

## UNDERSTANDING THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT

On the 7th of October 2023, a new spiral of violence marked Israeli-Palestinian relations after the Ezzeddine al-Qassam brigades – the military branch of Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas – launched an unprecedented series of attacks on Israeli citizens and targets. But this does not mean that the situation was necessarily calm up to then. Violence is structural in the relations between Israelis and Palestinians, and it barely stopped since the first Arab Israeli War erupted in 1948. The current sheet puts “the Israeli-Palestinian conflict” in perspective and aims at giving keys to better understand the current context.

### The Israel-Palestine Conflict

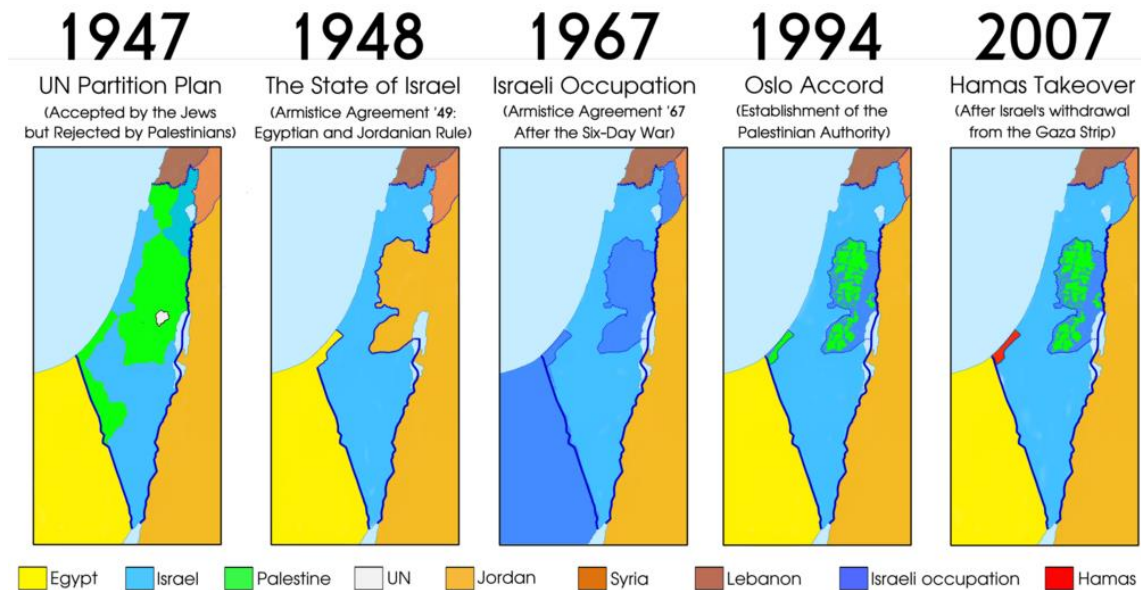
Speaking about the “Israel-Arab” conflict is more accurate than calling it “Israel-Palestine”. The reason comes as follows.

In 1897, a political movement, the Zionist organization, was created with the objective of allowing Jews in the world to find a haven in Palestine – the legal name for the province at that time. Theodor Herzl, founder of this movement, was concerned about the raising antisemitism that prevailed towards Jews, essentially in Europe but also in a country like Russia. Twenty years later, Britain committed to helping Jews settle in Palestine (Balfour declaration, 1917). Thirty years later, as tensions had been increasing between the Arab and Jewish communities of Palestine, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a partition plan (1947) that would allow Jews and Arabs to proclaim their respective states. The 15<sup>th</sup> of May 1948, Israel proclaimed its existence: but the Arabs of Palestine refused to do the same. The same day, the first Arab-Israeli war erupted, with – mainly - Egypt, Syria and Jordan launching attacks on Israel: a ceasefire followed (1949) with Israel gaining a territorial advantage – and many Palestinians turning into refugees because of the impossibility for them to return to their homes. The UN recognized their status as refugees (UN Res. 194, 1948).

The next key event will intervene the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 1967: the Six-Day war will allow Israel to benefit from a fulgurant advantage by occupying territory from Egypt (the Sinai Peninsula), Syria (the Golan Heights), and Lebanon (the Shebaa Farms), apart from the Egypt-managed Gaza Strip, the Jordan-managed West Bank, and Jerusalem. It is here that the main political and territorial disagreements between Israelis and Arabs and Palestinians lie: the latter want to have their lands back, while Israelis consider that conquests made during wars could be negotiated, but not necessarily at the conditions imposed by the defeated. The UN is clear about the matter: It considers that Israel must withdraw from the territories that it occupied during this conflict (UN Res. 242, 1967).

Since then, episodes of tension and violence have prevailed, between Israelis and Palestinians in particular. The Palestinian political scene suffered constant fragmentation, with the emergence of secular and/or Islamist political and military movements that do agree on the objective of creating a Palestinian state, but without putting aside their

rivalries. On the Israeli side, serious efforts towards the resolution of the conflict and the recognition of a Palestinian State have stopped since the end of the 1990s.



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Israel-Arab relations have little to do with religious matters, in a context where Arabs are in their majority Muslims and Christians. Ethnic considerations based on an Arab-Jew animosity do prevail when it comes to some parts of the two populations, but they shouldn't be exaggerated. Before events related to the Israel-Arab conflict(s) prevailed, Jews and Arab coexisted peacefully and respectfully in Arab countries and in Palestine, when antisemitism and pogroms prevailed largely in Europe. As the map above shows, the Israel-Palestine conflict is mainly territorial and political: religious and ethnic considerations come as an additional layer together with other key considerations such as security-related matters.

