

Why is it difficult to keep peace talks going in the Middle East?

The inability to resolve the land dispute, which began in the late nineteenth century and intensified after the setting up of the Jewish state of Israel in 1948, lies at the heart of the Arab conflict. Reaching a peaceful solution is essentially difficult because the dispute is fraught with many disagreements and lack of trust between and within the Palestinian Arabs and Israeli fractions that remain locked in battle.

The Arab basis of the claim is that they conquered the land in 600AD and have lived there ever since. However the Jewish viewpoint is Jews lived there first and that this is their biblical land. This was taken from Jews as a result of a war with the Romans causing Diaspora and they have simply reclaimed the land that was taken from them.

Arabs feel if Israel continues to claim the entire land, extending its boundaries then the millions of Arabs in the country would be required to live under Israeli sovereignty but without basic democratic rights. However Israel argues that there has never been an independent State of Palestine. Israel feels that the majority of Palestinians reside today in Jordan on the eastern side of the Jordan River if a Palestinian state was declared on the Western side of Jordan than this would clearly be a second nation for Palestinians. Accordingly Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza do not take away the sovereign rights of any other people.

To illustrate loss of sovereign rights the Arabs have highlighted that initially the vast majority of Jews lived outside of Jerusalem but Israel now confers upon those who observe Judaism the right to enter the state as fully enfranchised nationals instantly over anyone else including non-Jews who have lived there for a long time.

Jews do not trust the Palestinian political institutions accusing them of corruption and tacit support of terrorism. They feel a Palestinian state in the West Bank would pursue a long-term strategy of destroying Israel, rather than building up national life for the Palestinians. They feel a hatred of Israel appears to be a greater driving force for Palestinians than building their own society and therefore a Palestinian state would be a staging area for missile attacks on Israel. This line of thought is further enhanced by Arab states riddled with bureaucratic corruption are unable to control or contain fanatics in their midst bent on the destruction of the West.

Many Israelis believe the land provides security and supports their economy. They do not trust Palestinian authorities and are concerned if the lands they have fought for is given to the Palestinians they will get no real promise of security in return.

Further Israelis feel if they display a determination to hold onto the West Bank and not to yield to the Arabs then eventually the Arabs will understand that they cannot succeed and will either depart voluntarily to reside in Jordan or accept some limited self-rule, which is less than independence under Israeli sovereignty.

However the Palestinians argue that this not only challenges a legitimate right for Palestinian self-rule but that Jordan does not offer a meaningful alternative statehood for the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza.

Jerusalem remains one of the most problematic issues in the conflict. Neither Israel nor Palestinians are willing to make Jerusalem an international city as per UN plans. Israel sees Jerusalem as the capital city of ancient Israel the eternal capital and therefore will not voluntarily give it up. Arabs regard East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state. Most Arabs at the very least believe Jerusalem must stay under Islamic Palestinian authority.

Further the slow pace of negotiations for peace make people in the occupied territories impatient. This enables strict militant Islamic groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad Hezbollah to offer Palestinians a popular and radical alternative to the secular (non-religious) PLO. Such groups claim to represent the true version of Islam uncorrupted by modern ideas or interpretations, they do not trust and are not prepared to recognise Israel under any circumstances and aim for the complete destruction of Israel. As their activities such as suicide bombings continue Israel does not feel safe and in fact blames Palestinian authorities (at the time Yasser Arafat) for failure to control the violence. They believed Yasser Arafat himself purposefully failed to crack down on and gave unspoken support to the terrorists.

Both Muslim and Jewish fundamentalist groups oppose any compromise to peace which involves the sharing of Palestine. They believe any peace agreement would merely be short term and aim to create a state based on religious laws where no other beliefs exist.

