

Israel's Search for Peace

“Israel and the United States have a unique friendship based on our mutual commitment to democracy, freedom and peace.”

—House Republican Leader John Boehner (R-OH)

Attacked by five Arab armies at its birth, Israel has strived to achieve peace and normalize relations with hostile neighbors surrounding it while at the same time seeking defensible borders to ensure its own survival.

This quest has been arduous and remains incomplete, as only three of the Arab League's 22 members have recognized Israel and established diplomatic relations with the Jewish state. Most Arab states continue to pursue an economic boycott of Israel, and some of its neighbors support terrorist groups committed to Israel's destruction. Despite this hostility, Israel has continued to seek genuine peace with the other nations of the Middle East.

Israel Has Sought Peace With All of Its Neighbors

Israel's willingness to trade parts of its historic homeland for peace has so far led to peace treaties with two of its neighbors—Egypt and Jordan. Likewise, Israel has proven willing to make bold, painful concessions in order to find a way to live side-by-side with the Palestinians.

In 1993, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin signed the Oslo Accords, which led to giving the Palestinians control of more than 1,000 square miles of territory in Gaza and the West Bank in exchange for commitments to combat terrorism and recognize Israel's right to exist.

Following Rabin's assassination in 1995, four successive Israeli prime ministers offered territory to the Palestinians in the hopes of attaining peace. These efforts included Prime Minister Ehud Barak's attempt to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict once and for all during a 2000 summit hosted by then-President Bill Clinton at Camp David and in subsequent negotiations. Those at the center of the discussions reported that Barak's offer to Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat would have enabled the Palestinians to establish their own state on 95–97 percent of the West Bank and all of Gaza and welcome the return of Palestinian refugees to the Palestinian state.

BOLD STEPS: ISRAEL'S DECADES-LONG SEARCH FOR PEACE



1948

Declaring independence, David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, says Israel would “extend the hand of peace” to all its neighbors.



1967

Days after defending itself in the Six-Day War, Israel offers to return captured territories to Arab states in return for peace treaties.



1978

Israel cedes large portions of territory to Egypt in return for a peace agreement.



1993

Israel grants the Palestinians unprecedented autonomy in exchange for Palestinian agreement to recognize Israel and end terrorism.



1994

Israel cedes territory to Jordan as part of a peace treaty signed by Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and King Hussein.



2000

Following talks at Camp David, Yasir Arafat rejects Israel's far-reaching peace offer and the Palestinians launch sustained terrorist attacks that continue to this day.



2005

With U.S. support, Israel withdraws from Gaza and parts of the West Bank, giving up territory for the first time outside the context of a signed peace treaty.



2006

In a major speech, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert backs the creation of a Palestinian state if the Palestinians recognize Israel and end terrorism.

KEY EXCERPTS FROM THE HAMAS CHARTER

“Allah is its [Hamas’] goal, the Prophet its model, the Quran its constitution, Jihad its path and death for the cause of Allah its most sublime belief.”

“Israel, by virtue of its being Jewish and of having a Jewish population, defies Islam and the Muslims.”

“There is no solution to the Palestinian problem except by Jihad. The initiatives, proposals and international conferences are but a waste of time, an exercise in futility.”

However, Arafat rejected this unprecedented proposal, and the Palestinians launched a sustained campaign of terrorism that has so far killed more than 1,100 Israelis and wounded more than 8,100 others in attacks targeting civilians in hotels, shopping malls and restaurants.

Progress in the Absence of a Palestinian Peace Partner

In the absence of a Palestinian partner, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon decided that Israel had to ensure the security of its citizens and could not afford to wait for the Palestinians to elect leaders committed to peace. Under Sharon’s leadership, Israel in 2005 completely withdrew from the Gaza Strip and from an area more than twice as large in the northern West Bank.

Ahead of this bold step for peace, President Bush sent a

seminal letter to Sharon on April 14, 2004, praising disengagement and supporting Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state with a Jewish majority and defensible borders.

The letter made clear that Palestinian refugees should return to a future Palestinian state—not overrun Israel and eliminate its character as a Jewish homeland. The United States thereby weighed in against attempts to destroy Israel demographically by implementing the so-called “right of return” or creating a bi-national state rather than two separate countries for two peoples.

Reiterating U.S. commitments to ensuring Israel’s security, the policy letter also recognized the importance of Israel’s strategic depth—the distance between its borders with hostile neighbors

and key cities and infrastructure. It also stated that realities on the ground precluded Israeli withdrawals from major Jewish population centers in the West Bank adjacent to Israel.

Tragically, no Palestinian leader has met obligations to accept Israel and end terrorism. Arafat encouraged violence against Israel. His successor, Mahmoud Abbas, has spoken against violence but has so far failed to dismantle terrorist groups. Making matters more complex, the Iranian-backed terrorist group Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip by force in June 2007. Despite the ever-changing developments in Palestinian areas, Israel has continued to look for ways to support and work with a credible Palestinian peace partner.

America’s Role in Advancing Israeli Peace Efforts

Israel’s pursuit of peace with its neighbors and its willingness to undertake serious risks to achieve this goal are made possible by the strong support of the United States.

The United States has also helped prevent other nations and outside bodies such as the U.N. from imposing unfair and unworkable peace settlements on Israel and has insisted that Arab

nations conduct negotiations directly with the Jewish state.

In addition to providing vital assistance, the United States has backed Israel’s refusal to deal with Palestinian leaders linked to terrorism and supported the unilateral steps Israel has been forced to take. The United States has also consistently pressed the Palestinians to live up to their obligations under peace agreements to end terrorism and dismantle the terrorist infrastructure.

Designed to ensure the security of Israel’s own citizens, such principles are indispensable to the viability of the Jewish state’s ongoing efforts to forge genuine peace with all of its neighbors.

“Until and unless Hamas renounces violence and terror, and renounces its position calling for the destruction of Israel, I don’t believe the United States should recognize them.”

—Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-NY)

Key Points

- Throughout its history, Israel has demonstrated its desire to live side-by-side with all of its neighbors in genuine peace while also maintaining defensible borders to ensure its own survival.
- Israel has repeatedly traded parts of its historic land for peace agreements.
- The United States is committed to a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the return of Palestinian refugees to a future Palestinian state—not Israel.
- The Palestinian leadership has been unwilling to fulfill its obligations under internationally backed agreements to fight terrorism and undertake much-needed political, economic and security reforms.
- The United States has supported steps taken by Israel in order to secure its citizens in the absence of a Palestinian peace partner.
- By working with Israel and standing against third-party attempts to impose peace treaties on it, the United States has enhanced the prospects for true peace between the Jewish state and its neighbors.