



Middle East Peace Process: historical background and a detailed chronology from 1990 to 2010

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Author: Ben Smith and Tim Youngs

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This note provides historical background, from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire to the first Iraq War. It then provides a detailed chronology of the peace process since 1990. It gives an overview of the main talks and agreements between Israel, its Arab neighbours and the Palestinians from the start of the Madrid process, through to the failed Camp David and Taba talks in 2001. It then considers the evolution of the second Palestinian Intifada between 2000 and early 2005, and looks at Israel's unilateral disengagement from Gaza.

The note considers the withdrawal of Ariel Sharon from the political scene, the Hamas' victory in the Palestinian parliamentary election in early 2006, and the upsurge in violence in Lebanon and Gaza between June and August. The final sections cover the Hamas coup in Gaza, the Israeli invasion 'Operation Cast Lead', and the elections in Israel and the United States and the continued controversy over the construction of Israeli settlements in the Occupied Territories.

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Contents

1	Historical background	2
2	Middle East Peace Process, 1991-2000	5
	Madrid Process	5
	Oslo Process 1993-96	6
	Oslo Process 1996-2000	7
3	Outbreak of Violence (2000-2003)	8
4	Quartet Road map (2003)	11
5	Move to Unilateralism? (2004-2006)	12
	Death of Mr Arafat (2004)	15
	New Israeli Government formed	16
	After Disengagement	17
	Election of Hamas and Kadima	19
	Crisis in Lebanon	23
	Invasion of Gaza	26
6	Election of Barack Obama	26
	Settlements 'snub'	28
	The Gaza aid flotilla	28
	The Obama administration tries the carrot instead of the stick	31
	A settlements freeze is abandoned. The end of the road map?	32

1 Historical background

Except for during a brief period in the 19th Century, Palestine was part of the Ottoman Empire from 1516 until the end of First World War, when the defeat of Turkish forces in 1918 left large parts of the Middle East occupied by the British and French.

Meanwhile, in 1917, the then Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour made his famous Declaration announcing British support for the creation of Israel. The letter said:

His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which

may prejudice the existing civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status of Jews in other countries.¹

The predecessor to the United Nations, the League of Nations, granted a mandate to the United Kingdom to administer Palestine, an area which included the present-day Israel, the Occupied Territories including Gaza and Modern Jordan. The British Mandate was formally approved in 1922, and Britain continued to administer the area until 1948.

Within the Mandate, two states were set up: Palestine and Transjordan. The Mandate also recognised the goal of setting up a Jewish homeland within the Palestinian part and facilitating Jewish immigration, in line with the Balfour Declaration. British administration was to continue until such time as the states were able to administer themselves.

Under the British Mandate, immigration steadily increased the size of the Jewish population and the Jewish sector of the economy grew more strongly than the Arab sector. The Jewish population grew from 46,000 in 1931 (17% of the total population) to 135,000 (30%) in 1935. The British administrators allowed local Muslims some control of issues related to Islam, such as the appointment of religious leaders and judiciary, but Arab disquiet about their treatment and Jewish immigration gradually increased.

From 1936 to 1939, a revolt among the Arab population, including strikes and armed insurrection, shook the British authorities- as many as 10,000 combatants were involved in the struggle at its peak. Jewish underground forces supported the British in their attempts to suppress the uprising, at times using indiscriminate attacks on Arabs in retaliation for attacks on Jews.

In 1939, the British Government published a White Paper in which the aim of creating a Jewish state was renounced. The Government proposed to allow a further 75,000 Jews to immigrate over the following five years, after which no more immigration would be allowed and self-governing institutions would be developed. With the onset of war and the Jews already clearly committed to opposing the Nazis the British Government was interested in securing the support of the Arabs, and oil supplies.

In line with the new policy, the British authorities tried to limit Jewish immigration from Nazi-occupied Europe. Armed Jewish groups stepped up their actions against the Mandatory authorities and the Arabs.

After the end of World War II, the Mandatory authorities handed the matter over to the newly-created United Nations, in 1947, and in that same year, the General Assembly voted in favour of a plan to divide Palestine into two roughly equal states, one Jewish and one Arab, with Jerusalem a UN-administered zone. The Arabs rejected the plan and, in 1948, war broke out between Arabs and Jews. Some 350,000 Arabs left or were expelled from their homes to seek refuge in neighbouring Arab states. Hundreds of thousands more left over the following few years.

The British Mandate was relinquished in May 1948 and the State of Israel created. The United States and the USSR immediately recognised the new entity, which did not include Gaza, administered by Egypt, or the West Bank, which became part of Transjordan, or Jordan as it became known after the West Bank areas were included following a referendum.

¹ Letter from Arthur Balfour to Lord Rothschild, 2 November 1917. Quoted in Rynhold, Jonathan, Jonathan Spyer, Tom Little, Nur Masalha and Colin Shindler. History (Israel), in *Europa World online*. London, Routledge.

The first elections were held in 1949 to form the Knesset, a single chamber parliament, elected by proportional representation. Arab Israeli citizens were granted the vote.

In the years immediately after the creation of Israel, Jewish immigration surged and the population almost tripled between 1948 and 1956. At the same time, low-level conflict with the neighbouring Arab states intensified, with attacks on Israel from the West bank and the Gaza strip, and the destruction of an Egyptian military base in Gaza. A revolution in Egypt brought down the monarchy and installed a strongly Arab nationalist and left leaning government. With Colonel Nasser in charge of Egypt, the USSR became the chief arms supplier not only to the Egyptians but also to Syria and Iraq. With the Cold War increasing in intensity and European power fading, Israel turned increasingly to the United States for support. The Palestine Liberation Organisation was formed in 1957.

During the 1960s the number of attacks and mutual accusations of frontier violations increased.

In 1967, the six-day war broke out. Israel occupied the Gaza strip, the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, including all of Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights, part of Syria. The United Nations passed Security Council Resolution 242, calling for the withdrawal from the occupied territories and the restoration of legal frontiers, and the recognition of Israel and termination of all states of belligerency.²

Despite the 1967 truce, the Arab neighbours, particularly Egypt, maintained their hostility to Israel and sporadic fighting caused considerable casualties added to which there was an increase in terrorist activities by Palestinian groups such as 'Black September' In 1970, Nasser surprised the Arab world by signing up to a US ceasefire plan. Jordan also signed up to the plan, while Israel was reluctant. Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, maintained Nasser's policy but initially the Israelis were reluctant to withdraw from the Suez Canal zone. The US was keen for an agreement to be reached so that the canal could be re-opened.

In 1973, the Egyptians mounted an attack on Israeli forces on the East side of the Suez Canal, coordinating with the Syrians who attacked Israeli forces occupying the Golan Heights. In the ensuing Yom Kippur war, the Israelis were ultimately successful, driving back the Egyptians and Syrians to their original post-1967 positions. The war, nevertheless, cost many lives and public opinion in Israel turned against the government.

In May 1977, Israelis voted out the serving Labour Government and gave the largest number of seats to the right-wing coalition Likud. After this major watershed, partly the result of new immigration from Asia and North Africa, Menachem Begin formed the first non-Labour government in Israel's short history. The rightward shift of the Israeli electorate was matched by increasing radicalisation among Israeli Arabs and inhabitants of the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip.

New Egyptian President Sadat visited Israel and addressed the Knesset in November 1977. Talks between Sadat and Begin, facilitated by President Carter at Camp David in the USA, progressed and, in 1978, two agreements were signed: one that provided for peace between Egypt and Israel and the other which provided for a five year transition to autonomy and self-government for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. The peace agreement was signed in 1980 but disagreements over the meaning of the initial document on Palestinian autonomy meant that talks did not progress. Israel completed its withdrawal from Sinai in 1982.

² UNSCR 242, 1967

In 1982, Israel again invaded Southern Lebanon (there had been an invasion in 1978), where PLO fighters had been threatening Northern Israel. Within a month, Israeli forces had progressed as far as West Beirut, trapping thousands of PLO and Syrian combatants. After the notorious massacres at Sabra and Chatila Palestinian refugee camps, talks led to an agreement to withdraw in December 1982, although the Israelis did not completely pull out, stopping at the Awali River. Southern Lebanon was then effectively occupied by Israel, supported by the Southern Lebanese Army, a Lebanese Christian militia.

Throughout the 1980s there were sporadic attempts at peace negotiations. As frustration mounted among the Palestinian population, outbreaks of violence occurred. In 1987 waves of rioting broke out. The first Intifada had begun. Israel's response was to crack down on dissidents: thousands of Palestinians were arrested and curfews were imposed.

The Islamic Resistance Movement, commonly known as Hamas, was created in 1987, signalling the growth of an Islamist response to the perceived problems of Palestinians, who were disillusioned with the socialist and pan-Arabist policies of the previous generation of leaders such as Nasser.

In 1988, King Hussein of Jordan formally ceded sovereignty over the West Bank, in a move designed to strengthen the PLO's claim to be the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinians; the PLO was regularly excluded from any negotiations on the future of the Palestinians because its charter called for the destruction of the state of Israel.

In 1990, the Labour/Likud coalition government collapsed and, against a background of increasing instability, Yitzhak Shamir formed a right wing government. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the international scene was in turmoil and important Arab governments were losing their main sponsor and arms supplier in the USSR. In 1991, Israel restored diplomatic relations with the USSR and in 1992 established relations with China for the first time.

During the conflict over Kuwait, Iraq fired Scud missiles at Israel and it was feared that Israeli retaliation might lead to a general conflagration in the region. Israeli action was averted due to US diplomacy and the inefficacy of the missiles which, despite 39 of them being fired, caused only 2 fatalities.

2 Middle East Peace Process, 1991-2000

Madrid Process

October 1991 Madrid Conference

An initial three-day conference was held with representatives from Israel and Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and the Palestinians (the latter two taking part as a joint delegation due to Israeli opposition to any direct talks with the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, the PLO). The conference then fed into a series of bilateral and multilateral negotiations during 1992, which sought to build confidence and improve regional co-operation on issues such as water, economic development, refugees, arms control and the environment.

1993-March 1996 Negotiations between Israel and Syria

US mediation sought to lay the groundwork for a Syrian-Israeli peace agreement and an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights. Talks were accelerated in 1996 by Israeli Prime

Minister Shimon Peres after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, but were suspended just prior to the 1996 Israeli election.

