

# PALESTINE & THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN PEACE PROCESS

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## ISSUES

- There are nearly 13 million Palestinians worldwide, including some 5 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza who have been living under Israeli military rule for over 53 years. Another 1.5 million Palestinians are citizens of Israel, while over 6 million more remain displaced as refugees, outside of Israel/Palestine.
- Since 2001, there has been broad international consensus on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the basis of ending Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the establishment of an independent and viable Palestinian state living alongside the state of Israel — also known as a two-state solution. However, no serious peace negotiations have occurred in years, even as the number of Israeli settlers in the occupied West Bank (including East Jerusalem), which now stands at more than 650,000, continues to grow.
- Whereas the Obama and Bush administrations had called for ending Israel's occupation and identified a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on a two-state solution as a "vital national security interest" of the United States, the Trump administration moved away from that vision. Instead, the now defunct "Peace to Prosperity" plan called for a nominal Palestinian "state" made up of numerous disconnected territorial islands surrounded and controlled by Israel, which would be allowed to annex some 30% of the West Bank. The Trump plan was firmly rejected by the Palestinians and failed to garner support in the international community. At the same time, the prospect of formal Israeli annexation of West Bank land, which would have constituted a serious breach of international law and likely spelled the end of a genuine two-state solution, triggered widespread international condemnations and warnings from Europe, Arab states, and even congressional Democrats.
- The U.S.-brokered normalization deal signed between Israel and the UAE on Aug. 13 and hailed by the Trump

administration as a "historic diplomatic breakthrough" was roundly condemned by Palestinians across the political spectrum as a blow to the goal of Palestinian statehood and to the Saudi-sponsored Arab Peace Initiative, by which Arab states had agreed to normalize relations with Israel only in return for Israel ending its occupation and allowing the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. Although broadly welcomed by leaders of both political parties as well as much of the international community, Israel-UAE normalization, in the absence of a final status agreement, further disincentivizes Israel from seeking compromise or granting concessions to the Palestinians, making a peace agreement based on a two-state solution even more difficult to achieve.

- Under an Israeli blockade, the humanitarian situation in Gaza remains dire, and the risk of an armed conflict between Gaza and Israel remains high.
- The Palestinian Authority (PA), created by the Oslo process in the 1990s and widely viewed as the nucleus of a future Palestinian state, remains bitterly divided between the Fatah-dominated West Bank and the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip. The ongoing schism has effectively suspended institutional politics in Palestine, including the Palestinian Legislative Council, the PA's parliament. After years of stagnation and faced with an acute crisis of legitimacy, in January 2021, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas announced that long-delayed elections would be held for the Palestinian Legislative Council in May, for president in July, and for the Palestine National Council, the PLO's ostensible parliament-in-exile, in August.

## US INTERESTS

- Work toward a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that is consistent with America's foundational values of freedom, dignity, and respect for human rights for all peoples.
- Prevent an escalation of violence between Israelis and Palestinians.

- Ensure that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not an obstacle to the fight against transnational Salafi-jihadists or to improved relations between Israel and Arab states, as part of efforts to address Iran.
- Uphold the principle of the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war, a central pillar of the post-World War II international order, by working to end Israel's 53-year-old occupation and by preventing Israeli annexation of any portion of the West Bank.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reset and reorient U.S. relations with the Palestinians through:
  - Clearly and unequivocally calling for an end to Israel's military occupation, as the Obama, Bush, Clinton, and other past administrations have done.
  - Reaffirming the internationally accepted terms of reference for an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement, most notably UNSCR 242, which enshrines the "land for peace" formula that has undergirded the peace process for more than half a century.
  - Issuing a follow up to U.S. recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital stipulating that the declaration applies to West Jerusalem and announcing support for the establishment of a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem. To demonstrate its seriousness, the Biden administration should call on Israel to reopen Palestinian civic, political, and cultural institutions in East Jerusalem, as required by the Quartet Roadmap, and secure guarantees that Israel will allow Palestinians in Jerusalem to participate in planned upcoming elections, as per previous arrangement in 2006 and 2005.
  - Reopening the PLO mission in Washington and reestablishing the U.S. consulate in East Jerusalem as a dedicated mission to Palestinians.
  - Reinstating U.S. foreign assistance to the Palestinians and to UNRWA.
  - Supporting efforts aimed at Palestinian internal

reconciliation in order to allow for the PA's return to Gaza and for lifting the Israeli blockade.

- Affirming U.S. support for holding Palestinian legislative and presidential elections in a timely manner and a commitment to respect the outcome of those elections if they are conducted in accordance with international standards.
- Support efforts in Congress to ensure that U.S. military assistance to Israel is not used to support settlement activity, annexation, or human rights abuses in the occupied territories and that such assistance is consistent with existing U.S. law, including the Leahy Law.
- Press Israel to lift the Gaza blockade with the goals of aligning Israeli import controls for Gaza with those of the West Bank and normalizing the movement of people and goods in and out of the Gaza Strip.
- Acknowledge that while American involvement and leadership remain crucial to the success of any diplomatic process, the United States cannot and should not seek to achieve comprehensive peace on its own and should instead work with its international partners (e.g., including both major powers and regional stakeholders such as Germany, France, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and others) to establish a genuinely multilateral mechanism for diplomatic engagement with the parties.