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# The Routledge Handbook on the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict

Edited by Joel Peters and David Newman

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*Edited by Joel Peters and David Newman*

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# The Routledge Handbook on the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is one of the most prominent issues in world politics today. Few other subjects have dominated the world's headlines and have attracted such attention from policy-makers, the academic community, political analysts, and the world's media.

*The Routledge Handbook on the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict* offers a comprehensive and accessible overview of the most contentious and protracted political issues in the Middle East. Bringing together a range of top experts from Israel, Palestine, Europe, and North America, the *Handbook* tackles a range of topics, including:

- the historical background to the conflict
- peace efforts
- domestic politics
- critical issues such as settlements, borders, Jerusalem and refugees
- the role of outside players such as the Arab states, the USA, and the EU.

This *Handbook* provides the reader with an understanding of the complexity of the issues that need to be addressed in order to resolve the conflict and a detailed examination of the varied interests of the actors involved. In-depth analysis is supplemented by a chronology of the conflict, key documents, and a range of maps.

The contributors are all leading authorities in their field and have published extensively on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict/peace process. Many have played a leading role in various Track II initiatives accompanying the peace process.

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# Introduction

## Understanding the Israeli–Palestinian conflict

*Joel Peters*

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Without question, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has been one of the most bitter and protracted of modern times. Its continuation is seen as a threat to global security, and its resolution is viewed by global leaders as a strategic priority crucial to long-term peace and stability in the Middle East.

Efforts to resolve the conflict have featured prominently on the global agenda since its outset. Leaders of the international community have expended considerable time and energy trying to bridge the differences between Israel and the Palestinians. The United Nations has spent more time discussing this issue than any other international conflict. The region is awash in peace plans and envoys on peace missions. American presidents have hosted summits, placing their personal prestige on the line. The international community has committed considerable financial resources to providing support for the Palestinian refugees, to developing Palestinian civil society, and to building the institutions needed for Palestinian self-government and statehood. Despite these many and varied efforts, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict persists, with little prospect of an end in sight.

The history and issues surrounding any international conflict can be variously interpreted, depending on narrative and perspective. Rarely (if ever) do the dynamics of a conflict point to an objective or shared understanding, and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is no exception. It has been marked by a number of pivotal moments subject to competing narratives, explanations, and justifications. These narratives feed into Israeli and Palestinian notions of history, self-identity, and perceived ideas about the motivations and goals of the other side (see chapter 3, by Paul Scham).

The oft-cited phrase “One land, two peoples” captures the essence of the conflict. For many, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is a struggle of national identity, of two peoples and two nationalist movements (Zionist and Palestinian) located in the same territorial space. Framing it as a territorial dispute has led to a narrative of ownership and dispossession, with each side denying the rights, claims, and legitimacy of the other.

The notion of partition, first mooted by the 1937 Peel Commission and enshrined in the 1947 UN partition plan and the 2003 Road Map, has had a chequered history. In 1946 the British government handed its Mandate for Palestine over to the United Nations and, after considering various options, the UN General Assembly opted for partition. Resolution 181 of



29 November 1947 called for the creation of two separate states – one Jewish, one Arab – and for the internationalization of the city of Jerusalem. The immediate result of the vote was an intensification of violence between the Arab and Jewish communities in Palestine. Following Britain's withdrawal and Israel's declaration of independence on 14 May 1948, the violence turned into interstate war between the new State of Israel and the armies of the neighboring Arab states. The fighting came to an end in early 1949, with Israel signing armistice agreements with Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. No peace accords were discussed or signed.

By the end of the war, Israel had increased its territory by 21 percent in relation to the boundaries set out by the UN partition plan. By contrast, the Palestinians had lost any hope of an independent state – Jordan took control of the West Bank and Egypt the Gaza Strip. Above all, the war gave rise to the Palestinian refugee question. Close to three-quarters of a million Palestinians became refugees in the Arab world, having fled during the fighting or been driven out of their homes.

The 1948 war is a defining moment in the history of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The history of the war and its accompanying narratives continue to influence the politics of the peace process. For Israel, the 1948 war is depicted as a heroic struggle for survival, wherein the outnumbered forces of the Haganah (pre-state Jewish army) overcame overwhelming odds to defeat the combined forces of the Arab world intent on strangling the nascent Jewish state. That narrative has been challenged in recent years by a new wave of Israeli historians (see chapter 4, by Kirsten Schulze), but the discourse of vulnerability, annihilation, and Arab rejection of Israel's legitimacy are recurring themes in Israeli thinking on the conflict. For Palestinians, the 1948 war marks the start of their exile. Referred to as *al-Nakba* (the Catastrophe), the war is a symbol of Palestinian dispossession, displacement, and loss, individually and collectively, and of deliberate expulsion.

The outcome and consequences of the 1948 war plunged the Middle East into a cycle of conflict: a further five Arab–Israeli wars (the 1956 Suez Crisis, the Six Day/June War of 1967, the Yom Kippur/October War of 1973, and the Lebanon wars of 1982 and 2006); the eruption of two Palestinian *Intifadas*, in 1987 and 2000; a history of terrorism and political violence; and periodic cross-border clashes, military raids, and incursions. For the better part of the next three decades, however, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the Palestinian issue became submerged within the wider context of Israeli–Arab rivalry and the broader politics of the Cold War. The question of Palestinian national rights fell largely by the wayside. The outbreak of the Six Day/June War in 1967 escalated as a result of friction along the Israeli–Syrian border and had little to do with Palestinian rights. Indeed, UN Security Council Resolution 242, drawn up in the aftermath of the war and the cornerstone of the Israeli–Palestinian peace process, fails to mention the question of Palestinian national rights and makes reference to the Palestinians only within the context of “achieving a just settlement to the refugee problem.” Instead, the resolution focuses on both the rights of all states in the region to live within secure and recognized borders and the return of territories captured by Israel in the war in exchange for peace.

The impact of the June 1967 war on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict cannot be overstated. Israel's dramatic victory created a new set of geopolitical and demographic realities. With the capture of the West Bank from Jordan and the Gaza Strip from Egypt, Israel now controlled all the territory allocated for both the Jewish and the Palestinian state under the terms of the 1947 UN partition plan. Jerusalem, divided after the 1948 war, became reunified. Israel immediately expanded the municipal boundaries of the city and applied Israeli law to East Jerusalem too (see chapter 10, by Michael Dumper). Significantly, a further million Palestinians now came under direct Israeli military rule.