Oslo Process 1993-96

September 1993 Oslo Accords

The Oslo Accords comprised a series of agreements and understandings which were reached after initially secret bilateral negotiations between Israel and the PLO. The first phase of Oslo had two main components:

Mutual Recognition – an exchange of letters between PLO leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin granting mutual recognition.³

Declaration of Principles – agreement on the establishment of Palestinian self-government in parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The agreement set out the framework and timetable for the transition to Palestinian self-rule, which would last for an interim five-year period. Talks on a final status agreement to address other more complex issues, such as borders, the establishment of a Palestinian state and the status of Jerusalem and the Israeli settlements, were supposed to begin no later than the third year of that period.⁴ In the event, formal final status talks were delayed by disputes between the two sides and eventually began in September 1999.

May 1994 Agreement on the Gaza Strip and the Jericho Area

This agreement implemented the first phase of the Declaration of Principles. Israel transferred control of most of Gaza and Jericho to the PA. Israeli forces carried out an accelerated withdrawal from these areas, transferring responsibility for public order and internal security to the 9,000-strong Palestinian police force. Israel retained authority over the rest of the West Bank and the areas of Jewish settlements, pending agreement on further phased redeployments.⁵

August 1994 Agreement on Preparatory Transfer of Powers and Responsibilities

An additional accord was reached between Israel and the Palestinians, putting into effect the transfer of authority in the spheres of education and culture, health, social welfare, tourism and taxation.⁶

October 1994 Treaty of Peace between the State of Israel and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan

Jordan and Israel concluded a formal peace treaty, defining the border between the two countries and normalising relations.⁷

August 1995 Protocol on further Transfer of Powers and Responsibilities

³ The text of the letters on Israeli-PLO recognition are available on the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs web site at <http://www.israel.org/mfa/go.asp?MFAH00pz0>

⁴ The text of the 'Declaration of Principles' is available on the Israeli MFA web site at <http://www.israel.org/mfa/go.asp?MFAH00q00>

⁵ The text of the 'Agreement on the Gaza Strip and the Jericho Area' is available on the Israeli MFA web site at <http://www.israel.org/mfa/go.asp?MFAH00q20>

⁶ The text of the 'Agreement on Preparatory Transfer of Powers and Responsibilities' is available on the Israeli MFA web site at <http://www.israel.org/mfa/go.asp?MFAH00q90>

⁷ The text of the 'Treaty of Peace between the State of Israel and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan', is available on the Israeli MFA web site at <http://www.israel.org/mfa/go.asp?MFAH00pa0>

Israel and the Palestinians signed a further protocol on 27 August 1995, under which additional powers were transferred to the Palestinian Authority in the following spheres: labour, trade and industry, gas and petrol, insurance, postal services, statistics, agriculture, and local government.⁸

September 1995 Interim Agreement

The Interim Agreement between Israel and the Palestinians incorporated and superseded the earlier Oslo Accords. Israel undertook to withdraw from six more West Bank towns (Bethlehem, Jenin, Kalkilya, Nablus, Ramallah and Tulkarem), with an additional partial withdrawal from Hebron planned for within six months. Once implemented, the agreement gave the PA two areas that contained most of the Palestinian population on the West Bank, and under one third of the territory. The territory of the West Bank was divided into three zones: complete Palestinian control (A), and partial (B) or complete (C) Israeli control.⁹

November 1995 Assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin

Mr Rabin was shot dead by Yigal Amir, a Jewish militant opposed to the peace process and the withdrawals from the Occupied Territories.

January 1996 First Palestinian presidential and legislative elections

Yasser Arafat elected as president (or chairman) of the Palestinian Authority.

Oslo Process 1996-2000

May 1996 Election of Likud candidate Binyamin Netanyahu as Prime Minister of Israel

January 1997 Hebron Agreement

Agreement between Israel and the Palestinians to implement the delayed Israeli withdrawal from most of the West Bank town of Hebron. The agreement provided for the effective partition of the town between a Jewish settlement in 20 per cent of the territory and the Palestinian-held area in the remaining 80 per cent.¹⁰

October 1998 Wye River Memorandum

Israel and the Palestinians agreed a memorandum with two main elements: an Israeli undertaking on the next phase of withdrawals from the West Bank; and a commitment from the PA to combat terrorism. An initial Israeli withdrawal took place, but further redeployments were cancelled following clashes between Israeli troops and Palestinians.¹¹

December 1998 Collapse of the Israeli government

February 1999 King Hussein of Jordan dies

Crown Prince Abdullah ascended to the Jordanian throne on 7 February following the death of his father King Hussein.

⁸ The text of the 'Protocol on further Transfer of Powers and Responsibilities', is available at <http://www.israel.org/mfa/go.asp?MFAH00ru0>

⁹ The text of the 'Interim Agreement' is available at <http://www.israel.org/mfa/go.asp?MFAH00qa0>

¹⁰ The text of the 'Protocol concerning the redeployment in Hebron' is available on the Israeli MFA web site at <http://www.israel-mfa.gov.il/mfa/go.asp?MFAH00ql0>

¹¹ The text of the 'Wye River Memorandum' of 23 October 1998 is available on the Israeli MFA web site at <http://www.israel.org/peace/wye.html>

May 1999 Election of Labour leader Ehud Barak as Israeli Prime Minister

September 1999 Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum

Israel and the Palestinians agreed on revisions to the Wye River Memorandum, providing a new timetable for Israeli redeployments from the West Bank, and opening the way for the launch of permanent status negotiations.¹²

September 1999 Formal opening of permanent status negotiations between Israel and the PLO

Talks were suspended after disputes in December 1999.

January 2000 Sheperdstown Talks between Israel and Syria

Talks were suspended after five days due to a lack of progress.

March 2000 Geneva Summit between Israel and Syria

Negotiations between Prime Minister Barak and President Hafez Assad again failed over the issue of border demarcation on the Golan Heights.

March-April 2000 Talks between Israel and the PLO on final status issues

May 2000 Israeli unilateral withdrawal from Southern Lebanon

June 2000 Death of Syrian President Hafez al-Assad

President Hafez al-Assad died on 10 June 2000. His son, Bashar al-Assad, was formally inaugurated as President on 17 July 2000 following a referendum which confirmed him as President elect with over 97 per cent support.

July 2000 Camp David Summit between Israel and the PLO

The US hosted a summit involving Mr Barak and Mr Arafat, aimed at securing a final status agreement to resolve the outstanding issues of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, including borders, territory, settlements, refugees and Jerusalem. The talks ended on 25 July without agreement, although progress was reportedly made on several contentious issues.¹³

3 Outbreak of Violence (2000-2003)

September 2000 Outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada, known at the 'al-Aqsa Intifada'

Israeli police clashed with stone-throwing Palestinians protesting against the visit of the opposition Likud leader, Ariel Sharon, to Jerusalem's disputed Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif on 28 September. The death of five Palestinians prompted further demonstrations across the West Bank and Gaza and armed clashes ensued between Palestinian militias and Israeli forces.

¹² The text of the 'Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum' is available on the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs web site at <http://www.israel.org/mfa/go.asp?MFAH0fxv0>

¹³ The Trilateral Statement issued at the conclusion of the talks on 25 July 2000 is available on the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs web site at <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/go.asp?MFAH0hn10>

October 2000 Sharm el-Sheikh Summit

A summit involving UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, President Clinton, Mr Barak and Mr Arafat was convened in an attempt to break the cycle of violence and establish a route back to the negotiating table. Both sides agreed to an international investigation into the crisis, to be led by US Senator George Mitchell.

November 2000 Announcement of early Prime Ministerial elections for February 2001

With his coalition government on the verge of collapse, Mr Barak announced that early elections would take place in February 2001.

December 2000 Talks between Israel and the PLO

Talks between Mr Arafat and Israel's foreign minister sought to bridge the remaining gaps from the Camp David talks. Mr Clinton put forward a series of bridging proposals, which were accepted, with conditions, by the two parties.¹⁴

January 2001 Taba Negotiations on final status issues

Talks at the Egyptian resort of Taba on the remaining final status issues concluded without agreement, although progress was reported on the status of Jerusalem and the Palestinian refugee issue.¹⁵

February 2001 Election of Likud candidate Ariel Sharon as Prime Minister of Israel

April 2001 Report of the Mitchell Committee on the Israeli-Palestinian Violence

A five-member committee under former US Senator George Mitchell reported on the outbreak of the Intifada and put forward recommendations on how to halt the violence, rebuild confidence and resume negotiations.¹⁶

June 2001 Agreement on Ceasefire Conditions

The Director of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), George Tenet, brokered an agreement on ceasefire conditions to halt the violence between Israel and the Palestinians. A lull ensued, but violence flared again during the autumn.¹⁷

October 2001 Assassination of Israeli Tourism Minister

¹⁴ Minutes from a meeting in December with President Clinton, during which he outlined his proposal, were released by the Palestinian delegation and are online at <http://www.jmcc.org/new/00/clinton.htm>

¹⁵ An official statement released by the two parties at the conclusion of the Taba talks on 27 January 2001 is available on the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs web site at <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/go.asp?MFAH0j7o0>

An account by the European Union representative at the talks, Ambassador Miguel Moratinos, is contained in a 'non-paper' which was published by *Ha'aretz English Edition* online at: <http://www.haaretzdaily.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=130193&contrassID=3&subContrassID=0&sbSubContrassID=0>

¹⁶ 'Report of the Sharm el-Sheikh Fact-Finding Committee', 30 April 2001, available at <http://download.meridian.org/sheikh.pdf> or <http://usinfo.state.gov/regional/nea/mitchell.htm>

¹⁷ An unofficial text was published by the Israeli *Ha'aretz* newspaper on 14 June 2003 and is available on the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs web site at <http://www.israel.org/mfa/go.asp?MFAH0khz0>

The small leftwing Palestinian group, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), assassinated the Israeli tourism minister, Rehavam Zeevi, the first assassination of a high-ranking Israeli by Palestinians for almost two decades.