Examples why peace talks have failed:

1. In 1978 at Camp David an agreement was signed which proposed to give Palestinians in the occupied territories autonomy (self-rule) for a 5 year period after which the final status of the occupied territories would be decided.
Due to the lack of trust the PLO and other Arab states rejected this because it did not guarantee full Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories or the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. Israel further enhanced the Arab distrust, by continuing to build new settlements in these areas.
2. In April 2003 a new peace plan “road map to peace” sought a two state solution to the conflict, setting up an independent Palestinian state in the occupied territories, alongside Israel, to be achieved in 3 stages by 2005.
However due to failure to control Palestinian violence initiated through militant groups, and terrorist attacks Israeli troops halted their withdrawals to begin a campaign of assassinations of top terrorist leaders.

The conflict is about religion and so no other factor is important. Do you think this is true?

In my opinion the primary cause of the conflict is land and who controls it. However religion is a vital force that promotes the conflict along with other factors e.g. nationalism political, economical and ideological are also important.

Palestine is sometimes termed as the Holy Land because certain places notably the city of Jerusalem, played a special part in the Jewish, Muslim and Christian religions.

The first religious argument for the Jewish people's claim to the land of Israel is biblical. According to traditional Jewish belief God promised the land of Israel to Abraham around 3,500 years ago and this biblical promise applies today.

In ancient times Jew's left Egyptian slavery to fulfil God's promise and inhabit the Biblical land of Israel. However during Roman rule, which culminated in a failed uprising against their imperial masters in 67AD, dispersal or *Diaspora* occurred where most Jews left the historic homeland Israel and settled all over Europe and the middle East. Although living in widespread communities around the world Jews constantly yearned for the promised land. This is the idea of Zionism provoked by a series of violent attacks known as pogroms on Jews in Russia during early 1880s. Zionism is where Jews believe they would return to their homeland.

The Promised Land includes the entire territory between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River, including the West Bank; the towns in these regions all have biblical histories playing a major part in Jewish national and religious life. Jews left these places only when attacked, killed or driven out. Consequently since 1967 when Israel took control of the West Bank and Gaza Jews feel it is religiously forbidden for Israel to hand control of any part of the territories over to any other sovereign authority e.g. the Palestinian authority and in fact continued Israeli settlement is a religious obligation. Jews feel if Israel withdraws and agrees to Palestinian rule over the West Bank Jews would find it difficult if not impossible to live in their own promised land as a result of the violently hostile Palestinian attitudes towards to Jews and Palestinian control over security in those areas.

A second religious argument for Jews retaining land;

“Jewish people can only achieve their national redemption and bring the Messiah by retaining the entire biblical Land of Israel”

Jews believe they are destined for an everlasting redemption (a time when Jews will enjoy peace, security and spiritual tranquillity) and this can only happen according to Rabbinical teachings in the Land of Israel.

Jews feels that Israel's creation soon after the Holocaust marked the beginning of this redemption and the progression towards the Messianic age. The wars of 1948 and 1967 ensured Israel's control of the “biblical territory” therefore settlement activity naturally

brings redemption closer. Consequently it would not be religiously permissible for Israel to reverse this process by returning land, to stop settlements would mean rejecting the Messianic vision.

From an Islamic point of view the war is considered as a Jihad, a war not just against Palestinians but a war against Islam. Therefore it was a call for all Muslims to unite against the infidel, fighting and dying for the cause of Palestine is fighting for Allah. Further Muslims believe the Dome of the Rock mosque is a religious Islamic landmark built by a prophet and it is the place where Muhammad went up to Heaven from Jerusalem. In fact during early Islam it was here and not Mecca where Muslims used to face in order to pray
The events of 09/11 have emboldened fanatical Muslims around the world to dream that the western culture can be brought down along with Israel whose military is subsidized by American taxpayers.

However other reasons for wanting the land are:

- 1) The Jewish people did not have their own state dispora and persecution in other countries led to increased feeling of nationalism and Zionism among Jews. Palestinians lost the land (six days war, 1948 war) They want their own land and live as refugees in poor conditions.
- 2) Power from the land Israelis??? it is a key military advantage to Israel, since Israeli settlements strengthen Israel's military security. Before 1967 Israel was extremely vulnerable geographically, it was 14 Km wide at its narrowest point and Jerusalem and other major population centers were very exposed. Following 1967 it obtained more territory which it could uses a buffer against further military attack. Therefore settlements built in the Gaza strip to the west of Israel impede a Egyptian attack and those in the Jordan valley impede armoured assault from Jordan and / or Iraq.
- 3) Economics Israel is wealthy since it has control of others are poor.

