

The Middle East Peace Process, 2003 – present

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Background

- ‘The Peace Process’ is the term that has come to be used to describe Middle Eastern diplomacy and peace negotiations following the 1967 War in which Israel on one side attacked its neighbours, Egypt, Jordan and Syria on the other. It has taken shape over many years and refers to the gradualist US-led approach to resolving the resultant conflicts which emphasises the ‘process’ of reaching peace rather than its substance.
- Following the war of 1948 when the state of Israel was established in historic Palestine, three quarters of a million Palestinians were driven out of the territory and forced to become refugees in exile. They were left with only a fraction of the territory that had once been theirs. During the 1967 war waged 19 years later, a second wave of refugees was created and the land that remained to the Palestinians was occupied by Israel along with some Syrian and Egyptian territory. A year after the military occupation commenced, Israel began establishing illegal settlements on Palestinian territory. The refugees have never been allowed to return.
- In the 43 years since the 1967 War, there have been numerous attempts at resolving the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. Some have managed to reach settlement; in 1979 and 1994 Israel signed peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan respectively. Nevertheless, the core conflict that rages between Israel and Palestinians is yet to reach a settlement.
- The intractability of the core conflict stems from a range of sources. Some of these include differing views regarding Palestinian sovereignty, the status of Jerusalem, settlements, borders, the allocation of water resources and the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes.
- UN Security Council Resolution 446 states that the Israeli settlement policy has no legal validity and constitutes a serious obstruction to achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East. The Israeli Occupation as well as its discriminatory practices is all illegal under international law and yet the situation persists.
- The continued failure of the process has led to the widely held view that it is a deception intended to provide cover for the maintenance of the status quo; the open-ended occupation, settlement and systematic confiscation of Palestinian territory.



Below is a summary of the main peace proposals and plans since 2003 beginning with the Road Map for Peace. This plan was a defining point as it was the first time a US president called for the establishment of a Palestinian state.

The Road Map for Peace, 2003

- The Road Map is a plan drawn up by the "Quartet" - the United States, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations. It does not lay down the details of a final settlement, but suggests how a settlement might be approached.
- The principles of the plan were first outlined by U.S. President George Bush in a speech on June 24, 2002, in which he called for an independent Palestinian state. The road map lays down conditions for its achievement. In exchange for statehood, the PA is obliged to make democratic reforms and abandon violence. Israel must accept this reformed government and end settlement activity in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.
- It proposed a phased timetable with the goal of creating a Palestinian state by 2005. It puts the establishment of security before a final settlement and is designed to create confidence, leading to final status talks.
- Palestinians upheld their end of the bargain by appointing the first Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas and Arab leaders, including Abbas announced support for the plan and promised to work on cutting off funding to the armed resistance. While Ariel Sharon's cabinet 'approved' the Road Map, they attached 14 reservations to the plan in a political tactic aimed at sabotage. Sharon later rejected Israel's main requirement of settlement freeze as 'impossible.'
- Following a breakdown in the proceedings that threatened to derail the plan fresh violence broke out. This was followed by the 'Hudna' or temporary ceasefire which also later broke down.
- By the end of 2003, Israel had neither withdrawn from Palestinian areas occupied since September 2000, nor frozen settlement expansion. Thus the requirements of the Road Map were not fulfilled, and it has not continued further.
- The Road Map has not been implemented and is in effective limbo.



The Road Map

Isratin or the Bi-National State, 2003

- Isratin refers to a 'unitary, federal or confederate Israeli-Palestinian State entity encompassing the present state of Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.'
- This proposal is increasingly being viewed and discussed not as a possible solution but as the probable, inevitable outcome to the conflict.

