

Review Article

EXAMINING THE ISSUE OF HAMAS GOVERNANCE OVER GAZA AND THE END OF THE TWO-STATE PROCESS IN THE PALESTINIAN TERRITORY

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines the sequence of prominent events between 2006 and 2024 through an explanatory approach, focusing on the obstacles to the realization of an independent Palestinian state. The data collection method is documentary. These events coincide with Hamas's victory in the Palestinian elections, which occurred contrary to expectations and led to Hamas taking control of the executive government. This event became a turning point in the history of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, effectively bringing the process of reconciliation to a complete deadlock. Ultimately, the consequences of this event included the sanctioning of the Palestinian Authority, the Hamas–Fatah civil conflict, and the separation of Gaza from the West Bank. In this study, an attempt is made to explain the causes of the failure of agreements, the roots of intra-Palestinian factional conflict, and the reasons for the failure of mediating initiatives by moderate Arab states, which introduced proposals such as the Riyadh Summit and the Annapolis Conference. Finally, the study examines how the failure of these mediation efforts led to four bloody wars between Gaza and Israel, the last of which occurred on October 7, 2023. The present research emphasizes the necessity of a fundamental revision of international approaches—an approach that goes beyond punitive sanctions and symbolic initiatives and instead relies on transitional justice, Palestinian national unity, and binding pressure on Israel—to enable a sustainable peace that recognizes the historical and human rights of both sides.

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INTRODUCTION

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict began at the end of the turbulent 1940s and on the eve of the Cold War between two global powers, with the United Nations Partition Plan. This event coincided with the Arab states' rejection of the resolution. In 1948, representatives of the Jewish Agency, under Ben-Gurion's leadership, accepted the resolution. They established the State of Israel, while the Arabs, refusing to accept the resolution, refrained from forming a Palestinian state and instead attacked Israel. The rejection of the resolution and the Arab defeat in the 1948 war provided Israel with an opportunity to prevent the formation of a Palestinian state and occupy additional territories. Four major wars between Arabs and Israel (the 1948 War, the Suez War, the Six-Day War, and the Yom Kippur War) resulted in the loss of most Palestinian territories. Eventually, the Camp David Accords in 1978 led to reconciliation between Arabs and Israel, and the second peace agreement, the Oslo Accords in 1993, was intended to mark the beginning of the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.

The Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 and the formation of resistance groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah opened a new front known as the Axis of Resistance, which impeded reconciliation between Arabs and Israel.

Since the 1980s, three approaches toward Palestine have competed with one another. The first approach is the two-state solution, which considers the final resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict to be the establishment of two independent Arab and Jewish states. This approach, known in international relations literature as the two-state solution, has been the primary option of the international community for resolving the Palestinian crisis. In contrast, two opposing approaches exist. The first is the one-state Israeli approach, supported by the Israeli right wing, which represents the current reality in international politics and considers the establishment of any Palestinian state as a threat to its security. The second is the one-state Palestinian approach, promoted by the Axis of Resistance, which regards the establishment of Israel and its imposed borders as a historical injustice against Palestinians. The current Israeli–Palestinian conflict is essentially a confrontation between these three perspectives.

In the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, peace negotiations such as the Oslo Accords have repeatedly reached deadlock due to mutual distrust and disagreements over key issues (such as the status of Jerusalem and the right of return for refugees). From a realist perspective, these failures stem from security concerns and the prioritization of national interests by both sides. Offensive realism, developed by Mearsheimer, argues that great powers seek regional hegemony. In this conflict, the United States, as Israel's main supporter, has played a key role in maintaining Israel's military superiority. In contrast, Iran and some Arab states support Palestinian groups to expand their regional influence. These hegemonic rivalries have further complicated the conflict and, from a realist perspective, are a natural outcome of great power competition (Mearsheimer, 2007, p. 60).

On the other hand, the two-state solution has been designed as a framework for realizing the Palestinian right to self-determination and ensuring Israel's security. This idea reached its peak in the Oslo peace process (1993), which led to the establishment of the Palestinian Authority. However, challenges such as Israeli settlement expansion, disputes over Jerusalem, the right of return of Palestinian refugees, and control over water resources and borders have hindered its implementation (Shlaim, 2005, p. 80). From the Palestinian perspective, this solution is a step toward national independence and the end of occupation; however, groups such as Hamas sometimes consider it insufficient and call for the reclamation of the entire historical Palestine

(Khaledi, 2020, p. 189). In contrast, some Israeli groups, particularly right-wing factions, reject this solution due to security concerns and historical-religious claims over the entire land (Pappe, 2014, p. 260). This solution has also been supported in international negotiations such as the Arab Peace Initiative (2002) and the Annapolis Conference (2007). However, lack of mutual trust, ongoing violence, and disagreement over key issues have prevented meaningful progress (Mearsheimer, 2015, p. 92). Accordingly, this study aims to examine the issue of Hamas governance over Gaza and the end of the two-state process in the Palestinian territory.

Research Method

The data collection method is documentary, and a set of historical documented data collected through library research will be used. To enhance the research's innovative aspect, efforts have been made to use translated, reliable sources while also increasing the use of untranslated documents and sources.