Recently it has been said on Radio 4 that international involvement in the Middle East has caused many problems than it has solved. Do you agree with this statement?

Until the middle of the twentieth century most Arabs outside the remote desert regions of Arabia lived under the imperial rule of Turkey, France or Britain. As this rule crumbled independent Arab states emerged.

The situation in the Middle East was complicated by Britain who had strong interests in the region ruled by the Turks, since they wanted control of the Suez canal (a route to India its most valued colony) and also Britain did not want the oil fields to fall into hostile hands. Eager for an ally and support against Turkey they approached the Arabs through their High Commissioner in Cairo, Sir Henry McMahon.

A letter written by McMahon on 24th October 1915 to the Sherif of Mecca, clearly stated

“Great Britain is prepared to recognise and support the independence of the Arabs in all regions with the limits demanded by the Sherif of Mecca”

In November 1917 Arthur Balfour, the British Foreign Minister sent a letter to Lord Rothschild a prominent supporter of Zionism. In the letter Balfour offered government support for

“the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people”

In fact by the time World War I ended Britain had made 2 different and contradictory proposals :

- 1) to help the Arabs set up their own states in the Middle East
- 2) To give Jews their own national home in Palestine.

The effect of these proposals meant that neither Jews nor Arabs trusted Britain. Following the 1919 Peace Talks Britain was given the Mandate and hence responsibility for overseeing Palestine and bringing it to self-government. However the Jews fared well during the mandate since the British appointed a Jew Sir Herbert Samuel as High Commissioner of Palestine whose sympathies inevitably lay with the Jews. By the end of 1920 10,000 Jewish immigrants had arrived in Israel since the end of the World War I, they established their own force and the General Federation of Jewish Labour promoting further immigration and settlement. Perhaps by dividing Palestine into Arab and Jewish areas as soon as the mandate was established, Britain could have avoided this conflict.

The British were an uncertain government of the Palestinian mandate between the wars and failed to control the violence between Jews and Arabs by the later 1930s which was approaching new heights of ferocity.

Nazi persecution of Jews during the Holocaust At the close of world war II meant increased number of Jewish refugees seeking entry to Palestine fueling Arab-Jewish tension even more.

Although Britain tried to limit immigration to Palestine there was mounting pressure from the US (where American Jews were successful in organizing themselves politically) and from Jewish terrorists in Palestine for Britain to relax its immigration policy to enable more Jews to enter Palestine

On 14th February 1947 the British Foreign Secretary announced that Arab objections prevented a partition of Palestine (and handed over the mandate to the United Nations. Following this on 29/11/47 the General Assembly of the UN carried by 33 votes to 13 (Britain against) supporting the foundation of a Jewish homeland. Arab countries and Britain voted against. The Holocaust was a major factor on voting:

- 1) Since Western leaders felt both guilt and sympathy for Jews. The guilt was due to the fact the between 1933 and 1945 many countries in a position to shelter refugees from Nazi persecution including Britain, USA put concerns about domestic unemployment first limiting Jewish immigration.
- 2) Further the Arab cause was not helped by the fact that their leader the Mufti of Jerusalem was friendly with Hitler.

The UN actions were very heavy handed in pressing ahead with the partition in face of Arab and British opposition.

"The assembly (of the UN) partitioned what it had no right to divide- an indivisible homeland" (Yasser Arafat)

The formation of Israel left Palestinian Arabs with no immediate hope of establishing a state of their own.

