

The Persistence of Conflict: An Examination of Ten Critical Factors Why the Israeli–Palestinian Dispute Remains Unresolved

Maciej Huczko

Warsaw School of Economics, Warsaw, Poland

mhuczko@sgh.waw.pl

Abstract: *The Middle East is a geographical and political region whose boundaries vary with analytical purpose. Depending on whether the emphasis is placed on security, politics, or economic integration, the region may be defined expansively—from Morocco to Pakistan (the “Greater Middle East,” a term popularized in the early 2000s)—or more narrowly, in line with traditional Orientalist framings, from Egypt to Iran. Although the region’s spatial scope is contested, one defining characteristic is widely recognized: chronic instability. At the center of this instability lies the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.*

Since Israel’s establishment in 1948, the confrontation has evolved from an element of a broader Arab–Israeli conflict into a distinct and enduring dispute with regional and global ramifications. Although the conflict concerns a relatively small territorial space (approximately 20,000 square kilometers), it has repeatedly expanded in political significance—from local contestation to regional polarization and, ultimately, to internationalization. It remains salient across the Muslim world and continues to command sustained attention from global policymakers, who for more than seven decades have failed to broker a durable settlement.

The conflict often generates sharply polarized views and is frequently approached through simplified narratives that obscure its historical depth and institutional complexity. While its modern dynamics emerged in the twentieth century, both parties draw on longer historical, religious, and cultural claims in legitimizing competing rights. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict has also been instrumentalized by external actors, from Cold War geopolitics to post–September 11 security discourses. This article argues that the persistence of the Israeli–Palestinian dispute is best explained as a product of interacting political, structural, psychological, and international factors. By analyzing ten obstacles to peace, the paper offers a framework for understanding why repeated negotiations have failed and why conflict management has often substituted for conflict resolution.

KEYWORDS: MIDDLE EAST; ISRAEL; PALESTINE; UNITED STATES; CONFLICT RESOLUTION; INTERNATIONAL MEDIATION, ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

1. Land and Identity

The end of World War II produced major transformations in borders, political alignments, and regional security environments, including in the Middle East. Since Israel’s establishment in May 1948, it has fought wars with one or more Arab neighbors, and for decades many Arab states viewed Israel as an externally enabled project that disrupted existing political and social orders through territorial appropriation. Over time, and with sustained support from third parties—most notably the United States—Israel normalized relations with several Arab states, beginning with Egypt in 1978 and extending to the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain through the 2020 Abraham Accords. A comparable normalization process has not occurred with the Palestinians.

For much of the conflict’s history, the core issues have been land and identity—two dimensions that are analytically distinct but politically inseparable. Territorial sovereignty is foundational to statehood, and therefore control of land remains central for both parties. Palestinians contend that the establishment and expansion of Israel occurred at their expense and that continued settlement growth on occupied territory entrenches dispossession and undermines the territorial basis of Palestinian statehood.

refugees are eligible for services, many living in camps across neighboring states under conditions that perpetuate political marginalization and socioeconomic vulnerability. For many Palestinians, these experiences reinforce a collective narrative of dispossession and amplify perceptions of Israel as an occupying power.

Land and identity also converge in Jerusalem. The city is sacred to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and its governance and symbolic status remain among the conflict’s most contentious issues. International actors, including the United Nations, have frequently supported arrangements that protect access to holy sites and accommodate competing claims. Yet Jerusalem remains under Israeli control, and access regulations have at times been contested or restricted. For Palestinians, Jerusalem functions as a focal point of both territorial deprivation and symbolic exclusion, intensifying the conflict’s intractability.

2. Asymmetry Between the Parties

A second obstacle to conflict resolution is the persistent asymmetry between the parties in both hard and soft power. Hard power refers to material coercive capabilities—especially military strength and the willingness to employ it. Soft power, in this context, concerns legitimacy, attraction, and the ability to mobilize international support for one’s claims and strategies. The 1990–1991 Gulf War illustrates the relationship between these forms of power: Iraq possessed hard power sufficient to invade Kuwait, yet lacked the international legitimacy needed to sustain that action, enabling a U.S.-led coalition to respond with overwhelming military force and broad diplomatic backing.