The Draft Permanent Status Agreement or Geneva Accord / Initiative, 2003

- The Geneva Accord is an informal treaty proposal or agreement between Israeli politician Yossi Beilin, one of the architects of the Oslo Accords, and former Palestinian Information Minister Yasser Abed Rabbo. It does not obligate either government.
- It proposed to return to Palestinians almost all of the territory captured during the war; the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and part of Jerusalem defining Israel's borders in closer accordance with those that existed pre-1967. Israel would dismantle some major settlements such as Ariel, but annex others closer to the border, with swaps of land in Israel for any taken in the West Bank
- Palestinians would have the right to have their capital in East Jerusalem, though with Israeli sovereignty over the Western Wall in the Old City.
- Its most glaring compromise is that the Palestinians effectively give up their "right of return" though there could be a token return by a few. They will also have to drop all other claims and demands made of Israel officially ending the conflict.
- In exchange for the establishment of a state, Palestinians will also have to recognise Israel as the rightful homeland of Jewish people. They will also be obliged to cease violent resistance and disarm and disband armed groups.
- The accord was accepted by the Palestinian government though unenthusiastically and rejected outright by Israel. Former US president Jimmy Carter and US General Colin Powell both endorsed it. Influential Palestinian figure, Marwan Barghouti reputedly accepted it in principle.
- The Geneva Accord reverses the concept of the Road Map, in which the growth of security and confidence precede a political agreement and puts the agreement first, which is then designed to produce security and peace.



The Geneva Accord

The People's Voice [Ayalon-Nusseibeh Plan], 2003

- The People's Voice is an Israeli-Palestinian civil initiative dedicated to advancing the achievement of peace in a single agreement and without any interim steps.
- It is co-founded by former head of the Shin Bet, Ami Ayalon and former PLO representative in Jerusalem Sari Nusseibeh. The initiative was signed in July 2002 and officially launched in 2003.
- The key proposals or statements of principle of the initiative are:
 - Two states for two peoples.
 - Borders based upon the June 1967 lines.
 - Jerusalem will be an open city, the capital of two states.
 - Compensation for refugees and relinquishing of Palestinian right of return.
 - Palestine will be demilitarized.
- The initiative aims to influence the political process by petition, seeking the signatures of enough residents of the area on all sides of the conflict to force the leaders of the various sides to concluding a peace agreement.

Israel's Unilateral Disengagement Plan, 2004

- In 2004, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert proposed the unilateral withdrawal of the Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip and some others in the West Bank. The proposal came to be known as the disengagement plan. The reasons for such steps were sited as the lack of a possible agreement with the Palestinians or progress being made with implementing the Road Map.
- In February 2004 the US endorsed the plan and it was widely hailed around the world. In August the plan was implemented.
- The disengagement plan was considered a failure by Israel and is in part blamed for the election of Hamas and the kidnap of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit among other things. The shelving of the partial disengagement from the West Bank is also blamed for this failure.

Continuation of the Road Map, 2004

- On April 14th 2004 in a letter to Ariel Sharon, George W. Bush made two significant changes to US policy on peace as embodied by the Road Map. For first time during the process he indicated his expectations of final status negotiations. This was seen as a triumph for Ariel Sharon as it heavily favoured Israel on the issues of final borders, settlements and the right of return.



- Later in the month during an interview in Egypt, Bush also backtracked on his pledge of the 2005 date set for the commencement of negotiations and the establishment of a Palestinian state, stating that it was now an unrealistic aim and blaming the non-fulfilment of the plan on the eruption of violence and a change in the political landscape.

Sharm el-Sheikh Summit of 2005, 2005

- Following Mahmoud Abbas' election in 2005 and the death of Yasser Arafat, a concerted effort was made to bring an end to the second Intifada begun in 2000. These efforts resulted in re-newed co-operation between the Sharon government and the Palestinian Authority and with the backing of the US, Jordan and Egypt, eventually led to an agreement to hold the Sharm el-Sheikh Summit.
- The summit was attended by the leaders of Israel, Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority. Its purpose was to declare the wish of those present to work toward an end to the intifada and of their continuing support of the Road Map.
- It consisted of a series of meetings and resulted in the issuance of statements by all except for King Abdullah, reaffirming a commitment to stabilize the situation and to move on with the peace process in accordance with the Road Map. Statements made by both Sharon and Abbas with regard to an intended cessation of violence marked the formal end to the Intifada.

2006 Franco-Italian-Spanish Middle East Peace Plan, 2006

- Following Israel's invasion of the Gaza Strip in 2006, France, Italy and Spain announced a Middle East peace plan proposed by the Spanish premiere during talks with the French president. It was later introduced to the Italian prime minister who gave it his full support.

