must be created, where Jews can feel safe and do not risk persecution. The idea of creating a Jewish national state is labeled Zionism, and can be seen as the Jewish version of the growing nationalism in Europe.

The wheels were set in motion by Leon Pinsker's book in 1881 that criticize that so far Jews have not been assimilated and accepted in the countries they have fled to. However, it is Theodor Herzl that in 1896 with his book *Der Judenstaat* really put the ideas together. He founds the World Zionist Organization that is instrumental in bringing about the state of Israel.

Today anti-Semitism is still found in most countries, and is especially blatant in the Arab world. Arab leaders and media publicly demonize Jews calling for the destruction of the Jewish state.

### **Palestinian resistance, nationalism & martyrs**

Palestinian resistance against Jewish influence in Israel/Palestine started in the 1920s when Jewish immigration rose, and is maintained on a quite high level even if the world, alliances, and resources have changed significantly. Two developments that have proved instrumental in the resistance fights are nationalism and martyrs that have provided a shared point of reference for the resistance.

The Palestinian nationalism is often contested as a recently constructed concept with no real roots in history. Indeed, the very idea of nationalism is of a very recent date in most countries, and evolves even later in the Arab world with the late independence from the colonial powers. The Palestinian nationalism was especially put on the map with the high profile terrorist attacks in the 1970s during the Olympics in Munich and the hijacking of several planes.

Increasingly, the establishment of a Palestinian state rather than an Arab state won the acceptance from most countries. Even Israel has accepted to negotiate with representatives for a Palestinian state. Nationalism was important to formulate a shared vision for disgruntled Palestinians and unite different struggling groups. For some time it looked to be a successful endeavor with the strength of Yassir Arafat, PLO and Fatah, but since 2005 Arafat has died and the Palestinians have moved dangerously close to civil war over what constitutes a Palestinian state. Hamas wants a state with strong roots in Islam whereas Fatah supports a secular state.

In the resistance fight the concept of martyrs found a special place. Martyrs (shahids) are victims in the resistance whether by choice or chance. The children killed by stray bullets are martyrs just like the suicide bombers killing innocent civilian Israelis. Martyrs play a large part in the Palestinian society as role models to gather around in the resistance against Israel. The martyrs have given the ultimate sacrifice and for that is rewarded a place in paradise. The use of suicide bombs and the support of the bombers by some Moslem religious leaders regularly spark controversy.

### **Terrorism & security**

Throughout the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century Israel/Palestine have been haunted by numerous terrorist attacks from both sides, although the Palestinians have by far used this weapon most frequently. Terrorist attacks especially from Jewish groups during the time of the British mandate were instrumental in forcing the United Kingdoms to give up Palestine, and hand over the responsibility to the United Nations that decided on the partition plan in 1947.

As the Palestinians have increasingly become the weak part in the conflict they have been more prone to use terrorist attacks as a weapon that does not require many resources both directly at Israel with bombs and in other countries often through hijacking and kidnapping. Indeed, most Palestinian groups were founded with the aim of destroying Israel. In contrast Israel can rely on their superior military to ensure their security, which was not possible prior to the establishment of the modern state of Israel. Israel sees itself as restraining its use of power constantly in the conflict, but forced to curb the numerous acts of terrorism from different Palestinian groups. On the other hand many Palestinians see their fight against Israel as a freedom fight, where they need to resort to the means at hand against a superior enemy – including acts of terrorism.

The terrorist attacks towards civilian Israelis have led Israel to enforce increasingly harsh security measures in the form of military raids, check points, collective punishment, security fences and discrimination against Palestinian residents. Many Palestinians are stopped from going to work or school in Israel causing standard of living to suffer. Palestinians who get through the checkpoint are thoroughly searched and wait in long lines. There have also been incidents where innocent civilians were harmed due to overzealous Israeli soldiers or even direct harassment. This has led to heavy criticism of Israel that is charged with breaking human rights on an almost daily basis.

Although, there is evidence that security measures of Israel are effective in reducing terror attacks they also lead to the alienation of innocent Palestinian. This alienation may in the long run decrease the chances of peace. Indeed the recent success of Hamas in the elections for the Palestinian Parliament is to a large extent a result of Hamas' hard line towards Israel (and the corruption rampant under the ruling secular party Fatah) that strikes a cord with an increasing amount of Palestinians. The success of Hamas has been further bolstered by Israel's exit from South-Lebanon in 2000 and Gaza in 2005. South-Lebanon is ruled by the religious/terrorist/political/social organization Hezbollah that is supported strongly by Iran. Many Palestinians are convinced that arms rather than talks brought about the Israeli

retreat– including terror attacks as the strongest weapon in the Palestinian arsenal.

## **Settlements**

Settlements are closely ingrained in the Israel self-understanding as crucial to the founding of the state of Israel and its very soul. Settlements was used to cultivate land, and also served as defensive structures for Israel. The first settlements came in the late 1880s, where Jewish settlements were established in Israel/Palestine. The founding of the settlements was hard work before the land would be prosperous. The first settlements were often founded near historical significant places by dedicated pioneers from Eastern Europe. Indeed, Israel argues that the settlements are legit reestablishment of old Jewish communities. Initially, the Jewish settlements were founded by buying land from Arab landowners that did not see the settling Jews as any threat yet. However, this changed in the 1920s and 1930s, where the Jewish immigration increased.

	<b>Moslems</b>	<b>Christians</b>	<b>Jews</b>	<b>Population</b>
1922	486.100	71.500	83.800	649.100
1926	576.100	76.500	149.500	810.100
1931	693.100	89.000	174.600	966.800
1936	796.200	108.600	384.100	1.300.200
1940	881.300	120.600	463.500	1.478.000
1945	1.035.100	139.300	554.300	1.743.600

\* Between 1880 and 1920 around 70.000 Jews primarily from Eastern Europe immigrated to Palestine/Israel.