Applied to the Israeli–Palestinian context, these criteria reveal profound imbalance. Israel possesses a highly capable military and is frequently ranked among the world’s strongest armed forces (Global Firepower 2017). By contrast, Palestinians lack conventional capabilities such as an air force, a navy, armored forces, or strategic weapons systems. The asymmetry has been reinforced by external assistance, particularly U.S. military aid, which has historically dwarfed the levels of aid provided to Palestinian authorities (Comparison of Military Strength of Israel and the Palestinians 2009).

This hard-power advantage enhances Israeli security, but it can also undermine Israeli soft power. The ability to impose “facts on the ground”—especially through settlement expansion—has generated significant international criticism and contributed to perceptions of



Figure 1. Palestine land loss since 1917

Source: Praxis UCC, “Human Rights Campaign: Focus on Palestine,” <https://praxisucc.ie/student-case-studies/student-projects/class-of-2022/human-rights-campaign-focus-on-palestine/>

Territorial loss also shapes identity formation. Displacement associated with Israel’s creation, subsequent wars, and settlement activity has produced a large and enduring refugee population. According to UNRWA, approximately six million Palestinian

illegality or disproportionality. Palestinians, conversely, often attract international moral support precisely because their coercive capabilities are limited and their position is frequently framed as resistance to occupation rather than conventional interstate aggression. Cross-national surveys have at times indicated greater sympathy for Palestinians than for Israelis in global public opinion (Pew Research Center 2007).

This imbalance is overwhelmingly visible when it comes to economy of Israel and Palestine. On the graph below presents the annual per capita income in USD in Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, depicting the difference in annual income per capita of nearly 95% comparing Israel to the Gaza Strip and nearly 85% in case of the West Bank (Visualizing Palestine 2019)

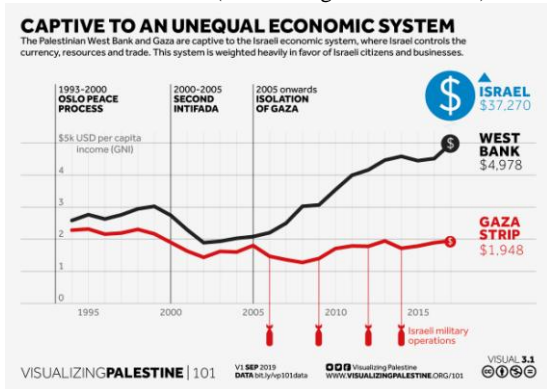


Figure 2. Captive to an Unequal Economic System
Source: Visualizing Palestine, “Captive to an Unequal Economic System”, <https://101.visualizingpalestine.org/visuals/captive-unequal-economic-system>

This data reveals a crushing difference between the parties – Israel – a superbly developed and affluent society and on the Palestine – underdeveloped and poverty dominated region with citizens deprived of education, health care and perspectives.

3. The United States and the Conflict

No external actor has shaped the conflict more decisively than the United States. Following World War II, the United States emerged as a global power with unmatched economic and military capabilities and a willingness to intervene abroad to protect strategic interests. The Middle East has consistently ranked among Washington’s most consequential regions due to its geostrategic position, energy resources, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and transnational terrorism, as well as the U.S.–Israel strategic partnership (Sasnal 2009). American support for Israel initially reflected domestic political dynamics and Cold War strategy. By 1948, U.S. policymakers increasingly perceived the Soviet Union as a long-term competitor, and Israel’s existence offered the United States a potentially reliable partner in a strategically important region. During the Cold War, the Middle East became a theater of superpower rivalry, culminating in heightened U.S. and Soviet involvement during the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

After the Cold War, U.S. priorities shifted toward broader order-building and crisis management, often relegating the Israeli–Palestinian conflict to episodic engagement. Palestinian support for Iraq during the 1990–1991 Gulf War further damaged Palestinian standing in Washington, strengthening Israel’s relative legitimacy in U.S. political discourse. After September 11, 2001, these dynamics intensified: Israel was widely framed as a counterterrorism ally and a frequent target of terrorism, while Palestinian actors were often associated—fairly or not—with terrorism in U.S. public debates. U.S. public opinion has tended to favor Israel over Palestine, including in Gallup polling (Gallup 2010).