The consequences of this action are still being seen today:

- 1) It destabilized the Middle East, making it perhaps the most troubled region in the world.
- 2) Although it united the Arabs in their cause against Israel it also served to widen the divide between separate Arab nations.
- 3) It left a large number of Palestinian Arabs as second class citizens in an alien state.
- 4) It drove the Palestinians to form their own resistance organisations dedicated to opposing the Israelis by any means possible, including terrorism
- 5) However with the backing of the Victors of World War II on the 14th of May 1948 the territory within Palestine which was previously governed by the British was founded as the internationally recognised state of Israel. .
- 6) It made many of the citizens of the new state suspicious intolerant and defensive
- 7) It bred many wars, two long bloody uprisings and hundreds of horrifying terrorist attacks.
- 8) It wracked and distorted the economies of Israel an her neighbours

- 9) It brought the United States close to confrontation with the Soviet Union.
- 10) It led to an oil embargo that rocked the world economy.
- 11) It brought assassination, torture and the downfall of a politician.

The communist Soviet Union and the democratic United States although allies during world war II neither understood or trusted each other. By 1947 both superpowers were at loggerheads, each built up huge stockpiles of weapons and tried to outdo the other in attracting allies around the world. This was the Cold War era. A dangerous repercussion of the Cold War was the diplomatic manoeuvring of the US and Soviet Union in the conflict they merely continued the conflict and effectively made a solution more difficult to achieve at least until the late 1970s.

- 1) In the 1960s the Soviet Union engaged in a massive anti-Zionist campaign among the Arabs. This was not done for reasons of principle but to unite the Arabs against Israel an ally of the US. But it served only to increase tension in the area.
- 2) It is also suspected the Soviet leaked false warnings to Egypt that its ally Syria was about to be attacked by Israel and precipitated the 1967 war.
- 3) It is rumoured the US was behind the coups in Syria (1961) and Iraq (1963) to temporarily remove these countries from the Soviet sphere of influence.
- 4) The primary manner in which both fuelled the conflict was by supplying arms to either side. Perhaps a refusal to provide arms to Israel or the Arabs might have made each side less ready to resort to war.
- 5) Another consequence of US-Soviet involvement was on occasion it brought the world close to nuclear disaster.

On 17th September 1978 the US president Jimmy Carter acting as go between persuaded Israeli Prime minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to sign an historic peace settlement on the basis of peace in exchange for land known as the Camp David agreements. Israel handed back the region of Sinai to Egypt in return for a peace treaty and full normal relations between the countries. Although Sadat's move while celebrated in the West was deeply unpopular in the Arab world. The agreement shattered Arab unity, other Arab leaders condemned Sadat as traitor and expelled Egypt from the Arab League, and he was assassinated in 1981 by Muslim extremists. Israelis were also divided between those who supported Begin and those who believed he had sacrificed the country's security. Importantly many Palestinians now believed they could no longer rely on the support of Arab neighbours and their fate lay in their own hands.

Major step forward was made when Bill Clinton in September 1993 oversaw the signing of an agreement in Washington which resulted from The Oslo Accords. During negotiation over the following 3 years Israelis withdrew their forces from Gaza and from many West Bank cities. In 1996 Palestinian elections were held and Yasser Arafat won a landslide victory and a Palestinian Authority ruled the Palestinians for the first time. However Israel still possessed 60% of the West Bank and 40% of the Gaza strip, having overall control over the land, security and water.

Many ordinary Palestines were worried that Oslo Accords did not guarantee setting up of a separate state. Whilst Israelis were concerned lands they had fought for would be returned to the Palestinians with no security in return. Importantly both extreme Islamic groups and Israeli right-wingers could not tolerate compromise. A series of suicide bombings in Israel by Hamas ensured popular Israeli opinion shifted towards a hard-line approach. Rabin was assassinated in November 1995 by Israeli extremists and in May 1996 a conservative government came to power in Israel headed by Benjamin Netanyahu an opponent of the Oslo Accords. His government agreed expansion of Israeli settlements going against the Oslo agreement. By 1997 US and EU peace efforts stalled as continued spread of Israeli settlements led to increased support for Islamic militant groups. In 1998 USA put pressure on Israelis to put a stop to settlement building and to continue troop withdrawals, and in October 1998 the Wye memorandum was signed in Washington where Israel agreed to withdraw from an additional 13% of the West Bank in return for a pledge from the Palestinians to crack down on terrorism. In July 2000 President Clinton invited Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak and Yasser Arafat for negotiations although no agreement was reached over the status of Jerusalem and Palestinian refugees, Barak was criticized in Israel for having offered too much.