March-April 2002 Arab League Peace Initiative

The Saudi Crown Prince, Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz, presented a peace proposal to the Arab League summit in Beirut, which was subsequently adopted as a summit declaration on 28 March 2002. The initiative offered full peace and recognition of Israel. In return, Israel would be withdrew to its 1967 borders and accepted both the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza with East Jerusalem as its capital and a just solution to the Palestinian refugee issue in accordance with General Assembly Resolution 194.¹⁸

Israel launches Operation 'Defensive Wall'

Following an upsurge in Palestinian violence in early 2002, Israeli forces launched major incursions into the West Bank, reoccupying large areas of Palestinian-controlled territory, imposing curfews on the local population and engaging in heavy fighting with armed Palestinian militants.¹⁹ A siege of Yasser Arafat's compound in Ramallah was lifted in April after a deal (known as the Ramallah Agreement) was brokered to place six Palestinian militants under the supervision of US and UK monitors in a Palestinian prison in Jericho. Further incursions followed in June and, despite some withdrawals, Israeli forces retained control of Palestinian areas in the West Bank.

June 2002 Speech by President Bush calls on the Palestinians to elect new leaders who are not "compromised by terror"

On 25 June President Bush said that attaining statehood for the Palestinian would be conditional on democratic reforms and a crackdown on the activities of militant groups.²⁰ He challenged Israel to take concrete steps to support the emergence of a viable, credible Palestinian state. The speech was widely praised in Israel, but condemned by Palestinians, who argued that it was for the Palestinian people to choose their own leadership.

Mid-2002 Work begins on the Israeli Security Barrier in the West Bank

Israel began construction of a 'Security Fence' or barrier to prevent Palestinian militants from entering Israel to mount suicide bombings.²¹ The route of the barrier has encountered international criticism because it deviates from the 1949 armistice line (the 'Green Line') dividing Israel from the Occupied Territories. Israel says the barrier is crucial for its national

¹⁸ The full text of the Arab League Declaration can be found in a Press Release from the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia Information Office, Washington DC, 28 March 2002, http://www.arts.mcgill.ca/MEPP/PRRN/docs/beirut_declaration.html

¹⁹ The Israeli Government describes the Palestinian militant groups of Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, Hamas and Islamic Jihad as terrorist organisations, because of their involvement in suicide bombings and attacks on civilians. The groups themselves, and some Palestinians, claim they are resisting the Israeli occupation.

²⁰ The text of the speech is available from: 'President Bush Calls for New Palestinian Leadership', White House Press Release 24 June 2002, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020624-3.html>

²¹ Critics use the term "security wall", whereas Israel uses "security fence" or "seamline". This note uses the more neutral term "barrier".

security. Palestinians fear the barrier represents an Israeli attempt to draw new borders and annex territory.²²

July 2002 Unofficial 'Statement of Principles'

An unofficial 'Statement of Principles' on the framework for a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement signed on 27 July by Ami Ayalon, the former head of the Israeli internal security service Shin Bet, and Sari Nusseibeh, the Palestinian president of Al Quds University.²³

4 Quartet Road map (2003)

April 2003 Quartet Road map to a solution of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Drawn up by the international Quartet, which comprises the United Nations, the United States, the European Union and Russia, the Road map specifies a series of steps for the two parties to halt the violence, resume negotiations and to reach a final and comprehensive settlement of the conflict by 2005. The final settlement would involve what is known as a 'two state solution' with the formation, alongside Israel, of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. Publication of the Road map had been delayed by disputes over its provisions and by the international focus on the invasion of Iraq the month before.²⁴

May 2003 Prime Minister Sharon says the Israeli occupation of the Palestinians must end

Ariel Sharon told a meeting of his Likud parliamentary faction on 26 May that: "I think the idea that it is possible to continue keeping 3.5 million Palestinians under occupation - yes it is occupation, you might not like the word, but what is happening is occupation - is bad for Israel, and bad for the Palestinians, and bad for the Israeli economy. Controlling 3.5 million Palestinians cannot go on forever. You want to remain in Jenin, Nablus, Ramallah and Bethlehem?"²⁵

June 2003 Aqaba Summit

On 4 June President George Bush, King Abdullah of Jordan, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and the new Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas attended a summit in Aqaba, Jordan on the peace process and implementation of the Road map.²⁶

October 2003 Israeli air strike on Syria territory

On 5 October Israel carried out an air strike on an alleged training camp for the Palestinian militant groups Islamic Jihad and Hamas. Other reports suggested the site was an abandoned camp operated by a different group, the Popular Front for the Liberation of

²² For more detail on the barrier, see Library Standard Note SN/IA/3065, *Israel and the West Bank Barrier*, <http://hcl1.hcllibrary.parliament.uk/notes/iads/sn-ia-03065.pdf>

²³ The text of the 'Statement of Principles' is available online at <http://www.mifkad.org.il/eng/PrinciplesAgreement.asp>

²⁴ 'Performance-Based Road map to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict', 30 April 2003, http://usinfo.state.gov/regional/nea/summit/text2003/0430road_map.htm

²⁵ BBC News online website, 27 May 2003, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/2939552.stm

²⁶ Details of the summit and the final statements made by the parties are available on the Israeli MFA website at <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/go.asp?MFAH0nfn0> and on the US State Department website at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2003/21808.htm>

Palestine - General Command. The strike was the first attack by Israel on Syrian territory since the 1973 Yom Kippur conflict.

December 2003 Unofficial 'Geneva Accord'

A signing ceremony took place on 1 December for the unofficial 'Geneva Accord', which sets out a detailed draft framework for a comprehensive peace agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The accord was negotiated by Israeli politicians and intellectuals from the left of the political spectrum and by members of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, the PLO. The accord received a lukewarm reception from the Palestinian leadership, and was rejected by the Israeli Government as a historic mistake and a false hope.²⁷

5 Move to Unilateralism? (2004-2006)

December 2003 Unveiling of a unilateral 'Disengagement Plan' by the Israeli Prime Minister

On 18 December Prime Minister Sharon warned that, if the Palestinians failed to comply with their Road map obligations, his Government would implement a unilateral 'Disengagement Plan'. This was to involve the redeployment of Israeli forces to new security lines, a withdrawal from certain isolated West Bank settlements, and the accelerated construction of the Security Barrier. Palestinian critics said the plan constituted an annexation plan for large parts of the West Bank.²⁸ Israeli opponents protested at the proposal to withdraw from certain settlements.

January 2004 Prisoner exchange between Israel and Hizbollah

A prisoner exchange between Israel and the Lebanese militia group, Hizbollah, was completed on 29 January. Israel released 23 Lebanese, 400 Palestinian, and 12 other Arab prisoners in exchange for an Israeli businessman and the bodies of 3 soldiers. The deal was reached despite ongoing tension along the Lebanese-Israeli border, particularly in the Sheba'a farms sector.

February 2004 International Court of Justice holds hearings on the Israeli Barrier

The International Court of Justice held three days of hearings on the Israeli security barrier. The ICJ had been asked by the UN General Assembly to offer a non-binding advisory opinion on the legality of the barrier.²⁹

March 2004 Hamas leader Sheikh Yassin is killed by Israel

²⁷ Further detail on the accord and the reaction of the British Government and the European Union can be found in Library Standard Note SN/IA/2861, *The Geneva Accord*, available online at

<http://hcl1.hclibrary.parliament.uk/notes/iads/sn-02861.pdf> The text of the accord is online at http://www.heskem.org.il/Heskem_en.asp

²⁸ The text of Mr Sharon's speech is online at

<http://www.pmo.gov.il/english/ts.exe?tsurl=0.41.7635.0.0>

²⁹ Further detail on the barrier and the ICJ advisory opinion can be found in the Library Standard Note SN/IA/3065, *Israel and the West Bank Barrier*, online at

<http://hcl1.hclibrary.parliament.uk/notes/iads/sn-03065.pdf>

On 22 March an Israeli missile killed the leader of Hamas, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin.³⁰ The news of his death prompted widespread demonstrations by Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

April 2004 Disengagement Plan for Gaza and parts of the West Bank

Mr Sharon presented the detail of his Disengagement Plan, which called for the full withdrawal of the 7,500 Jewish settlers and the Israeli military installations in Gaza.³¹ Initially, Israel was to retain control of the border strip with Egypt (the 'Philadelphi Route'), although this would be reconsidered if the security situation improved. The plan also called for the withdrawal of four settlements and related military installations in 'Northern Samaria', the northern sector of the West Bank.

President Bush endorses the Disengagement Plan

In an exchange of letters with Mr Sharon after their meeting on 14 April, Mr Bush welcomed the Disengagement Plan as "a real contribution towards peace".³² In a shift of US policy, he said it was "unrealistic" to expect a full return to the 1949 Green Line, given the realities of Jewish settlement construction in the West Bank. He also addressed the sensitive issue of a 'right of return' for Palestinian refugees, suggesting that the refugees should be settled in a future Palestinian state, rather than Israel, so as to safeguard the latter's status as a Jewish state. Mr Bush's letter was strongly criticised by Arab states and the Palestinians, who said it prejudged the outcome of final status negotiations and denied the Palestinians crucial negotiating space.

New Hamas leader Abdel Aziz Rantissi is killed by Israel

On 17 April a further Israeli missile strike killed the new leader of Hamas, Dr Abdel Aziz Rantissi. The attack prompted further widespread demonstrations by Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

May 2004 Likud referendum rejects the Disengagement Plan

Members of Mr Sharon's Likud party rejected the Disengagement plan by a margin of 20 per cent in a referendum on 2 May.

Large-scale Israeli incursions into Gaza

Israeli forces mounted a major operation into Gaza, citing the need to combat the activities of militant groups and to destroy tunnels used to smuggle in arms and ammunition from Egypt. Around 40 Palestinians died during the operation and around 2,000 were left homeless after Israeli forces bulldozed houses close to the border with Egypt. The operation drew strong international criticism. The UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1544 expressing grave concern at the demolition of houses and the humanitarian situation in Gaza.³³

³⁰ Israel characterises its policy of attacking Palestinian militant leaders as "targeted killings", whereas critics refer to "extrajudicial killings" or "assassinations".