Not only Israel is favored over Palestine by the public opinion, but also this choice is presented by the politicians, the White House and the congress. Despite the fact that Israel is a well-developed and

strong economy with a modern military, it is heavily aided by the USA, placing Israel as the first recipients of US aid (Independent, 2024)

US foreign aid from 1946 to 2023

Measured in US dollars, in billions

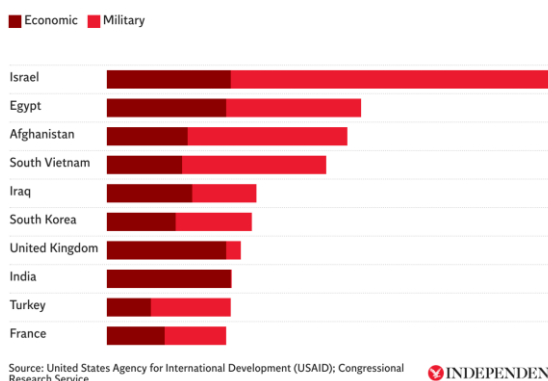


Figure 3: What weapons has the US paused sending to Israel – and what else do they supply?

Source: Independent, “What weapons has the US paused sending to Israel – and what else do they supply?”, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/israel-gaza-war-weapons-us-bombs-b2541453.html>

This aid, together with lack of US support of Palestine, creates disproportion between Israel and Palestine. It allows Israel to enter negotiations with Palestine from a power position which creates little incentives for the stronger state to show any kind of flexibility. Israel’s strength, partially derived from American support, results in lack of peace efforts on the Israel’s side.

4. Pro-Israeli and Pro-Palestinian Lobbying in the United States

Lobbying is a structural feature of U.S. politics and a significant mechanism through which organized interests influence foreign policy. Advocacy can be conducted by individuals or by institutionalized groups, and it often provides decision-makers with expertise, networks, and political support. Critics, however, describe lobbying as a legalized form of influence peddling that can privilege group interests over broader public goods.

In Middle East policy, the pro-Israeli lobby is widely regarded as more influential than pro-Arab or pro-Palestinian advocacy networks. One reason is organizational coherence: while pro-Israeli lobbying tends to prioritize a relatively focused objective—strengthening U.S.–Israel ties—pro-Arab advocacy is often fragmented among state-specific or issue-specific constituencies (e.g., pro-Egyptian, pro-Saudi, pro-Turkish, pro-Palestinian), diluting messaging and political leverage. Social positioning has also mattered. In the post–September 11 environment, Arab- and Muslim-American political mobilization faced increased suspicion, while Jewish Americans generally enjoyed higher levels of institutional access and social integration. As the chart below presents, the place of both lobby groups (ethnic minorities) in the American society is much different and their agenda for US policymakers is also executed with different success. It is easier for American society and the policymakers to identify with the pro-Israeli minority.

Pro-Israeli lobby	Pro-Arab lobby
Single goal	Multi-goal
Treated as Americans	Treated as aliens
Sympathy (WWII)	No sympathy (9/11)
Fighting terrorism	Are terrorists
Well financed	Poorly financed
Prominent in society	Underrepresented

Figure 3: Pro-Israeli lobby vs. Pro-Arab lobby in the USA

Source: own work

Sustained U.S. military, diplomatic, and economic support has enabled Israel to maintain regional superiority. At the same time, such support can weaken incentives for compromise by reducing the costs of maintaining the status quo. Where a party enjoys security dominance and stable external backing, the political risks of negotiation may outweigh the benefits of concession.

5. Israeli Domestic Politics as a Challenge to Peace Process

Israel's domestic political context constitutes a major impediment to negotiated settlement. Persistent party fragmentation, polarization, and the expanded influence of nationalist and religious parties have reduced the capacity of Israeli governments to sustain credible peace initiatives. Coalition instability—driven by frequent elections and dependence on small parties—limits strategic planning and discourages far-reaching concessions (Shamir and Arian 1999).