The September 2001 attack increased US sympathy for Israel in its fight against militant Islam. President Bush believed that ending Palestinian terrorism would help the USA's "War against terror" therefore after Afghanistan and destroying Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq (2003) the US now gives serious support to the "road map" a multinational plan for peace between Israel and Palestinians, see Table 1.

Table 1: Stages of the Proposed Road Map to Peace, April 2003.

Stage	
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • End of Palestinian violence; • Reform of Palestinian Political institutions (accused of corruption and supporting terrorists) • Dismantling of all Israeli settlements in the occupied territories constructed since March 2001. • Progressive Israeli withdrawal from designated areas of the occupied territories.
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of an independent Palestinian state] • Discuss crucial issues such as sharing water resources and economic development.
3	<p>Parties to reach an agreement on</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final borders, • Status of Jerusalem, • Return of Palestinian refugees • Israeli settlements <p>Leading to an end the conflict.</p>

US support for Israel was seen in September 2003 when US vetoed a UN Security Council draft resolution which denounced Israel's decision to "remove" Yasser Arafat. At first the road map appeared to be successful however by early 2004 Sharon's government infuriated Palestinian opinion by continuing to build a "security fence" along a self-proclaimed eastern boarder, which Arabs claimed would deprive Arabs in West Bank of work, land and water.

One of the original supporters of the establishment of a Jewish state the UN is partly responsible for the conflict. Although it has tried to amicably settle the situation not one of its efforts have met with success. Thus a decline in its credibility as a peacekeeping organisation is a consequence of the war. A pattern for UN's involvement in the conflict is detailed in table 2:

Table 2-UN involvement in a conflict

An Outbreak of Violence
UN demands for a cease fire and withdrawl
Disengagement and arrival of UN observers and peace keepers
UN withdrawl when requested or threatened
A fresh outbreak of violence.
The UN can resist aggression with armed force only with unanimous support of members of the UN security council it has ne ver found such unanimity over the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Even after 1993 when progress was made the UN function's as a supporter and not an initiator. However the UN has won respect from all parties for its work caring for Palestinian refugees. It set ug the UN relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees.

In my opinion International efforts today genuinely aim to reach peace but this was not always the case e.g. during the Cold War. Also they were initially not quick enough e.g. had the superpowers or the UN stepped in the moment the fighting started in 1948 decades of turmoil might have been avoided. Consequently it is International interactions (or lack of) that have served to perpetuate the conflict making it the most enduring in Arab-Israeli history .

seemed to have no policy towards Palestine other than trying to contain the violence.

Therefore poor handling of the mandate by the British was a major cause of the future Arab-Jewish conflict.

Alienated the arabs

In the 1950s communist Soviet Union and the democratic capitalist United States were trying to outdo each other in attracting allies around the world. These superpowers were set against each other in the Middle East to deepen and intensify the Arab-Israeli conflict whilst fuelling hostility of the Cold War

Arabs do not trust west feel they are supporting Israel and feel their prime interest is in Oil therefore wanting an ally in Israel rather than supporting Palestine.

A few countries are biased in the argument.

However it non-Muslims countries are now uncertain of Islam. Terrorist attacks have forced distant observers to choose to support. Nature of attacks have made it a religious war there have been over 18000 violent attacks on Israeli targets since September 2000, of which many have been carried out against sites which are holy to the Jewish people or taken place on communal religious occasions these attacks are therefore regarded as an attack on the heritage of the Jewish people- consequently brings religion into the argument.