

Question of Palestine



United Nations Documents and Sources

1917-1947

The Palestine problem became an international issue towards the end of the First World War with the disintegration of the Turkish Ottoman Empire. Palestine was among the several former Ottoman Arab territories which were placed under the administration of Great Britain under the Mandates System adopted by the League of Nations pursuant to the League's Covenant (Article 22).

All but one of these Mandated Territories became fully independent States, as anticipated. The exception was Palestine where, instead of being limited to "the rendering of administrative assistance and advice" the Mandate had as a primary objective the implementation of the "Balfour Declaration" issued by the British Government in 1917, expressing support for "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people".

During the years of the Palestine Mandate, from 1922 to 1947, large-scale Jewish immigration from abroad, mainly from Eastern Europe took place, the numbers swelling in the 1930s with the notorious Nazi persecution of Jewish populations. Palestinian demands for independence and resistance to Jewish immigration led to a rebellion in 1937, followed by continuing terrorism and violence from both sides during and immediately after World War II. Great Britain tried to implement various formulas to bring independence to a land ravaged by violence. In 1947, Great Britain turned the problem over to the United Nations.

1947-1977

After looking at various alternatives, the UN proposed the partitioning of Palestine into two independent States, one Palestinian Arab and the other Jewish, with Jerusalem internationalized (Resolution 181 (II) of 1947). One of the two States envisaged in the partition plan proclaimed its independence as Israel and in the 1948 war expanded to occupy 77 per cent of the territory of Palestine. Israel also occupied the larger part of Jerusalem. Over half of the indigenous Palestinian population fled or were expelled.

Jordan and Egypt occupied the other parts of the territory assigned by the partition resolution to the Palestinian Arab State which did not come into being.

In the 1967 war, Israel occupied the remaining territory of Palestine, until then under Jordanian and Egyptian control (the West Bank and Gaza Strip). This included the remaining part of Jerusalem, which was subsequently annexed by Israel. The war brought about a second exodus of Palestinians, estimated at half a million. Security Council resolution 242 (1967) of 22 November 1967 called on Israel to withdraw from territories it had occupied in the 1967 conflict.

In 1974, the General Assembly reaffirmed the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people to self-determination, national independence and sovereignty, and to return. The following year, the General Assembly established the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. The General Assembly conferred on the PLO the status of observer in the Assembly and in other international conferences held under United Nations auspices.

1977-1990

Events on the ground, however, remained on a negative course. In June 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon with the declared intention to eliminate the PLO. A cease-fire was arranged. PLO troops withdrew from Beirut and were transferred to neighboring countries after guarantees of safety were provided for thousands of Palestinian refugees left behind. Subsequently, a large-scale massacre of refugees took place in the camps of Sabra and Shatila.

In September 1983, the International Conference on the Question of Palestine, which was widely attended, adopted inter alia the Geneva Declaration containing the following principles: the need to oppose and reject the establishment of settlements in the occupied territory and actions taken by Israel to change the status of Jerusalem, the right of all States in the region to existence within secure and internationally recognized boundaries, with justice and security for all the people, and the attainment of the legitimate, inalienable rights of the Palestinian people.

In December 1987, a mass uprising against the Israeli occupation began in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (the intifada). Methods used by the Israeli forces during the uprising resulted in mass injuries and heavy loss of life among the civilian Palestinian population.

The Peace Process

A Peace Conference on the Middle East was convened in Madrid on 30 October 1991, with the aim of achieving a just, lasting and comprehensive peace settlement through direct negotiations along 2 tracks: between Israel and the Arab States, and between Israel and the Palestinians, based on Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973)

(the "land for peace" formula). A series of subsequent negotiations culminated in the mutual recognition between the Government of the State of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization, the representative of the Palestinian People, and the signing by the two parties of the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements in Washington on 13 September 1993, as well as the subsequent implementation agreements, which led to several other positive developments, such as the partial withdrawal of Israeli forces, the elections to the Palestinian Council and the Presidency of the Palestinian Authority, the partial release of prisoners and the establishment of a functioning administration in the areas under Palestinian self-rule. The involvement of the United Nations has been essential to the peace process, both as the guardian of international legitimacy and in the mobilization and provision of international assistance. In 2000 and 2001, Israelis and Palestinians held talks on a final status agreement, which proved inconclusive.

2000

The controversial visit by Ariel Sharon of the Likud to Al-Haram Al-Sharif (Temple Mount) in 2000 was followed by the outbreak of the second intifada. A massive loss of life, the reoccupation of territories under Palestinian self-rule, military incursions, extrajudicial killings of suspected Palestinian militants, suicide attacks, rocket and mortar fire, and the destruction of property characterized the situation on the ground. Israel began the construction of a West Bank separation wall, located within the Occupied Palestinian Territory, which was ruled illegal by the International Court of Justice in 2004. In 2002, the Security Council adopted resolution 1397 affirming a vision of two States, Israel and Palestine, living side by side within secure and recognized borders. In 2003, the Middle East Quartet (US, EU, Russia, and the UN) released a detailed Road Map to a two-State solution, endorsed by Security Council resolution 1515. In 2005, Israel withdrew its settlers and troops from the Gaza Strip as part of its "Disengagement Plan," while retaining effective control over its borders, seashore, and airspace. Following the Palestinian Legislative Council elections of 2006, the Quartet concluded that future assistance to the Palestinian Authority would be reviewed by donors against the new Government's commitment to non-violence, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous agreements.