## Where do we stand today?

### The political situation

Over the last decades, the two societies – Israeli and Palestinian – radicalized, with extremists taking it over on the political scene and conditioning evolutions. In the Palestinian territories, legislative elections were organized in 2006 and were won in majority by Hamas, an Islamist movement that was created in 1987. In Israel, extremist parties have also strengthened in a context of general political fragmentation that makes alliances necessary. The result is the impossibility for any Prime minister to take decisions on key matters without benefitting from the support of the other members of his coalition: this also affects Israel-Arab relations and relations with Palestinians.

### What does International Law say?

There are several UN resolutions that call for the end of violence between Israelis and Palestinians and back negotiations and the agreement of a solution. One of the key references is UN resolution 242 (1967), that calls Israeli forces to “withdraw from

territories occupied” during the Six-Day War. But parties diverge on its interpretation: Arabs and Palestinians want a return to the status quo ante, while Israelis want to avoid automatic concessions.

### **What about violence and terrorist attacks?**

They are key and they are the obstacle number one to peace; the UN regularly condemns violence from all sides and calls to a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

### **Why do some Palestinians back Hamas?**

In episodes of violence such as the one that we witnessed in October 2023, we see many Palestinians backing unanimously Hamas’s actions – though without necessarily adhering all to the Islamist party’s orientations. This is because their sense of belonging to a national community ends up being stronger than their political and ideological divergences. This tendency is clear in the West Bank. In the Gaza Strip, the restrictions that prevail in terms of freedom of speech and expression make it difficult to assess the reality of the population’s feelings and stances: but it makes no doubt that strategies of collective punishment as the one that Israel chose as a reaction to the Hamas attacks of the 7<sup>th</sup> of October will not dissuade Palestinians from backing Hamas and being understandable of its action – it is rather the contrary.

### **Are Israelis unanimous in their support of their government?**

Israelis are also unanimous in the support of their feeling of national belonging: their first reaction to the October 2023 events was solidarity and praising of their national unity. But things also clearly shifted to a criticism of the current Prime minister, Benyamin Netanyahu, and his failure in anticipating Hamas’s attacks. Personal and strategic considerations put apart, PM Netanyahu’s action is also driven by his quest for political survival.

### **Why did Hamas proceed to this attack knowing its consequences?**

While only time can tell what was in the head of Hamas’s military chiefs, there are some points that can be put in evidence.

1. The attack coincides with the celebration of the October War of 1973, one of the key episodes in the history of Israel-Arab relations.
2. The Trump administration had brokered the Abraham Accords, which allowed the normalization of relations between Israel and a number of new Arab States (Bahrein, Morocco, Sudan, the United Arab Emirates). Saudi Arabia was the next country on the list, but with those events, it will have to postpone its plans – something that Hamas may have sought.
3. Hamas wants to dismantle the myth of an Israeli invincibility. It also wants to use the Palestinian cause as a way to criticize Israel and its actions and policies: the fierce reaction of the Israeli government was evident, and it meets Hamas’s objective of drawing the attention on the methods of Israel.

### **What about Fatah and the Palestinian Authority?**

The Palestinian Authority – the rival of Hamas – is considerably weakened. President Mahmoud Abbas saw his image degrading since he came to power in 2005. Despite his opposition to violence, he failed to defend efficiently the “Palestinian cause”.

### **Who is right, who is wrong?**

It is hard to pretend to objectivity when it comes to the Israel-Palestine conflict: each side and their supporters defend opposite points of view. What is sure is that no act of violence

of any kind can be justified. The Hamas attack on October 7<sup>th</sup> was a war crime: but Israel's disproportionate reaction to the attack and its strategy of collective punishment towards Palestinians, leaving thousands of persons – among them many children – dead, also is a war crime. International Law is clear about it. And the fact is that Israel occupies the Palestinian Territories: this brings obligations towards Palestinians that it is not abiding by.

### **Is there any solution for the Israel-Palestine conflict?**

Yes. Priority number one: stop hostilities, and this is where the so-called “international community” – starting with the US, Israel's closest ally – can make the difference. Step number 2: put into application international law, which implies putting an end to the occupation of Palestinian Territories and creating an independent State of Palestine. Exploring territorial arrangements that would take distance with the UN recommendations wouldn't help: only a strict and chronological application of UN resolutions can help. Otherwise, we will be heading towards the "celebration" of 100 years of official conflict in 1948 with no hope in sight, knowing that, by putting an end to the occupation of Palestinian Territories, Israel would achieve the objective it always talks about: leaving in peace with its neighbours.

### **Point of view**

SLU-Madrid's community is made of a large range of students that share opposite points of view. The current section does not seek to reflect on approaches that would put pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian opinions. Instead, we decided to share with you this interesting and moving reflection from an American student at SLU-Madrid.

“I am filled with hurt at this conflict. I grieve for the loss of life, I understand the conditioning soldiers experience that allows themselves to commit such atrocities and go to sleep at night. This conflict is deeply rooted in grief and pain from individuals that have received persecution for generations. So many of us can not understand the loss of life, waking up every morning with fear and generational grief. I feel it is important that as critical thinking individuals we look at the cause and effect that has led to this point. Acknowledge the actions that have brought us all here, and be willing to admit shortcomings. I stand arm in arm with my Palestinian brothers and sisters who have faced horrific atrocities. I also ask the West to acknowledge that a political stronghold, is not worth the loss of life of over 5000 men, women and children. Death is never the answer. We are called to higher ordered things, and change starts within us. Do not let propaganda, emotions and nativity stop your humanity. The world needs to heal.”