Unresolved Issues in the Arab-Israeli Conflict

Progress has been made toward solving the Arab-Israeli conflict. Both Egypt and Jordan, which were among the five Arab states that invaded when Israel declared independence, have peace treaties with Israel. Israel has endorsed the idea of an independent Palestinian state, a key Arab demand, and supported the creation of a Palestinian government called the Palestinian Authority. The Arab League, which declared in the Khartoum Resolution of 1967 that Arab states would not make peace with Israel, would not recognize Israel, and would not negotiate with Israel, has now stated that the Arab states would accept peace if Israel meets the demands in the Arab Peace Initiative. However, a comprehensive peace remains difficult to achieve because there are major unresolved issues that divide Israel and the Arab governments.

Final Borders
In the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel gained control of Gaza and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria. Following the war, Israel stated that it would return most of the land in exchange for peace and recognition of its right to exist as an independent state. Israel insists that it must retain control of some of this land for its security. Israel’s territorial gains in 1967 provided it with borders that could be defended more easily against invading armies. It also provided better sites for radars to detect and respond to incoming air attacks. Israel argues that it has been attacked and threatened by its neighbors since its founding, that it gained the territory in a war of self-defense, and that binding UN resolutions recognize its right to secure borders. Arab governments state that Israel must completely withdraw to its pre-1967 borders. They argue that Israel cannot keep any land gained by war, no matter what the circumstances.

Disagreements about final borders affect negotiations with the Palestinians over the future of the West Bank (Jordan relinquished its claim to the West Bank in 1988) and negotiations with Syria over the Golan Heights; Israel completely withdrew from the Sinai Peninsula after Egypt and Israel signed a peace treaty in 1979 and it completely withdrew from Gaza in 2005.

Settlements
Returning to the 1967 borders is also complicated by the existence of Israeli communities in the West Bank known as settlements. Israel originally established settlements to serve as security outposts for Israel’s main population areas and to restore Jewish communities that were destroyed when Arab states invaded in 1948. However, beginning in the 1970s, the number of settlements grew and many Israelis moved there for religious or nationalist reasons. These Israelis felt that Jews should have the right to live anywhere in the historic Jewish homeland where they purchase land or receive government permission to build on public land.

Most Arabs feel that settlements are illegal and that Israelis cannot live on land gained in the 1967 War. The Palestinian Authority has gone so far as to make selling land to Jews a capital offense that is punishable by death. Israel is also criticized for its security measures to protect Israeli settlers. For example, checkpoints designed to stop attackers are criticized for making travel more difficult for Palestinians. Israel argues that security measures are necessary to save lives and that the claim that settlements are illegal is politically motivated. It states that Jordan (which gained control of the West Bank in 1948) was the first government in history to prohibit Jews from settling there and that settlements do not displace Arab inhabitants. Therefore, Israel insists on the legitimacy of the settlements though it is willing to discuss removing them, as it
removed the settlements in the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza. However, Israel argues that some of the largest settlements should remain part of Israel in a future peace agreement with the Palestinians. For the most part, Arab governments insist that Israel should completely withdraw to the pre-1967 lines.

Israeli and Palestinian negotiators have both accepted the principle of a land-swap in which Israel would give up land elsewhere in exchange for keeping large settlements. However, the two sides have not been able to agree on details such as which land would be swapped.

**Jerusalem**

Arab governments demand that Israel recognize an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. Israel has endorsed the idea of an independent Palestine, but most Israelis feel that Jerusalem should remain Israel’s undivided capital. They argue that Judaism’s most important holy sites are in East Jerusalem, that Jerusalem was the undivided capital of previous Jewish states, that Jews everywhere have expressed deep connections to Jerusalem for millennia, and that Jews lived in East Jerusalem from antiquity until 1948. In 1948, the Jewish community in East Jerusalem was evicted by the conquering Jordanian army. From that time until June 1967, Jews were not allowed to enter East Jerusalem where the Jewish holy sites are located. As a result, most Israeli Jews are reluctant to give up control. They point out that under Israeli rule all religious groups have access to and control over their own holy sites.

Palestinians argue that some of the most holy Islamic sites are in East Jerusalem and must be part of a Palestinian state. Palestinians claim that they will maintain free access to the religious sites of all religious groups. They also highlight the facts that Jerusalem is an important cultural center for Palestinians and that most of the residents of East Jerusalem are Palestinian.