In parallel, the strengthened role of right-wing and religious-nationalist actors has narrowed the political space for territorial compromise. These actors often frame withdrawal as both a security threat and a violation of historical or religious claims. The settlement movement has further entrenched these constraints by functioning as an institutionalized political force capable of shaping coalition bargaining and state policy (Zertal and Eldar 2007). The aspect of fueling and maintain the aura of existential threat and security has a unifying effect around hard, decisive leaders capable of defending the country and nation.

Public opinion reinforces these dynamics. Prolonged exposure to violence tends to harden attitudes, reduce trust in negotiations, and strengthen conflict-sustaining beliefs that delegitimize the adversary (Bar-Tal 2007). As a result, even when leaders endorse negotiations rhetorically, domestic incentives frequently discourage costly compromise, making peace efforts cautious, reversible, and vulnerable to political shocks.

6. Benjamin Netanyahu's Political Context

Benjamin Netanyahu's prolonged leadership has been associated with a strategic preference for managing rather than resolving the conflict. Coalition dependence on nationalist and religious parties—many opposed to Palestinian statehood—has constrained the scope for territorial concessions. As Inbar (2018) argues, Netanyahu's approach emphasized security, deterrence, and political stability over diplomatic breakthroughs.

Netanyahu's legal vulnerability has also shaped his governing strategy. Leaders facing legal and political threats often avoid high-risk initiatives that could fracture coalitions or mobilize opposition (Hassner 2020). This logic is particularly salient in a political environment where settlement expansion and hardline security positions function as bargaining currency with coalition partners.

Ideologically, Netanyahu has frequently expressed skepticism toward the two-state framework, emphasizing Israeli security control over contested territories (Huczko, 2005). Critics argue that such rhetoric contributes to the normalization of permanent control as both necessary and inevitable (Pappé 2017). Policy choices—including continued settlement expansion—have further undermined Palestinian trust, reinforcing perceptions that negotiations function as cover for territorial consolidation (Zertal and Eldar 2007). The combined effect is to institutionalize the status quo and to weaken conditions for meaningful negotiation.

7. Palestinian Political Division as an Obstacle to Peace

Internal Palestinian fragmentation has severely weakened the capacity to negotiate and implement agreements. The split between Fatah and Hamas—crystallized after Hamas's 2006 electoral victory and its 2007 takeover of Gaza—produced dual governance: the Palestinian Authority in parts of the West Bank and Hamas as the de facto authority in Gaza. This division has eroded political legitimacy and strategic coherence (Brown 2010).

Fragmentation also creates bargaining problems. Negotiations require a credible counterpart capable of making binding

commitments and enforcing compliance. Divided leadership increases the risk of “spoilers” and veto players who can undermine agreements through violence or noncompliance (Pearlman 2009). Public disillusionment has compounded these difficulties, as factional power struggles have at times overshadowed state-building objectives and weakened confidence in the peace process (Le More 2008).

External dynamics interact with these divisions. Hamas's refusal to recognize Israel and its endorsement of armed resistance provide Israel with grounds to question the feasibility of comprehensive negotiations. At the same time, the Palestinian Authority's security coordination with Israel has been criticized domestically as collaboration. This rivalry has increasingly become a contest over representation, identity, and the meaning of resistance, further reducing the likelihood of unified strategy (Milton-Edwards 2013). Lack of unity among the Palestinians can be used (and is) by the Israeli side in two ways at least. Firstly, there is no unified authority body representing Gaza and the West Bank. Therefore potential negotiations would not be bilateral but multilateral and therefore more complicated. Secondly, this Palestinian political division, serves also as an excuse and explanation for the Israelis who claim, that lack of progress in negotiations is caused by lack of serious, unified Palestinian representation. For the Israelis, sustaining such Palestinian division is useful in case of benefiting from prolonging the conflict in order to build new settlements, further destruction of Gaza and driving Palestinians from their land.