³¹ A general outline of the April draft of the Disengagement Plan, as communicated by the Israeli Prime Minister's office is online at:

<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Peace+Process/Reference+Documents/Disengagement+Plan++General+Outline.htm>

³² The text of the letters can be found in Library Standard Note SN/IA/3025, *Israel and the Occupied Territories: disengagement plan*, online at <http://hcl1.hclibrary.parliament.uk/notes/iads/sn-ia-03025.pdf>

³³ The text of the Resolution is online via http://www.un.org/Docs/sc/unsc_resolutions04.html

May-June 2004 Ariel Sharon presents a revised Disengagement Plan

On 30 May Mr Sharon presented a revised plan to the cabinet, under which Israel would withdraw from Gaza and the northern West Bank in four phases before the end of 2005. Each phase of the plan would require cabinet approval. The plan, which had strong public backing, was approved in principle in early June, despite opposition from some ministers. Two left the cabinet in protest, leaving Mr Sharon without a majority in the Knesset. Subsequent efforts to form a government of national unity with Labour were rejected by the Likud convention in August.

June-July 2004 Israeli High Court rules on route of Israeli barrier

In late June and July the Israeli High Court of Justice issued a series of rulings on the route of sections of the Israeli barrier in the West Bank. It found that parts of the barrier violated the rights of Palestinian residents and caused “acute and severe hardship”, and ordered that sections be rerouted, even if the security effectiveness of the barrier would be reduced. The Israeli Government said it would carry out a thorough review of the barrier’s route.

July 2004 ICJ Advisory Opinion on the Israeli barrier

On 9 July 2004 the International Court of Justice rendered its non-binding advisory opinion on the legality of the Israeli barrier. The Court found by fourteen votes to one that: “The construction of the wall being built by Israel, the occupying Power, in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including in and around East Jerusalem, and its associated régime, are contrary to international law”, and found that Israel should terminate construction forthwith. The opinion was welcomed by the Palestinians, but rejected by Israel as one-sided and politically motivated.

August 2004 Ariel Sharon proposes an accelerated timetable for the Disengagement Plan

In late August Mr Sharon proposed that the timetable for the withdrawals from Gaza and the northern West Bank be accelerated, with the main legal provisions to be brought before the cabinet by the end of September.

Hamas Suicide Bombings in Beersheba leave 16 dead

On 31 August two suicide bombers attacked buses in the southern Israeli city of Beersheba, the first major suicide bomb attack in six months. 16 people died and more than one hundred people were injured. Hamas claimed responsibility for the attacks.

September 2004 Israeli Government approves compensation payments for settlers

On 15 September the Israeli security cabinet approved compensation payments of between \$550 million and \$670 million over two fiscal years for Jewish settlers evacuated under the Disengagement Plan.

UN Security Council calls for a Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon

The UN Security Council passed Resolution 1559 in which it called upon all remaining foreign [i.e. Syrian] forces to withdraw from Lebanon and called for the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias [i.e. Hizbollah], so as to support the

extension of control of the Lebanese Government over all Lebanese territory.³⁴ The UN Secretary-General reported in October that the only significant foreign forces in Lebanon, aside from the UN presence, were an estimated 14,000 Syrian troops.³⁵ The Lebanese parliament voted to extend President Lahoud's term by a further three years. Prime Minister Rafik Hariri resigned shortly afterwards after expressing his opposition to the move.

October 2004 Bomb attack on Israeli tourists in Taba, Egypt

On 7 October at least 34 people were killed in suicide bombings in the Egyptian resort of Taba, near the border with Israel. Around 12 Israelis were among the dead. Islamist militants with links to al-Qaeda were believed to have carried out the attack.

Israeli Knesset approves the Disengagement Plan

On 26 October the Knesset voted by 67 to 45 in favour of the Disengagement Plan, the first time it had voted on the principle of removing settlements from the West Bank and Gaza. Two Likud ministers who voted against were sacked by Mr Sharon, who rejected calls from within his Government for a referendum on the plan.

Death of Mr Arafat (2004)

November 2004 Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat dies

On 11 November Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat died in Paris. The speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Assembly, Rawhi Fattuh, took over as president, pending elections on 9 January 2005. Former prime minister Mahmoud Abbas became Chairman of the PLO's Executive Committee, Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei retained his post, and Foreign Minister Farouk Kaddoumi was named as head of Fatah, the dominant faction within the PLO. Ten candidates registered for the election initially, although Marwan Barghouti, the head of Fatah in the West Bank who is serving five life terms in an Israeli jail, withdrew on 12 December.

December 2004 Ariel Sharon seeks a coalition with Labour

On 1 December Mr Sharon sacked four ministers from Likud's largest coalition partner, Shinui, which had voted against the prime minister's 2005 budget. The move left Mr Sharon with a minority government that commanded only 40 seats in the 120-member Knesset. On 9 December the Likud Central Committee revoked a ban, passed in August, on entering a coalition with Labour.

PLO Chairman Mahmoud Abbas calls for an end to violence

In mid-December Mr Abbas said that the Palestinian people had a legitimate right to "express their rejection of the occupation through popular and social means", but said that "using weapons is harmful and has got to stop".³⁶ In late November he had called on the Palestinian media to halt the broadcast of "inflammatory" material inciting violence and hatred against Israel.

Israel agrees to release 170 Palestinian prisoners

³⁴ S/RES/1559, 2 September 2004

³⁵ *Report of the Secretary-General pursuant to Security Council resolution 1559 (2004)*, S/2004/7771, October 2004, <http://www.un.org/Docs/journal/asp/ws.asp?m=S/2004/777>

³⁶ Interview with the London-based Arab newspaper, *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, published on 14 December 2004, quoted in 'Abbas calls for end to violence', BBC News web site at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4096783.stm

The Israeli cabinet agreed in mid-December to release 170 Palestinian prisoners, after Egypt released an Israeli Arab jailed for spying. Israel said the move was a goodwill gesture to Egyptian President Mubarak and the new Palestinian leadership.

January 2005 Mahmoud Abbas elected President of the Palestinian Authority

On 9 January Mahmoud Abbas was elected President of the Palestinian Authority with 62.3 per cent of the vote. His nearest rival, the human rights activist Mustafa Barghouti, won just under 20 per cent. Turnout was around 63 per cent. Mr Abbas said: "We are ready for peace, peace based on justice. We hope that their [Israel's] response will be positive."³⁷ Mr Sharon congratulated Mr Abbas and wished him luck, but said that the main focus should be Palestinian action to combat terrorism.

President Bush welcomed Mr Abbas's victory, saying he was heartened by the strong turnout and was looking forward to welcoming him to Washington if he chose to come.³⁸ Foreign Secretary Jack Straw congratulated Mr Abbas, saying: "This is a crucial time for the Middle East. The prospects for progress towards a peaceful settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict are now better than they have been for many years. These elections mark an important point on that road to peace."³⁹

New Israeli Government formed

On 10 January the Israeli Knesset voted by 58 to 56 to approve a new coalition Government comprising Likud, Labour and United Torah Judaism.

February 2005 Sharm el-Sheikh summit

On 8 February Mr Abbas and Mr Sharon met in Sharm el-Sheikh to declare a mutual ceasefire, saying that both sides had agreed to stop all acts of violence against the other.⁴⁰ Observers noted a drop in the level of violence, although a Palestinian Islamic Jihad suicide attack in Tel Aviv in late February left at least four Israelis dead.

Assassination of Rafik Hariri

Former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated on 14 February by a massive car bomb in Beirut. Widespread opposition demonstrations against the government ensued, leading to its resignation. Mr Hariri's death and suspicions of Syrian involvement led in April to the establishment by the United Nations of an international independent investigation commission (UNIIC), led by the German prosecutor, Detlev Mehlis.

March 2005 London meeting on strengthening the Palestinian Authority

The British Government hosted a one-day meeting of senior Palestinian officials, including Mr Abbas, on 1 March 2005. The aim was to set out the Palestinian Authority's programme

³⁷ 'Abbas makes peace offer to Israel', BBC News web site, 11 January 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4163479.stm

³⁸ 'President's Statement on Palestinian Elections', White House Press Release, 9 January 2005, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/01/20050109.html>

³⁹ FCO Press Release, 10 January 2005, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1007029394626&a=KArticle&aid=1101399191040>

⁴⁰ For the text of the statements issued by Mr Abbas and Mr Sharon, see the BBC News web site, 8 February 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4247233.stm and http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4247327.stm

for “institutional renewal” and the international community’s commitment of support in the fields of governance, security and economic development. The PA announced plans for fresh Legislative Council elections in July 2005 and a series of local elections by the end of the year. Other governance issues included strengthening the independence of the civil service, reforming the judicial system and combating corruption.⁴¹

Resumption of Israeli-Palestinian Security Cooperation

Israeli and Palestinian officials agreed to return security control to Palestinian police in five West Bank towns, starting with Jericho and Tulkarem. Israel released certain categories of Palestinian prisoners.

Declaration of a period of calm by Palestinian militants

Following prolonged talks with Mr Abbas, thirteen militant groups including Hamas, pledged in mid-March to observe a period of “calm” until the end of 2005, as long as Israel continued to withdraw from Palestinian areas and to release prisoners. Mr Sharon called the move a positive step, but stressed the need to pursue full disarmament of these groups, rather than simply a ceasefire or truce.⁴²

Syria announces withdrawal from Lebanon

In a speech to the Syrian parliament on 6 March 2005 President Bashar al-Assad announced a phased withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. The last troops withdrew in April 2005, although critics claimed Syria continued to exert considerable influence in Lebanon through its security and intelligence agencies.

June 2005 Lebanese opposition win control of parliament

The opposition alliance in Lebanon, led by the son of Rafik Hariri, won control of parliament in early elections. An opposition candidate, Fouad Siniora was chosen as prime minister.

Palestinian legislative elections postponed

Mr Abbas announced on 4 June that the Palestinian legislative elections scheduled for 17 July would be postponed indefinitely to allow resolution of a dispute over the election law. Critics claimed Mr Abbas was concerned that Hamas would give a strong showing in the election and would challenge the dominance of his own Fatah faction. The election was subsequently rescheduled for 25 January 2006.

After Disengagement

September 2005 Israeli Disengagement from Gaza complete

Israel’s Disengagement Plan began in late August and concluded in early September. Israeli forces and Jewish settlers withdrew from all of Gaza and from four settlements in the West Bank. The withdrawal proceeded comparatively smoothly, despite widespread demonstrations by pro-settler groups and warnings that some might use force to resist eviction.

Israel mounts strikes on Gaza

⁴¹ See the ‘Conclusions of the London Meeting on Supporting the Palestinian Authority’, 1 March 2005, on the FCO web site at http://www.fco.gov.uk/Files/kfile/LondonMeeting010305_Conclusions.pdf

⁴² See ‘Sharon welcomes truce by militants’, *Financial Times*, 18 March 2005.