**Security Needs**

Israel and Arab governments disagree about how to balance Israel’s security needs with Palestinian independence. Israel argues that if it is prepared to give up tangibles (territory) for intangibles (the promise of peace), its citizens need to feel confident that they will be safe in their country. For example, Israelis insist that the West Bank must be demilitarized with no heavy weapons such as tanks. They point out that within its 1967 borders Israel is only nine miles wide at its narrowest point. This makes it difficult to respond to an attack and leaves it vulnerable to being cut in half by invading armies. Banning heavy weapons from the West Bank would help ease Israeli concerns. Palestinians insist that their state should not be different from other states, so there should not be restrictions.

There is also disagreement on how to protect Israel from individuals and organizations that carry out terrorist attacks because they do not recognize Israel’s right to exist. After 2005, when Israel removed its civilian and military presence from Gaza, rocket attacks from terrorists in Gaza increased dramatically. Israel feels that a peace agreement must include provisions to keep Israelis safe. Palestinians feel that their country should not be treated differently than other countries and therefore a peace agreement should not include these sorts of provisions.

**Refugees**

Another major unresolved issue is the status of the approximately 700,000 Palestinian refugees who fled their homes in 1948 and their descendents. Today, the number of refugees and their descendents approaches 4 million individuals who live in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, other Arab countries, the West Bank, Gaza, and elsewhere. They claim a “right of return” to Israel that Israel rejects. Most Israelis argue that there would be no refugees if Arabs had accepted the UN
Partition Plan and had not attacked the fledgling State of Israel. They point out that the Israeli Declaration of Independence guaranteed full equality for non-Jews and that approximately 20% of Israel’s citizens are Arabs who chose to remain in Israel during the war and their descendents. Most Arabs counter that Israeli forces played a role in creating the refugee population and the cause of the conflict should not affect the right of refugees.

Israel argues that other groups in similar situations have not had a right of return and binding UN Resolutions do not give Palestinian refugees a right of return. Instead, these Security Council Resolutions only mention a “just settlement of the refugee problem.” Israelis point out that this wording includes the equal number of Jewish refugees who fled Arab countries due to persecution, often having their properties confiscated and their citizenships revoked. Most of these Jewish refugees settled in Israel and today approximately half the Jewish population of Israel is of Middle Eastern or North African descent. Many Israelis feel that since they absorbed Jewish refugees from Arab states, the Palestinian territories and the Arab states should have absorbed Arab refugees.

One of the major reasons Israel opposes a Palestinian right of return to Israel is that if Israel accepted it, Jews could become a minority and would no longer have national self-determination and a guaranteed refuge from antisemitism. Many see this as equivalent to the destruction of Israel. Instead, Israel says that Palestinians should have a right to return to an independent Palestinian state, but not to Israel. Some Palestinians and Israelis have suggested that recognizing the plight of the Palestinian refugees and giving them some form of monetary compensation might be a solution, but other Israelis feel this is too much of a concession and other Palestinians feel it is insufficient.

**Water Resources**

The rights to use water resources are major political issues that impact the Arab-Israeli conflict and peace process. For example, in 1964, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon attempted to divert rivers that supplied Israel with water. After issuing warnings, Israel launched military strikes to prevent the plan. Agreements over how to share water resources were important parts of the 1994 peace treaty between Israel and Jordan and of the 1995 agreement between Israel and the Palestinians known as Oslo II. They also influence peace talks between Syria and Israel. Syria insists that Israel withdraw completely to the pre-1967 lines. Israel rejects this demand, but has expressed willingness to withdraw to the pre-1948 line instead. Israelis argue that they should not return land that Syria captured when it invaded in an attempt to destroy Israel. The pre-1948 line and the pre-1967 line are close to each other, but the issue is very sensitive because withdrawing to the pre-1967 line would give Syria partial control over the Sea of Galilee, one of Israel’s major water resources. This is a major security concern for Israel.

The distribution of water resources also impacts negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Underground aquifers cross the borders between Israel and the West Bank and between Israel and Gaza. Though the Palestinian Authority and Israel agreed how to share this water in the 1995 Oslo II agreement, many Palestinians feel the agreement should be changed because it gives Israel a much larger share of the water. They argue that Oslo II was an interim agreement and that the final agreement should give them rights to more of the water. Many Israelis feel the agreement should not be changed. They argue that water rights do not depend simply on dividing water evenly, but rather are shaped by the history of water use, with those who first accessed the water and put it to use gaining first rights. They feel the issue was already the subject of negotiations that reached a mutually agreed upon decision and should not be renegotiated.
Graphic Organizer

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