

ARAB AMERICAN INSTITUTE

PALESTINE

Background

Since the Obama Administration's attempts to reinvigorate the collapsed peace process in May 2014, new rounds of confrontations and heightened tensions between Israel and Palestine have emerged. In response to popular demands to end in-fighting and resume free and democratic elections, the Palestinian Authority and Hamas agreed to establish a consensus government. The Israeli government quickly condemned the reconciliation efforts, while some members of the Congress called for the United States (U.S.) to withhold aid to the Palestinian Authority as punishment for the collapse of negotiations. Following violence punctuated by the abduction and murder of three Israeli settler teens in the West Bank and a young Palestinian teen being abducted, beaten, and burned alive in East Jerusalem, Israel launched a widespread clamp down in the West Bank, an air campaign in Gaza, and ultimately a ground invasion.

The United Nations (UN) estimates that as a result of the 2014 Israeli incursion into Gaza, nearly 2,000 Palestinians died, 69% of whom were civilian—making 2014 the deadliest year for Palestinians since the 1967 war. Additionally, 475,000 people are displaced, and as many as 17,200 homes destroyed or severely damaged. In the seven months since the ceasefire, not a single completely destroyed home has been rebuilt, leaving more than 100,000 homeless. Throughout the Gaza war, the U.S. provided Israel both support and ample space to execute military operations, including direct aid for military ramp up, weaponry, and operations approval.

Heightened tensions since last summer have resulted in several deadly incidents, including the death of Palestinian Authority Minister Ziad Abu Ein after being assaulted by three Israeli police officers during a peaceful protest. Newly authorized settlement projects in the West Bank and East Jerusalem also contributed to a spike in violence between Israelis and Palestinians. In response to allegations that Israel is attempting to control the contested Temple Mount/Noble Sanctuary plaza, clashes between Israeli security forces and Arab protestors have occurred almost daily.

The Israeli government and Palestinian Authority recently reached a compromise freeing the Palestinian tax revenue that Israel froze following Palestine's move to join the International Criminal Court earlier this year. Israel will release \$450 million to the Palestinian Finance Ministry, and 180,000 Palestinian civil servants will receive their full salaries after enduring several months of 60 percent pay. Despite this development, Israeli officials claim that the Palestinian Authority owes Israel over \$500 million for electricity, water, and other services.

The Problem

After decades of discussions between Israeli and Palestinian leaders, and countless attempts by the U.S. to facilitate a peace process, it appears as though a resolution is no closer. Acknowledging the failures of recent peace talks, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas stated in January 2015 that he was seeking to reintroduce a resolution to the UN Security Council calling for the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Palestinian territories by November 2017 after it was rejected by the Security Council the previous month. The resolution envisions the creation of a Palestinian state, with East Jerusalem as its capital and inclusive of certain territories occupied by Israel since 1967.

After the plan to move forward failed, the Palestinian coalition moved to join international bodies, including the International Criminal Court (ICC), to challenge the Israeli occupation and seek accountability. The Palestinian Authority formally joined the ICC on April 1, 2015, giving the court jurisdiction over alleged crimes in Palestinian territories. Palestine's membership in the ICC is adamantly opposed by Israel based on the number of human rights cases that would be brought

forward. The U.S. also opposed Palestine joining the ICC, insisting that all issues be resolved at the negotiations table, not through “unilateral” actions. Since the Palestinian coalition announced its plans, several members of Congress have threatened to cut all U.S. aid to the United Nations if Palestine accedes to the ICC. Cutting aid to the UN is an extreme move that would end U.S. funding of UNICEF, among others.

Unlike the skeptical, punitive approach towards Palestine, Israel has always enjoyed the enthusiastic support of Congress. This was tested in early 2015, when Prime Minister Netanyahu disregarded diplomatic protocol by lobbying Congress without notifying the White House; he also happened to be lobbying against a key Obama initiative - nuclear negotiations with Iran. The blatant affront to President Obama angered many members of Congress, some of whom offered previously unheard of criticism of the Prime Minister and even skipped his address before a joint session of Congress.

PM Netanyahu’s speech also tested his relationship with President Obama’s administration. That relationship was further strained in the run-up to the May 2015 Israeli elections, during which Netanyahu made several racist, undemocratic comments, including an Election Day video message in which he warned that Arab voters were “coming out in droves,” endangering the right-wing government. He continued to play on Israeli fears by intimating that he does not support a two-state solution, assuring right-wing voters that a Palestinian state would not be established while he is Prime Minister. Following his re-election, he later qualified these statements, saying that he “want[s] a sustainable, peaceful two-state solution, but for that, circumstances have to change.”

Moving Forward

- Supports U.S. and international efforts towards a just resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that will result in the end of the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestine; the lifting of the blockade on Gaza; a robust aid package to assist the Palestinian people in building a stronger economy to address their society’s needs; and, equal rights for every citizen of Israel regardless of ethnicity or religion.
- Make it an urgent priority to make a considerably larger allocation of assistance and support to UNRWA, given the extraordinary need for reconstruction in Gaza.
- Bolster Palestine on the world stage. The U.S. should refrain from thwarting Palestinian efforts taken at the United Nations General Assembly or any resolutions that come before the UNGA. Further, the U.S. should refrain from vetoing or limiting proceedings on the Security Council.
- Stop using U.S. aid as a “carrot and stick” pretense to pressure and influence the Palestinian Authority to bend to American pressure and make sure aid demonstrates a commitment to playing a role in Palestine’s future development.