Israel launched a series of air strikes against alleged Palestinian militants in Gaza after an escalation of violence that saw Israel kill three Islamic Jihad members in the West Bank and Palestinian militants fire more than 40 rockets into Israel.

Ariel Sharon defeats attempt to force early Likud leadership vote

On 27 September the Likud Central Committee rejected an attempt by former prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu to force an early leadership contest for the party. Earlier in the month he had told the UN General Assembly that: "The right of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel does not mean disregarding the rights of others in the land. The Palestinians will always be our neighbors. We respect them, and have no aspirations to rule over them. They are also entitled to freedom and to a national, sovereign existence in a state of their own."⁴³

October 2005 Publication of report on assassination of Rafik Hariri

The international independent Commission set up to examine the assassination of Mr Hariri reported on 19 October. It concluded that it was highly unlikely that the Syrian or Lebanese intelligence agencies had been unaware of the assassination plot, adding that there was "converging evidence" pointing at both Lebanese and Syrian involvement in the attack.⁴⁴ Syria denied the allegations, but said it would cooperate with the inquiry, provided its national interests were not harmed.

UN Security Council calls for Syrian cooperation with international investigation into Mr Hariri's assassination

The UN Security Council passed Resolution 1636 on 31 October in which it warned of further action unless Syria cooperated with the Commission and detained suspects identified by the inquiry. It asked the Commission to report on Syrian compliance by 15 December.⁴⁵

November 2005 Hamas says it will not renew truce with Israel

Hamas declared on 2 November that it would not renew its unofficial period of calm beyond the end of 2005, following the killing by Israel of one of its leaders in the West Bank. Mr Sharon said subsequently that Israel would not support the Palestinian legislative elections in January 2006 if Hamas participated.

New Labour party leader calls for early Israeli elections

On 9 November the leadership of the Israeli Labour party was won by Amir Peretz, a trade-union leader and advocate of the peace process who then carried out his pledge to withdraw his party from the governing coalition with Likud. Early elections were set for 28 March 2006.

Agreement reached to reopen Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt

On 15 November US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice secured agreement to reopen the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt. European Union monitors were deployed to oversee Palestinian border police after the crossing reopened on 26 November.

⁴³ BBC News online, 16 September 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4250818.stm

⁴⁴ *Report of the International Independent Investigation Commission Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1595*, 19 October 2005,

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/21_10_05_mehlisreport.pdf

⁴⁵ S/RES/1636, 31 October 2005

Agreement was also reached on starting construction of a Gaza sea port, although little progress was reported on a planned transport link between Gaza and the West Bank.

Ariel Sharon leaves Likud to form a new party

On 21 November Ariel Sharon announced he was leaving the Likud party to set up a new centrist party called Kadima (Hebrew for forward). He said he believed Likud could no longer lead Israel to its national aims, adding that “staying in the Likud would have meant wasting time fighting political battles instead of working for the good of the nation”.⁴⁶ A number of ministers and Knesset members declared their backing for Mr Sharon, including former prime minister Shimon Peres, Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz, Finance Minister Ehud Olmert and Justice Minister Tzippi Livni. The following month Benjamin Netanyahu was elected as leader of Likud in the party’s leadership primary. Early opinion polls suggested Kadima would become the largest party in the Knesset, followed by Labour and Likud.

December 2005 Internal divisions emerge within the Palestinian Fatah party

Divisions between rival factions in the ruling Fatah party of President Mahmoud Abbas resulted in a break-away by the group led by Marwan Barghouti, who is imprisoned in Israel. Subsequent negotiations appeared to resolve the disputes and a united list was presented by Fatah for the elections on 25 January 2006.

UN Security Council extends investigation into the death of Mr Hariri by six months

On 15 December the UN Security Council voted to extend the mandate of the Investigation Commission examining the bomb attack on Mr Hariri for a further six months, until 15 June 2006.⁴⁷ It confirmed its earlier conclusion that Syria had failed to provide full and unconditional cooperation and underscored Syria’s obligation to do so.

January 2006 Disputes over voting rights for Palestinians in East Jerusalem

President Abbas said the elections to the 132-seat Palestinian Legislative Council could be postponed if Israel refused to allow Palestinians in East Jerusalem to vote. Israel said it would reconsider its position on the issue.

Ariel Sharon suffers major stroke

On 4 January Prime Minister Ariel Sharon suffered a major stroke. Medical reports suggested he was in a critical, but stable condition. Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was named as acting Prime Minister.

Election of Hamas and Kadima

January 2006 Hamas win a majority in the Palestinian Parliamentary Election

The militant Islamist movement Hamas emerged as the largest party from the Palestinian parliamentary election of 25 January 2006, winning 74 seats in the 132-seat Legislative Council. The result represented a major shift in the Palestinian political landscape, which had hitherto been dominated by the secular nationalist Fatah faction of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO). Israel and the international community said they would not cooperate or fund a Hamas-led Palestinian Authority unless it renounced violence,

⁴⁶ BBC News online, 21 November 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4458026.stm

⁴⁷ S/RES/1644, 15 December 2005

recognised Israel and agreed to abide by the PA's existing obligations. The EU and US said they would reduce their extensive aid to the PA if Hamas failed to comply.

February 2006 President Abbas invites Hamas to form a government

President Abbas confirmed on 18 February that Hamas would form the next government. Hamas officials said they would seek a government of national unity with Fatah and other factions, but would govern alone if coalition talks failed. The movement's nomination for the post of prime minister was Ismail Haniya, considered by many to be a relative moderate. As of 16 March, talks between Hamas and President Abbas on the new government's programme were ongoing.

March 2006 Olmert pledges to set Israel's borders within four years

Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said he would unilaterally set permanent borders for Israel within four years, if his Kadima party were elected. He said he would be willing to wait a "reasonable time" for Hamas to change, but that, if no progress was forthcoming, Israel would separate unilaterally from the majority of the West Bank Palestinian population.⁴⁸ He said this would involve annexation of the large settlements around Jerusalem and at Ma'ale Adumim, Ariel and Gush Etzion, and retention of the Jordan River as a "security border".⁴⁹

Clashes in Jericho and Gaza

On 14 March Israeli forces assaulted a Palestinian prison in Jericho. US and UK monitors had been based at the prison since 2002 to ensure the secure detention of six Palestinian militants. Four of the men had been convicted of involvement in the murder of the Israeli tourism minister in October 2001 and one was the leader of the PFLP, the Palestinian group that had claimed responsibility for the killing. The Jericho Monitoring Mission had been withdrawn shortly before the Israeli raid due to concerns over the monitors' personal security. Palestinian militia fighters angered by the move kidnapped several foreign nationals and attacked British government offices in Gaza.

Hamas Prime Minister-designate presents government programme and cabinet list

On 27 March Palestinian Prime Minister-designate Ismail Haniya presented his government programme and cabinet list to the Palestinian parliament. The proposed cabinet contained only Hamas representatives, as talks with other factions on forming a coalition had failed. The day before he said: "We are not against Jews as Jews. We are trying to stop the cycle of blood in the region. We only want the rights and dignity of the Palestinian people and an end to this deteriorating situation. Some say that the existence of Hamas in power will deepen the crisis. We say that its existence in power could be the start of a solution, if they want one."⁵⁰

Kadima party wins Israeli election

Ehud Olmert's Kadima party won the largest share of the vote in the Israeli Knesset election of 28 March, although it won fewer seats than predicted. A coalition was formed involving Kadima, Labour, the Pensioners' Party (Gil) and the ultra-orthodox Shas. Labour was given control of the defence ministry, while Kadima retained control of the foreign affairs, interior and finance portfolios. The coalition won the backing of the Knesset in early May.

⁴⁸ 'Olmert to 'Post': Israel to have final borders by 2010', *The Jerusalem Post*, 9 March 2006, from *BBC Monitoring*

⁴⁹ 'Olmert plans further withdrawals', *Financial Times*, 8 February 2006

April 2006 Hamas Government proposal for formation of new 3,000-strong security force is vetoed by President Abbas

The Hamas Interior Minister, Saeed Seyam, announced a new Hamas-led security force was to be formed, following disputes between Hamas and President Abbas over control of three branches of the Palestinian security forces. The proposal was dismissed by Mr Abbas as "illegal and anti-constitutional" and he later issued a presidential decree nullifying the move.

April-May 2006 Violence in Gaza and West Bank

Israel bombarded Gaza on a daily basis with artillery and mounted air strikes against suspected militant leaders. Palestinian militants fired rockets into Israel and Islamic Jihad launched a suicide bomb attack that killed 9 people in Tel Aviv.

May 2006 Operational deployment of new Hamas-led security force in Gaza

The new Hamas-led security force with 3,000 members was declared operational by the Hamas Interior Minister, Saeed Seyam, who said it was required to combat a "state of chaos and anarchy" after a spate of violence between Hamas and Fatah fighters. The force deployed for the first time into Gaza on 17 May, but was withdrawn a week later, following clashes with official security forces. In early June Hamas agreed to ensure the force kept a low public profile and to integrate its members into the official security forces.

Palestinian conference convened to forge a political agreement

Representatives from Fatah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad convened a conference in late May with the aim of resolving differences between their factions and forging a united position towards Israel. Reports suggested that leading members of Fatah and Hamas, many of whom were in Israeli jail, had agreed an 18-point document on seeking a Palestinian state in the territories occupied by Israel since 1967 and for continuing resistance in those areas.⁵¹ President Abbas said that, if agreement could not be reached, the issue would be put to a popular referendum on 26 July, with opinion polls suggesting support from a large majority. He argued that the document would resolve the impasse with the international community over the economic sanctions imposed following the election of Hamas.

June 2006 Upsurge in violence

Palestinian militants continued to fire rockets at Israel from Gaza. Israeli forces mounted artillery and air strikes into Gaza, killing several militants were killed. Among the dead were one member of Hamas' military wing and the leader of the Popular Resistance Committees, Jamal Abu Samhadana, who had been appointed as a senior official in the Hamas-run Interior Ministry. A number of Palestinian civilians were also killed: among them were seven civilians who died on a beach in Gaza. The military wing of Hamas responded by declaring an end to its informal 16-month truce and launching rockets across the border into Israel.