8. Trauma and Mistrust as Structural Barriers

Beyond institutional and territorial disputes, psychological and historical factors shape negotiation behavior. Collective trauma influences threat perception, identity construction, and willingness to compromise. Volkan (2001) describes “chosen traumas” as historical experiences that groups maintain as active elements of collective memory, shaping contemporary political behavior. For many Israelis, the Holocaust and repeated wars reinforce existential insecurity; for Palestinians, the Nakba of 1948 and ongoing occupation constitute a continuing trauma rather than a closed historical episode.

Intractable conflict environments generate narratives that justify one's own actions and delegitimize the opponent, sustaining mistrust and reducing openness to compromise (Bar-Tal 2007). The collapse of previous peace efforts has reinforced perceptions of bad faith. Kelman (2005) argues that trust cannot be produced solely through formal agreements; it requires mutual recognition of identity, suffering, and legitimacy.

Political psychology research further suggests that exposure to violence strengthens emotions—particularly fear and anger—that increase support for hardline policies and reduce willingness to make concessions (Halperin 2011). These processes generate a self-reinforcing cycle: violence deepens trauma; trauma strengthens mistrust; mistrust undermines negotiations. Consequently, peace initiatives focused exclusively on technical arrangements—borders, security, institutions—often fail to address the psychological foundations sustaining the conflict.

Furthermore, the model of the conflict is promoting a context in which reaching a peace deal is challenging. On one side, Israeli, there is an army, which is qualified, equipped and, as mentioned above, supported by the USA and on the other, Palestinian, the fighters are poorly equipped and far less effective. Also, the clashes are mainly in Gaza and the West Bank. As a result the human cost on both sides is incomparably uneven. As seen on the graph below, the number of casualties on both side is asymmetrical and just in the 2008-2020 period total death on the Palestinian side exceeded 5000 while the number of Israelis was 251 (McCarthy, 2021).

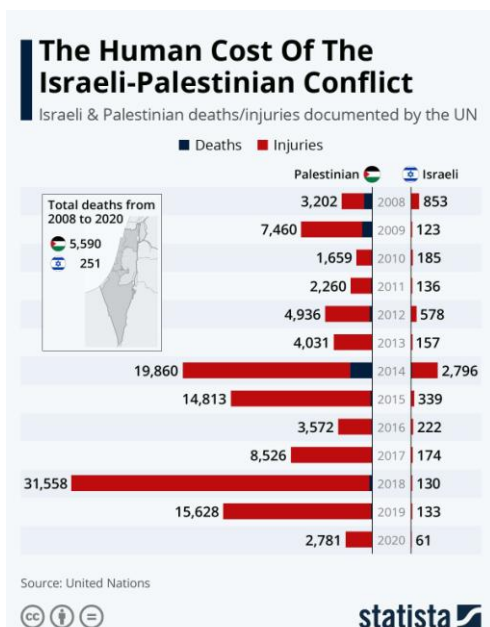


Figure 4: The Human Cost Of The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Source: Statista, The Human Cost Of The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, <https://www.statista.com/chart/16516/israeli-palestinian-casualties-by-in-gaza-and-the-west-bank/?srsltid=AfmBOor42EcdT-SgmFfNDfnftChIeiCjZbQOXT50cv-fcDvPXdSY9UMa>

Such as disproportion, especially bearing in mind that on the Palestinian side civilians vastly constitute to the human cost count, for the Palestinians, is a root of further resilience, hostility and a revenge driver. In this case, for the Palestinians, the trauma of losing the whole family is a source of hatred leading to escalation of violence.

9. The Absence of a Credible Enforcement Mechanism

Peace processes depend not only on agreement design but also on credible enforcement. In asymmetric conflicts, weak enforcement tends to privilege the stronger party, which faces limited costs for noncompliance (Pressman 2003). The Oslo process illustrates this vulnerability. While it created interim institutions and mutual recognition, it lacked robust enforcement provisions and depended heavily on bilateral trust and third-party mediation. When violations occurred—whether settlement expansion, attacks, or failures to meet obligations—there were limited mechanisms for adjudication or penalties. Pundak (2001) argues that Oslo assumed good faith while failing to develop tools for dealing with bad faith. International actors, especially the United States, typically acted as mediators rather than enforcers. Mediation without enforcement can intensify mistrust as both sides interpret inaction as bias or permissiveness. Without credible third-party guarantees, commitments remain politically fragile and easily reversible (Kelman 2005). The result is a repeated pattern of partial agreements followed by collapse, reinforcing public cynicism and empowering spoilers.