Until early 1930s the idea of settling in Israel/Palestine was not a shared vision for all Jews, although the idea was gathering momentum. In 1945 Jewish ownership in all areas of Israel/Palestine were quite limited. But it soon picked up speed.

Over the years the Israeli settlements have expanded significantly in Gaza and the West Bank. The settlements receive privileged access to roads and water as well as other benefits making it attractive even with the continuing security risks.

Most settlers are armed and there are regular clashes with Palestinians often over land, but also direct unprovoked attacks from both sides. Israeli extremist settlers have harassed Palestinians, uprooted olive trees, destroyed property, and killed several Palestinians in doubtful circumstances. Similarly, Palestinians attack settlements. Often perpetrators on both sides are not identified and almost never brought to justice.

The settlements have consistently been found to breach international law, but even despite heavy pressure from the outside Israel maintains the right to maintain and even expand the settlements that have especially been heavily expanded around Jerusalem. Some of the more religious settler groups continue to call for heavy settlements of the entire region as God has given this to them according to the Bible.

## **Human rights in the conflict**

The area of human rights is a hotly contested topic in the conflict. Indeed, many of the human rights adopted by the United Nations in the ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ are violated on regular basis. Numerous organizations try to document that especially the Israeli conduct is not within the laws set down by international conventions. The organizations are international, Palestinian and Israeli although with different focus areas. Some of the most influential ones are B’TSelem, Al Haq, Machsom Watch, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

Over the years the list of violations on both sides has remained long. On both side the

'Laws of War' and human rights are consistently broken for example with indiscriminate fire leading to unnecessary civilian casualties. Palestinian groups engage in rocket attacks and terrorist operations usually against civilian targets while the Israeli Defense forces (IDF) engage in artillery shelling, house searches and liquidation of terrorist leaders with a high risk of civilian casualties. The Israelis often use collective punishment evident from the hundreds of house demolitions of convicted or suspected terrorists homes. Often the retribution is extended to the family of the terrorist. Israelis also use civilians as human shields in military operations. Furthermore, the Israelis severely limit the freedom of movement for Palestinians through permits, checkpoints and the separation barrier (barrier consist of fence and concrete wall along the border between Israel and the West bank). Checkpoints severely limit the freedom and movement and often seem quite random and unjust to Palestinians even if they are valid from a security point of view.

The authorities on both sides have been accused of imprisonment without trial, torture and an unjust juridical system. On the Palestinian side the authorities have limited control with summary executions, rampant corruption and limited control of especially anti-Israeli criminal offense like weapons smuggling, rockets attacks and terrorist operations. The Israelis discriminate against Palestinians and detain people for long periods without trial. The consequences of the conflict for the civilian population continue to be dire. Most of the victims on both sides are civilians. Since late 2000 Israel has killed more than 3.500 Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, including 600 children. In the same period militant Palestinians have killed 1.000 Israelis both in Israel and the territories.

## **Peace**

The peace process for the conflict between the Arab world, Israel and the Palestinians has been slow and cumbersome. It has over the years attracted the attention of the super powers United States and Soviet Union, and been the scene for world politics. The United States have traditionally been an ally of Israel whereas the majority of the Arab world relied on the Soviet Union for support. However, with the end of the Cold War this has changed.

The peace process has produced a number of results over the years with Israel signing peace with Egypt and Jordan. However, this peace came only after great diplomatic efforts, and at immense cost for those state leaders signing the peace treaty as extremist from their own country subsequently killed them. Hence, the peace process is not only hindered by a number of major obstacles, but also a deep-felt antipathy in the region against peace. This antipathy is not limited to extremist groups but can be found in all countries. Although, the antipathy vary considerable over time as hope for peace goes up and down.

Over the years more than 20 major peace proposals have circulated, and many of them have been signed. However, especially the question of the Palestinians has been difficult to settle. The faith of the Palestinians has been on the peace table since 1947 but has always been sidestepped in favor of other more pressing issues. In the peace with Egypt and Jordan this was also the case. Although the Arab leaders offer moral and financial support for the Palestinian cause they are reluctant to exchange Palestinian advantages with own loss of influence and power.

Although, plans over the years have come a long way it has often been derailed by different interpretations of the treaties, lack of trust between the state leaders, Israeli security measures, and escalating violence from more or less autonomous Palestinian groups. The fundamental problems are outlined below:

- **Jerusalem, settlements & land:** Jerusalem is sacred and crucial to both

sides that see it as their natural capital. This is part of the larger question of the exact borders between the two states that are hard to draw. This is complicated by the Israeli settlements that are spread over large area of the West Bank. Palestinians are concerned about the large of number of settlements, whereas the Israelis are reluctant to evict people from their homes.

- **Security:** Israel needs to get insurance from a Palestinian state that they can maintain security when Israel withdraws. This also includes the presence of leaders that do not have blood on their hands and are credible supporters of peace. The indications so far are not very good as the Palestinian authorities have so far often been unwilling and too weak to curb the many factions attacking Israel.
- **Real sovereignty:** Palestinians are concerned that they will get an amputated state that lacks the necessary institutions, power and room to maneuver. The limitations demanded by Israel are often related to security measures, but often result in crippled Palestinian economic structures.
- **Palestinian refugees:** A solution has to be found for the many refugees from the wars. Israel will not allow them back as this would mean the end of a Jewish majority in Israel. However, the Palestinian side demands at least some kind of economic compensation and recognition of the hardships of the refugees.

The peace process remains among the most complex and important issues surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

## **Conclusion**

Hopefully, this guide has provided an overview of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that can serve as a starting point for working with the different episodes in Global Conflicts: Checkpoints.