International Quartet agrees aid for Palestinian Territories

The International Quartet agreed to support an EU proposal for around \$120 million in aid to be provided to the Palestinians through a temporary mechanism that bypassed the Hamas-led government. A three-part structure was devised to channel funds through an expanded

⁵⁰ Palestinian news agency *Wafa* website, 26 March 2006, translated by *BBC Monitoring*

⁵¹ The full text of the National Conciliation Document of the Prisoners, 11 May 2006, carried by the Al-Quds newspaper, is available online at: <http://www.jmcc.org/documents/prisoners.htm>

World Bank emergency services support programme for essential health supplies, and through a reinforced EU interim emergency relief contribution for fuel and other essential items. No funds were provided for the payment of salaries to PA employees. The EU Commissioner for External Relations cautioned that donor assistance could not substitute for the responsibilities of the Palestinian government or for the responsibilities of Israel under international law.⁵² Hamas officials welcomed the move, but said the Quartet should really deal with the elected Palestinian government. President Abbas said it represented a step in the right direction, but was inadequate.

Palestinian militants abduct an Israeli soldier

Tensions escalated sharply on 25 June with an attack by Palestinian militants on an Israeli military post near Gaza. Two Israeli soldiers were killed and a third was abducted. The attack was claimed by the military wing of Hamas, the Popular Resistance Committees and the previously unknown Army of Islam. The groups demanded that Israel release the estimated 95 Palestinian women and 313 under-18s held in its prisons. A new demand was added on 1 July for the release of 1,000 Palestinian, Arab and Muslim prisoners in Israeli jails. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert ruled out any prisoner exchange, warning that “surrendering today means inviting more extortion”.⁵³ Others questioned that approach, noting that Israel had agreed to prisoner exchanges in the past.⁵⁴

Palestinian factions reach agreement on a National Conciliation Document

Aided by intensive Egyptian diplomatic efforts, Hamas and Fatah reached agreement on 28 June on an 18-point National Conciliation Document, thereby avoiding the need for a referendum.⁵⁵ A central aim of the document was to restore a degree of unity between the rival Palestinian factions and halt the slide towards civil conflict. To this end, the factions agreed to work on forming a national unity government and to reactivate the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people by ensuring the participation of all factions, including Hamas.

With regard to peace negotiations with Israel, the document stressed the Palestinians’ right to self determination, including their right to establish an independent state with Jerusalem as its capital on all territories occupied in 1967; to secure the right of return for Palestinian refugees to their homes; and to liberate all prisoners and detainees. Some observers welcomed that as implicit recognition by Hamas of the Israeli state, but others disputed that interpretation. The factions agreed that responsibility for negotiations with Israel would lie with the PLO and President Abbas. They also stressed the right of the Palestinian people to focus its resistance to the occupation in territories occupied in 1967, in tandem with political action and negotiations.

June-July 2006 Israeli forces enter Gaza

⁵² ‘The situation in the Palestinian Territories’, Speech to the European Parliament by Benita Ferrero-Waldner, European Commissioner for External Relations, 5 July 2006, <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=SPEECH/06/434&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

⁵³ *Financial Times*, 3 July 2006

⁵⁴ See for example quotes in ‘Analysis: Israel’s wider aims in Gaza’, BBC News website, 3 July 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/5132932.stm

⁵⁵ The full text of the revised National Conciliation Document of the Prisoners, 28 June 2006, is online at: <http://www.jmcc.org/documents/prisoners2.htm>

On 28 June Israeli forces entered Gaza and subsequently arrested 8 Palestinian ministers and at least 20 legislative council members in the West Bank. Israeli aircraft struck the only power station in Gaza and bombed the office of Prime Minister Ismail Haniya. Israeli officials declared that the Hamas government was engaged in policies of terror and indicated they were seeking to undermine it.⁵⁶ The militant groups holding the soldier gave a deadline of 4 July for Israel to meet their demands. Reports suggested that Egyptian mediation was offering the future release of an unspecified number of Palestinian prisoners, in exchange for the immediate freeing of the soldier. Israel agreed to partially re-open the Gaza border for limited supplies in response to concerns about the growing humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

Crisis in Lebanon

July 2006

Heavy fighting breaks out between Israel and Hizbollah

On 12 July fighters from the militant Hizbollah movement crossed the Lebanese border into Israel and attacked an Israeli military patrol, capturing two soldiers and killing eight. Israel responded by imposing an air and sea blockade on Lebanon and striking infrastructure country-wide, in an attempt to prevent military supplies reaching Hizbollah from Iran and Syria. It also attacked Hizbollah positions and rocket launchers in the south with air and ground forces, although its ground incursions encountered heavily fortified defences and fierce resistance. As the conflict escalated, Hizbollah launched around 4,000 rockets in indiscriminate attacks on northern Israel, killing civilians in Haifa, Tiberias, Afula and Nazareth and forcing around 500,000 civilians to seek refuge further south, outside the range of the rockets.

International observers criticised Hizbollah for initiating the conflict with its raid of 12 July and for deliberately targeting civilians, while some said Israel had used “disproportionate” force in its response, particularly in attacks on civilian areas in Beirut and in towns and villages across the south. One Israeli air strike on the Lebanese village of Qana left 54 civilians dead, at least 34 of whom were children, and the UN force monitoring the border (UNIFIL) lost four soldiers in an Israeli air strike, despite repeated warnings to Israel. Between 700,000-900,000 Lebanese civilians were reported to have been displaced by the fighting, prompting concerns about an impending humanitarian crisis. There was also criticism of Israel’s targeting of non-Hizbollah Lebanese infrastructure: Israeli officials had hoped this would serve a dual purpose of inhibiting Hizbollah’s re-supply and focusing Lebanese anger against Hizbollah for initiating the conflict, thereby perhaps forcing it to back down, although the Israeli attacks appeared to have the contrary effect of rallying support for the movement. The UK and US resisted international pressure at the UN Security Council to condemn Israel’s actions and to call for an immediate ceasefire, insisting that what was required was a durable cessation of violence that addressed the underlying causes of the conflict.

August 2006 After weeks of mounting pressure for an end to the conflict, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1701 on 12 August in which it called for an immediate ceasefire.⁵⁷ It also reiterated its earlier demands that Hizbollah should disarm and allow Lebanese forces to take control of the south. It called for a full Israeli withdrawal to take place in parallel with the deployment of Lebanese forces, and for the UN force in the area (UNIFIL) to be expanded to around 15,000 troops, so as to allow it to assist the Lebanese Government in establishing control. The ceasefire came into effect on 14 August.

⁵⁶ See quotes in ‘Analysis: Israel’s wider aims in Gaza’, BBC News website, 3 July 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/5132932.stm and ‘Press warns Israel government’, 3 July 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/5140320.stm

⁵⁷ S/RES/1701, <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N06/465/03/PDF/N0646503.pdf?OpenElement>

During the month-long conflict, more than 1,000 Lebanese were reported to have died, most of them civilians. Israel lost 116 soldiers and 43 civilians. It claimed its forces had killed 530 Hizbollah fighters and that the militia's rocket force had been significantly degraded, although critics noted that the two soldiers seized in the initial raid had not been returned and that Hizbollah remained a potent fighting force. Both sides suffered damage to property: in Lebanon, the Government estimated that 6,900 houses and apartments and 900 factories, markets, farms and other commercial buildings had been damaged, along with 29 airports, ports, water and sewage treatment plants, dams and electrical plants. 145 bridges and overpasses were also damaged. The cost of repairing the damage to buildings and infrastructure, much of which had been only recently rebuilt after the civil war came to an end in 1990, was put at up to \$4 billion, while the Lebanese tourist industry, which earns the country an estimated \$2.5 billion per year, was also badly affected. Hizbollah was reported to be handing out payments of around \$10,000 to people whose homes had been damaged. On the Israeli side, more than 300 buildings, including houses and factories were reported to have been damaged. The cost of repairing the damage in Israel was put at around \$1.1 billion, while the total cost of the war, including military spending and lost GDP, was estimated to be up to \$4.8 billion.

September 2006 Israel lifts air and sea blockade of Lebanon

On 7 September Israel said it would lift its air and sea blockade of Lebanon, which had been imposed to restrict the re-supply of weaponry to Hizbollah. International forces operating as part of the expanded UN force assumed responsibility for monitoring Beirut international airport and patrolling the Lebanese coast.

Talks falter on forming a Palestinian government of national unity

On 11 September an 8-point agreement was concluded between Mahmoud Abbas and Ismail Haniya setting out a political agenda for the proposed national unity government involving Hamas and Fatah. The agreement reportedly included an implicit endorsement of the Quartet's conditions (recognition of Israel, renunciation of violence and acceptance of past agreements with Israel). The agreement collapsed within a matter of days after Hamas contested President Abbas' explicit statement at the UN on 21 September that a new government would recognise Israel.⁵⁸ Tension in Gaza increased in mid-September with the assassination of a senior officer in the Palestinian General Intelligence Service, General Jad Tayeh. A group calling itself "Al-Qaeda in Palestine" claimed responsibility.

October 2006 Israel withdraws from most of southern Lebanon

The UN Interim Force in Lebanon announced on 2 October that Israeli forces had withdrawn from most of southern Lebanon, with only the area around the village of Ghajar remaining under IDF control. As the IDF withdrew, Lebanese army units moved into the vacated area, taking up positions along the border for the first time in four decades. The UN said it anticipated a full Israeli withdrawal within a week.⁵⁹

Clashes between militia fighters affiliated to Fatah and Hamas

⁵⁸ Prime Minister Haniya said: "I personally will not head any government that recognises Israel. We support establishing a Palestinian state in the land of 1967 at this stage, but in return for a ceasefire, not recognition." Source: *The Irish Examiner*, 23 September 2006. The text of President Abbas' speech is online at: <http://www.jmcc.org/documents/abbasspeechun06.htm>

During early October armed clashes took place between Fatah and Hamas militia fighters, the heaviest since Hamas entered government. The violence, which left at least 10 people dead, was triggered by disputes over the non-payment of wages to government workers. The al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades said it held the Hamas leadership responsible for the deaths and threatened to kill three Hamas officials, including the head of the group's political bureau, Khaled Meshaal.⁶⁰

November 2006 Ceasefire agreed

Towards the end of November 2006, a ceasefire was agreed between Israel and Palestinian fighters. Israel withdrew its forces from Gaza. Talks were held between Abbas and Olmert.