Israel's Realignment Plan, 2006

- The Realignment Plan formulated by former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in 2006 proposed the removal of Israeli settlements from most of the West Bank and their consolidation into a large group of settlements near the 1967 borders. The area from which settlements would be removed would correspond to the area east of the route of the [West Bank barrier](#) or a similar route.
- Ilan Pappé asserts that the plan was formulated to address the "demographic threat" faced by Israel of a growing Palestinian population. By removing certain populous Palestinian areas from direct Israeli control, it was hoped that a "Jewish State" could be maintained.



- Following Israel's war with Lebanon in 2006, Olmert announced that the plan would be shelved and it has not since been revived.

Annapolis Conference, 27th November 2007

- The Annapolis Conference was convened with the objectives of producing a substantive document for the resolution of the [Israeli-Palestinian conflict](#) along the lines of President George W. Bush's [Roadmap For Peace](#), with the eventual establishment of a [Palestinian state](#).
- It differed from previous Middle East peace conferences mainly in that it was the first time both sides entered a conference with a common understanding that the final state of Palestinian-Israeli peace will be a [two-state solution](#). The importance of the 'Quartet' was also diminished since its establishment.
- The conference ended with the issuing of a joint statement signed by both parties supporting the two-state solution and marked the first time it was articulated as the mutually agreed outline for resolving the [conflict](#).
- The meeting was attended by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, Israeli PM Ehud Olmert and US President George W. Bush among others including the EU, the Arab league and the UN.

The Annapolis Conference Joint Statement

Efforts to restart the Peace Process under the Obama administration

- As part of Obama's campaign promise to negotiate a comprehensive Middle East peace settlement, and as an indication of the central role the region had assumed under his administration, George Mitchell was appointed the regional special envoy. Tasked with restarting the peace process, Mitchell made several visits to the region in which he emphasized the US determination to achieve a "truly comprehensive" settlement. He also emphasized longstanding official US policy with regard to the illegitimacy of settlements and demanded a freeze in construction.
- In his Cairo speech, Obama announced his personal commitment to the achievement of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders and to keeping to the understanding reached between the two sides under the Road Map and in the Arab Peace Initiative whose interpretations leave less scope for loopholes and continued settlement building. The assumption was that if Israel adopts the two-state solution, settlement building will cease as a matter of course.



- Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, in line with US pressure, demanded that Israeli settlement construction be halted as a prerequisite to the resumption of talks. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu refused to succumb to either pressure or demands in this regard.
- In September, Obama organised a tripartite summit in New York between himself, Abbas and Netanyahu in an effort to move past the stalemate. He used the word 'restraint' in reference to settlements construction as opposed to freeze.
- Israel announced a moratorium on settlement building which fell short of US demands for total freeze; however the move was praised by the US as going further than any previous Israeli government. The moratorium was limited to the West Bank and did not include Jerusalem. It also allowed for the completion of buildings already begun.
- Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton confirmed the US about turn on settlement policy and supported the Israeli view that settlement freeze is not necessary for a resumption of talks. She praised the Israeli offer to curb some settlement building as 'unprecedented' leading to Palestinian outrage and effective paralysis of the process bringing it to the brink of total collapse.
- At the beginning of 2010 the US announced a re-newed commitment to working toward the resumption of peace talks with a view to resuming negotiations, establishing a Palestinian state and the achievement of Israeli security. It was asserted that further delays would be detrimental to all parties involved and turned to its moderate allies in the Middle East for support, particularly Egypt. Netanyahu announced Israel's readiness to participate in the process while Abbas stood by his demand for a settlement freeze as a precondition to talks.

Conclusion

The failure of the parties to resolve the conflict is not because it is insoluble but a consequence of the disregard of the grievances of one party. While Israel and the international community use the 1967 War as the point of departure to end conflict, Palestinian grievances stem from 1948. The unwillingness to address the core issues arising from the dispossession and expulsion of the Palestinians in 1948 reflects a deeply flawed and imbalanced approach. It is one which betrays a preference for conflict management over conflict resolution. Not to mention the predominance of Israel's unending "security needs" over the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people. Instead of being an honest broker the United States has mediated for decades solely on behalf of Israel and jeopardised in the process all efforts to achieve a just settlement.