10. The Lack of a Unified International Strategy

International engagement has been extensive but often incoherent. Major actors—including especially the United States, the European Union, the United Nations, and regional powers—pursue overlapping but frequently unaligned strategies. This fragmentation reduces leverage and produces inconsistent signals that the parties can exploit (Tocci 2007). U.S. mediation has oscillated between intensive engagement and strategic neglect, limiting continuity and credibility (Quandt 2005). The European Union has emphasized legal norms and economic assistance but has often lacked political unity and enforcement capacity to translate positions into decisive influence.

The United Nations has repeatedly affirmed legal principles and Palestinian rights, yet enforcement is constrained by veto politics and great-power competition. When norms are inconsistently upheld, they risk becoming symbolic rather than regulative (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Regional and emerging powers further complicate coordination by pursuing distinct strategic interests, sometimes prioritizing broader rivalries over settlement. Conflicts persist when external actors fail to align incentives and pressures toward a shared end state (Zartman 2001). The process of negotiating Abraham Accords, and the Accords themselves illustrate approach of regional, Arab states towards the conflict, Palestine and Israel. The Palestinian cause, for the Arab actors, seem to be more of an obstacle for reaching business deals with Isreal not a condition (Huczko, 2003).

Conclusion

The persistence of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict reflects the interaction of multiple structural, political, psychological, and international dynamics rather than a single identifiable cause. Although the dispute is frequently framed as a territorial conflict over a relatively small geographic area, the analysis presented in this article demonstrates that its endurance is rooted in a complex set of mutually reinforcing obstacles. Issues of land and identity remain foundational, shaping both the material and symbolic dimensions of the conflict and making compromise politically and emotionally costly for both societies. Yet, as presented in this article, the search for peace between Israel and Palestine encounters scores of obstacle. Land ownership, refugees and Jerusalem, the three most widely discussed, that occur to be paralyzed any negotiation initiatives are followed by other factors, which are less visible, yet equally important.

The profound asymmetry between the parties—militarily, economically, and diplomatically—affects negotiation incentives and outcomes. Israel's structural advantages, reinforced by sustained external support, particularly from the United States, reduce the urgency for concessions, while Palestinians' relative weakness increases their reliance on international sympathy and external mediation. These asymmetries are further embedded in international politics, where U.S. strategic interests, domestic lobbying dynamics, and inconsistent global coordination have contributed to a mediation framework that lacks both neutrality and effective enforcement.

Domestic political constraints on both sides also significantly impede progress. Israeli coalition politics and the growing influence of nationalist and religious actors limit the political space for territorial compromise, while Palestinian political fragmentation between competing governing authorities undermines the credibility and coherence of negotiation efforts. In addition, decades of violence, collective trauma, and entrenched mistrust have created powerful psychological barriers that cannot be resolved through institutional agreements alone.

Equally important is the absence of a credible enforcement mechanism and a unified international strategy capable of sustaining negotiated commitments. The experience of past peace initiatives—particularly the Oslo process—demonstrates that mediation without enforcement and coordination often produces fragile agreements vulnerable to collapse. Without consistent external pressure, credible guarantees, and coordinated international engagement, the incentives necessary to move the parties toward a durable settlement remain insufficient.

Taken together, these factors explain why repeated diplomatic initiatives have struggled to produce lasting progress. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict persists not simply because of unresolved territorial claims, but because the broader political, institutional, and psychological environment continues to sustain conflict management rather than conflict resolution. Understanding these interacting barriers is therefore essential for evaluating past failures and for designing future peace efforts that address not only the immediate political disputes but also the deeper structural conditions that perpetuate the conflict.

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