January 2007 Tax receipts

On 19 January, the Israeli Government transferred \$100 million of the Palestinian tax revenues it had been withholding, for humanitarian purposes. The money went to Palestinian Authority president, Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas did not receive any of it.

April 2007 Ceasefire ends

The ceasefire announced in November was declared to be ended by Hamas in April and rocket fire into Israel was resumed. Israel responded by conducting air strikes against alleged militant targets in Gaza. A number of Hamas legislators and government officials were arrested by the Israeli security forces.

June 2007 The Hamas coup in Gaza

In June the friction between Hamas and Fatah finally resulted in open conflict, as Hamas overthrew the national unity government representation in Gaza. A new Fatah-only Palestinian national Authority government was created, with the technocrat Salam Fayyad as Prime Minister. This new government was immediately recognised by the USA, Israel and the international community, and Israel released tax revenue funding that had been frozen since Hamas had entered the government of national unity.

August 2007 Annapolis

In August 2007, an international conference, intended to re-launch the peace process, was held in Annapolis, Maryland, USA. The Palestinian position was that only a state comprising the whole of the West Banks and Gaza would be acceptable, and that six central issues should be dealt with at the conference: Jerusalem, refugees, borders, settlements, water and security. The Israelis said that part of East Jerusalem might be ceded to the Palestinian state, drawing criticism from right-wing Israelis, including the leader of the Shas party, part of the Olmert coalition government.

The *Joint understanding on negotiations*,⁶¹ published at the end of the conference, foresaw the achievement of a final settlement of the outstanding issues of contention between Israelis and Palestinians by the end of 2008. Both sides agreed to abide by the commitments made

⁵⁹ For detail about the Lebanon war and its aftermath, see the Library Standard Notes [Israel: the Olmert Government and the crisis in Lebanon](#) of 24 August 2006; [Israel: the Winograd Commission on the conflict in Lebanon of July-August 2006](#), 4 February 2008

⁶⁰ For more information about Hamas before the Gaza coup, see the Library Standard Note, [Hamas and the Middle East Peace Process](#), 3 October 2006

⁶¹ The wording of the understanding is available on the British Israeli Communications and Research Centre web site: [Joint understanding on negotiations](#), 28 November 2007

for the *Road map* of 2003. Palestinians were angered in December 2007 when the Israeli Government issued tenders for more than 300 new housing units at a settlement in occupied East Jerusalem.⁶²

2008 Rocket attacks from Gaza

In response to the Annapolis conference, Hamas had announced that its resistance to Israel would continue. Rocket attacks from Gaza against Israeli towns such as Ashkelon and Sderot continued and in January 2008, Israel intensified its military assault on Gaza and in the middle of the month imposed a complete blockade on the territory. 112 Palestinians and three Israelis died.

March 2008 Relations deteriorate

A Palestinian gunman killed eight students and wounded several others in a Jerusalem religious college. At first Hamas claimed responsibility for the attack, later denying it. Later in 2008, a ceasefire was agreed between Hamas and Israel but it did not prove durable. Israel continued to announce the construction of more settlements, particularly in East Jerusalem.⁶³

Invasion of Gaza

December 2008 Operation 'Cast Lead'

On 27 December, Israel launched a large-scale military operation in Gaza. After a week of bombings, ground forces moved in in January; by the end of the month, Israeli forces had withdrawn, leaving well over a thousand Palestinians dead, many of whom were non-combatants. 13 Israelis were killed. An initial United Nations report found that white phosphorus had been used as a weapon, on contravention of the Geneva Conventions. In June 2009, a fact-finding mission, led by the South African jurist Richard Goldstone, arrived in Israel to report on the alleged irregularities. Israel boycotted the inquiry. The Goldstone Report was published in September 2009, and found that: there was 'evidence indicating serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law were committed by Israel during the Gaza conflict, and that Israel committed actions amounting to war crimes, and possibly crimes against humanity'.⁶⁴ The report also questioned whether the Israeli military action was proportionate in relation to the rocket attacks against which it claimed to be a defensive action.⁶⁵

6 Election of Barack Obama

January 2009 The inauguration of Barack Obama as US President in January brought hope, especially in the Middle East and Europe, that new impetus would be given to the peace process. During the election campaign, Obama had, for some observers, unwisely, chosen progress on the Israeli/Palestinian peace process as one of his first-term priorities.

February 2009 Israeli general election

⁶² For more information on the Annapolis conference, see the Library Standard Notes, [Israel and the Palestinians: towards the Annapolis Meeting](#), 21 November 2007; [Middle East Peace Process: After Annapolis](#), 13 December 2007; [The Annapolis negotiations and the outlook for the two-state solution](#), April 2008

⁶³ For more information on the military situation between Israel and Hamas in spring 2008, see the Library Standard Note [Gaza: the latest crisis](#), 7 March 2007

⁶⁴ United Nations Human Rights Council, [Report of the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza](#), 2009

⁶⁵ Operation Cast Lead is covered in the Library Standard Note, [Gaza: The conflict between Israel and Hamas](#), 23 January 2009

Early general elections in Israel in February 2009 resulted in a close finish between the centrist Kadima and the right wing Likud. Tzipi Livni, former Foreign Minister, was thought to be unable to form a government for Kadima. The President therefore asked Binyamin Netanyahu of Likud to try. He announced that he had done so, with the support of Labour and a number of smaller religious parties; the new government was inaugurated in March. Netanyahu did not make clear his acceptance of the two-state solution or call a halt to the expansion of Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories.

May 2009 Netanyahu visits Washington

Concern at the distance between the US and Israeli governments grew when, after the Washington meeting, Obama stressed his commitment to the two-state solution as set out in the *Road Map* and the Annapolis conference. Netanyahu, on the other hand, stated his readiness to restart negotiations at once, but refused to endorse the goal of full sovereignty for Palestine, instead suggesting that economic development would lead to stability in the area.

June 2009 Cairo speech

In a speech at Cairo, President Obama set out his vision for a cooperative approach between the West and the Muslim world. Shortly after the speech, Binyamin Netanyahu finally endorsed the policy of creating an independent state for the Palestinians but continued to oppose a right of return for Palestinian refugees and a freeze on settlement expansion. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton denied that a deal had been done between Israel and the Bush Administration allowing Israel to continue to expand settlements.

November 2009 A temporary settlement freeze and the US changes tone

The US Administration, frustrated by the impasse over settlements and the failure to restart peace negotiations, began to mollify its former intransigent tone regarding settlements. On 25 November, Netanyahu offered a 10-month freeze on new residential building and the issuing of permits for this, in the West Bank. The [proposal did not include East Jerusalem, nor did it preclude building to accommodate “natural growth”.

Clinton praised Netanyahu’s offer of ‘restraint’ on the settlements problem, saying that it was more than had been offered before. Palestinian officials were angry that, as they saw it, agreements enshrined in the *Road Map* had been abandoned; other Arab leaders were frustrated, feeling that they had been led out on a limb by Obama’s earlier words, only to be left vulnerable to a backlash from their own peoples due to the lack of progress. Increasingly, observers started to call for talks to move directly to final status issues such as the drawing of frontiers, rather than remain stuck on problems such as settlement building.

January 2010 Gaza airstrikes

Israel carried out airstrikes on the network of tunnels between Egypt and the Gaza strip. The Israelis had become increasingly concerned about arms being smuggled through the tunnels. Palestinians, on the other hand, saw the tunnels as a lifeline, mitigating the effects of the blockade.

On 20 January, the body of Mahmoud al-Mabhouh, a senior Hamas official, was found in an hotel room in Dubai. The Dubai police quickly pointed towards the Israeli secret services, Mossad, as the likely author of the assassination. Tensions with western governments arose

when it was revealed that the killers had used altered British, Irish, French German and other passports.

The US considers presenting its own plan

It was widely reported that, dismayed by the lack of progress, the Obama Administration started to consider presenting its own settlement terms with a view to attempting to impose them on the two sides. The Israeli Government rejected this option. US officials were quoted as saying that the basic outlines of a plan for a two-state solution were well-known and that the difference would be that the US plan would be linked to regional questions such as relations with Iran, Jordan and Syria and would end the impasse on problems such as settlements.

Settlements 'snub'

March 2010

At the beginning of the month, it was reported in the press that Palestinians were on the brink of resuming negotiations, boycotted since the election of Netanyahu. According to the reports, the talks are referred to as 'indirect proximity talks'; Palestinians will continue to demand an end to all construction in the West banks and that Jerusalem should be on the negotiating table.

On 9 March, however, a new crisis emerged as the Israeli authorities announced the construction of 1,600 new housing units in occupied East Jerusalem. The announcement was made during a visit by the US Vice President Joe Biden to Israel. The Obama Administration was clearly angered at the move and its timing, although the Israeli Government denied that there had been an intentional snub. Some commentators talked about the effects of the coalition government in Israel leading to a lack of coordination between the Prime Minister, who is a member of Likud, and the Housing department, run by a minister from the right-wing Shas party.

April 2010

In April the US envoy George Mitchell returned to Jerusalem, raising hopes that the negotiations might resume.

May 2010

On 9 May, indirect talks resumed, amid low expectations of success. Negotiations took up where they had left off 18 months previously, when talks had been broken off during the Israeli military action in Gaza. Israel said that no substantial progress would be made without direct talks. The Arab League agreed to support negotiations for four months, a period which would end at about the same time as Israel's controversial partial freeze on settlement building.

The Gaza aid flotilla

The ships assembled in Cypriot waters on 30 May 2010, with Edward Peck, former US ambassador to Iraq, Ann Wright, former US soldier and diplomat who retired in protest at the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and European and Arab parliamentarians on board.⁶⁶ In total, nearly 700 activists were aboard the flotilla, most of them on the Mavi Marmara. 37 of them were British.

⁶⁶ 'Groups behind flotillas', *Financial Times*, 1 June 2010

Israeli commandos carried out an assault on the ships during darkness, when boats and helicopters approached the convoy. Armed Israeli personnel abseiled from the helicopters and encountered resistance from the activists on the largest of the ships, the Mavi Marmara. There was no serious violence on the other ships. There are conflicting accounts of what happened on the Mavi Marmara. The Israeli Government claims that the protesters armed themselves with iron bars and knives, and captured firearms from the Israeli soldiers, some of which were discharged.

Activists aboard the Mavi Marmara denied that the activists were armed in preparation for violence, and that the Israeli personnel let off stun grenades as they descended to the ship. It seems likely that the activists only used what weapons they could find on the ship, as they were reportedly searched by Turkish security services before they boarded.

The nine killed in the raid were identified as eight Turkish citizens aged between 32 and 61, and a Turkish-American student aged 19, who was shot at close range with four bullets in his head.⁶⁷

The loss of life on the Mavi Marmara caused an international outcry that was possibly unprecedented. European and other governments condemned the raid, while the US Government 'regretted the tragic loss of life.'⁶⁸ Israel's reaction to the comments was uncompromising, with the Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman telling Turkey that Israel had "nothing to apologise for,"⁶⁹ and Prime Minister Netanyahu accusing international critics of "hypocrisy" and "bias."⁷⁰

Many commentators blamed Israel's blockade on Gaza: UK Foreign Secretary William Hague called it "unacceptable and unsustainable."⁷¹ Pressure mounted on Israel to take steps to ameliorate the situation of the inhabitants of Gaza. Leaders also called for an impartial inquiry, many of them demanding an international inquiry under the auspices of the United Nations. Israel rejected this and announced the establishment of a three person commission of inquiry with two international observers, Lord Trimble and a Canadian military law expert. Turkey, traditionally Israel's strongest ally in the Islamic world, recalled its ambassador and threatened to downgrade diplomatic relations unless a full apology was received and an internationally-led inquiry was established.

July 2010

Israel also announced that it would ease the blockade, and that a new list of permitted products would be issued. On 4 July, a new list was released.⁷² A White House spokesman said the move was an "important step" that would "make a significant improvement in the lives of people in Gaza, while keeping weapons out of the hands of Hamas."⁷³ Hamas said the new list was "useless",⁷⁴ and aid agencies questioned whether the new list would significantly alter living conditions, as most consumer items had been available via tunnels under the border, and restrictions on much-needed building materials were left in place.

⁶⁷ 'We have nothing to be sorry for, Israel tells Turkey', *Daily Telegraph*, 4 June 2010

⁶⁸ 'Free Gaza Flotilla', US Department of State press release, 31 May 2010

⁶⁹ 'We have nothing to be sorry for, Israel tells Turkey', *Daily Telegraph*, 4 June 2010

⁷⁰ 'Netanyahu defiant as pressure builds to lift siege', *Guardian*, 3 June 2010

⁷¹ HC Deb 2 June 2010, c438

⁷² Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Gaza: Lists of Controlled Entry Items*, 4 July 2010

⁷³ 'Turkey threatens to sever ties with Israel over deadly flotilla raid', *Washington Post*, 6 July 2010

⁷⁴ 'Turkey ready to cut ties with Israel over flotilla raid', *Guardian*, 6 July 2010

On 6 July, Prime Minister Netanyahu visited Washington for a visit that had been postponed in the aftermath of the flotilla crisis. Both sides made efforts to repair relations. On the same day, foreign ministers of France, Germany, Britain, Italy and Spain accepted an unusual invitation from the Israeli Authorities to visit the Gaza Strip.⁷⁵

August 2010

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced an important breakthrough- after two years without direct meetings, Mahmoud Abbas and Binyamin Netanyahu would meet face to face in Washington DC on 2 September. Clinton admitted that there would be “obstacles” in the attempts to find a settlement and analysts pointed to the impending un-freezing of settlement construction as the most obvious of these. One Palestinian negotiator, who has been trying to broker reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas on behalf of Abbas, said: “This will continue to weaken him, not only in front of his people, but inside the [Palestine Liberation Organization], because Israel will continue to build settlements.”⁷⁶

September 2010

The main participants in the negotiations, together with President Obama, President Mubarak, King Abdullah of Jordan, Hillary Clinton and Tony Blair met on the evening of 1 September for a dinner at the White House. The meeting the next day was private but it has been suggested that Netanyahu may have raised the issue of the recognition of Israel as the national state of the Jewish people and that of security guarantees to avoid a repetition of the consequences of withdrawal from Gaza and Lebanon: the installation of militants backed by Iran in those areas.

After the meeting, however, commentators were surprised by the positive notes being struck by Binyamin Netanyahu. He spoke of reaching a “historic compromise with our Palestinian neighbours” and promised “to embrace original thinking” in order to achieve it.⁷⁷ Some critics interpreted this as an attempt to shift the blame to the Palestinian side for the inevitable collapse of the talks. Others interpreted it as a sign that Netanyahu, having established his reputation as a “hawk”, now felt strong enough to push the process forward.

On 26 September, the 10-month moratorium on settlement building expired and all direct contacts ceased. According to the Israeli pressure group Peace Now, there were some 20,000 housing units awaiting construction starts in the West Bank, but settlers’ organisations and the Israeli government said that construction would be measured and “responsible”.⁷⁸ The US State Department said that its policy on settlements had not changed.

Abbas did not declare an end to the talks immediately as construction restarted. Probably as a result of US pressure to keep the talks alive, he announced that he would consult colleagues in Fatah and the Arab League before making any decision, giving the talks a short stay of execution.

⁷⁵ ‘Five EU foreign ministers to visit Gaza after Israel eases blockade’, *EuObserver*, 6 July 2010

⁷⁶ “Obama to host Mideast peace negotiations; Clinton cites ‘obstacles’ to deal to create a Palestinian state”, *Washington Post*, 21 August 2010

⁷⁷ “Who’s bluffing?; It’s hard to read Mideast leaders’ intentions”, *Washington Post*, 13 September 2010

⁷⁸ “U.S. Scrambling To Save Talks On Middle East”, *New York Times*, 27 September 2010

The Obama administration tries the carrot instead of the stick

October 2010

In a sign of its more conciliatory approach to the Israeli Government, it was reported that the US had made new offers to Israel if the talks were kept alive by a 60-day extension of the partial construction freeze, including an important new arms deal involving the purchase of 20 F-35 Stealth fast jets; the acceptance a continuing Israeli military presence in the Jordan Valley; and a US veto of any UN Security Council resolution critical of Israel while the talks continued.⁷⁹ The Palestinians were reportedly offered US support for their position on the borders of a Palestinian state, in return for continuing the talks in the absence of a settlement freeze.

On 8 October, the Arab League released a statement giving US negotiators a month to resolve the impasse over settlements construction. Rather than any discussions of core issues, participants continued to concentrate on getting around the settlements obstacle. Meanwhile, no further talks took place.

On 10 October, the Israeli cabinet approved a draft amendment to Israeli immigration laws which would require non-Jewish immigrants to declare an oath of allegiance to Israel as a democratic and Jewish state. The amendment divided the cabinet, with Labour Party ministers voting against it. Some suggested it was a gift to the right of the coalition to prepare for the granting of concessions to the Palestinians. The following day, Netanyahu offered to re-instate the freeze on construction if the Palestinian side agreed to recognise the Jewish nature of Israel. The Palestinian side quickly rejected any acknowledgment of Israel as the Jewish homeland, worried that this meant accepting that the 4.5 million Palestinian refugees had no right of return to Israel. On 15 October, Israel announced the construction of 238 new housing units in East Jerusalem.

November 2010

On 13 November Israeli anti-settlement group Peace Now issued a report which claimed that since the end of the moratorium on 26 September, 1,629 housing units had been started.⁸⁰ This rate of housing starts meant that the settlement movement had almost made up for the reduction in starts implied by the moratorium.

At the same time, details were made public of the last attempt to persuade the Israeli government to implement a settlement freeze. It was reported that the United States was offering Israel \$3 billion of military hardware, including 20 F-35 Stealth fighters, in exchange for a 90-day freeze on settlement construction in the West Bank. The F-35s would be in addition to the 20 ordered in October, and would be delivered without charge. Reportedly, a comprehensive US/Israel defence agreement was also offered, to be signed in the event of a peace deal between the Israelis and the Palestinians. East Jerusalem would not be affected by the moratorium. In return for the concessions, Israel would agree to complete negotiations on the borders of the new Palestinian state.⁸¹

After a seven-hour meeting with the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Mr Netanyahu returned to Israel on 14 November to discuss a potential deal with the Israeli Cabinet.

⁷⁹ "U.S. Faces Risks and Advantages in Bid to Salvage Mideast Talks", *New York Times*, 6 October 2010

⁸⁰ "[In 6 weeks the settlers almost made up for the 10 months Settlement Freeze](#)", Peace Now, 13 November 2010

⁸¹ "Israel in talks over US incentives for settlement freeze", *Financial Times*, 15 November 2010

A settlements freeze is abandoned. The end of the road map?

December 2010

It had been widely expected that the Israeli government would support the deal and re-impose a settlement freeze. The Government stalled, however, and asked for written confirmation of terms of the offer. The US refused the Israeli demand for confirmation in writing and, in the end, no agreement was forthcoming.

On 7 December, a US official announced that the effort to persuade Israel to freeze settlement building was to be abandoned. The official said:

We've determined that a moratorium will not at the moment provide the best basis for negotiations. We know that everyone remains committed to the goal of a framework agreement, including the Israelis and the Palestinians, and we will continue to engage with them on the core issues and we still hope to get them to the talks.⁸²

US officials hoped that it would be possible to re-start indirect talks on specific issues such as the borders of a Palestinian state. The chief Palestinian negotiator, Saeb Erekat, said that the Palestinians' next step would be to ask the international community to recognise the Palestinian state.⁸³

Brazil announced that it would recognise the state of Palestine within the pre-1967 borders. Uruguay and Argentina quickly followed suit with announcements and Paraguay was thought to be about to join them. Israel reacted negatively to the news.⁸⁴ In reaction to the developments, Mahmoud Abbas called "on the EU to take a step towards recognition of the state of Palestine based on the 1967 borders".⁸⁵

⁸² "US ditches goal of halting Israeli settlements", *Financial Times*, 8 December 2010

⁸³ "Blame game begins after Middle East talks fail again", *Independent*, 9 December 2010

⁸⁴ "Israel attacks Brazil and Argentina", *Financial Times*, 8 December 2010

⁸⁵ "Europe's threat to recognise Palestine", *Daily Telegraph*, 14 December