The Two-State Solution

The two-state solution is a political and diplomatic proposal for resolving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict that emphasizes the establishment of two independent and coexisting states in the historical territory of Palestine: a Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip with its capital in East Jerusalem, and an Israeli state within the borders before the 1967 war, with the possibility of land exchange through negotiation to resolve border disputes. This concept is rooted in international law principles, particularly United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181 (1947), which proposed the partition of Palestine, and Resolution 242 (1967), which emphasized Israel's withdrawal from occupied territories (Zarei, 2019, p. 145).

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This solution has also been supported in international negotiations, such as the Arab Peace Initiative and the Annapolis Conference; however, the lack of mutual trust, the continuation of violence, and the failure to reach agreement on key issues have prevented significant progress (Khaledi, 2017, p. 92). From an international law perspective, the United Nations and many countries have endorsed this solution as the basis for a just peace, but political disagreements and on-the-ground realities, such as continued occupation and settlement expansion, have made it a complex challenge (Crawford, 2006, p. 156).

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The 2006 Parliamentary Elections in Palestine and Their Consequences

The 2006 parliamentary elections in the Palestinian territories were the second after the Oslo Accords and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority. The election results, contrary to expectations from all governments and political observers, led to Hamas's victory and Fatah's defeat. These surprising results ultimately led to the formation of a government cabinet headed by Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas (Milton-Edwards, 2008, p. 180). Hamas's victory in the elections marked a turning point in Palestinian events. Its consequences included the boycott of the Palestinian government, followed by divisions between Hamas and Fatah, and ultimately a civil war within Palestine, and finally the separation of Gaza from the West Bank. This situation continues to this day.

During the election campaign period, Israel created obstacles for Hamas members. Israel, which considered Hamas illegitimate for representing the Palestinian Authority due to its non-recognition of Israel, arrested approximately 450 Hamas members during the campaign period, most of whom were election candidates, and many were held under administrative detention for varying periods. During the election period, 15 council members were arrested and detained. Israeli authorities prevented candidates from campaigning in Jerusalem. Public gatherings and meetings were prohibited, and the Jerusalem identity cards of some council members were revoked. The Carter Center, which monitored the elections, condemned the detention of individuals whose only offense was participating in a free and fair election. Israeli-imposed obstacles during the election led to approximately 123,000 voters in East Jerusalem being unable to register until ten days before the election, creating significant logistical problems ahead of Election Day. Israeli checkpoints also created serious obstacles for all Palestinian parties during the campaign and on Election Day. In addition, Palestinian refugees in exile and 9,000 prisoners were deprived of the right to vote.

Israeli authorities announced their intention to prevent voting in East Jerusalem, which, unlike other Palestinian areas, was under Israeli civil and military control. The stated reason was not a dispute over sovereignty but concerns over Hamas's participation in the elections. Mohammad Abu Tir, Mustafa Barghouti, and Hanan Ashrawi were temporarily arrested by Israeli police while attempting to campaign in East Jerusalem. In response, Palestinian Authority officials declared that if East Jerusalem voters were not allowed to participate, the elections would not be held. In the days leading up to the vote, Israeli authorities announced that a limited number of Palestinians in East Jerusalem could vote at post offices. Palestinian candidates were also allowed to campaign in East Jerusalem on the condition that they register with Israeli police.

Ismail Haniyeh, the leader of the Change and Reform list, claimed that Hamas had won more than 70 seats in Gaza and the West Bank. With the announcement of the election results, Hamas's decisive victory in internationally approved elections was confirmed. Fatah officials accepted their defeat. Ahmed Qurei, the Prime Minister, resigned on Thursday morning along with his cabinet and announced that the responsibility of forming the government now lay with Hamas (Abu-Amr, 2018, p. 100). The reactions of independent observers largely confirmed

the integrity and transparency of the elections. The National Democratic Institute, in partnership with the Carter Center, reported that election authorities demonstrated professional and impartial conduct. The European Union observation mission stated that there was no indication that the final result did not reflect the will of the voters. The U.S. Congressional Research Service report concluded that the elections were held under the supervision of 17,268 domestic observers and 900 international observers and were legitimate. The Bush administration was ultimately forced to accept the results of the Palestinian parliamentary elections. The electoral process was widely regarded as free and fair, and Hamas, contrary to expectations, achieved victory, leaving international observers in astonishment (Tamimi, 2007, p. 250).

With Hamas's victory in the parliamentary elections and the formation of a government headed by Ismail Haniyeh, a dual authority emerged within the Palestinian Authority. While the presidency of the Palestinian Authority remained with Mahmoud Abbas from Fatah, the prime ministership was held by Ismail Haniyeh from Hamas. However, problems began when, according to the Oslo Accords, assuming governmental responsibility required recognition of Israel. At the same time, the United States and Israel, while accepting and cooperating with Fatah, considered Hamas a terrorist organization. Hamas's refusal to recognize Israel and its continuation of armed resistance despite holding executive power within the Palestinian Authority led not only to conflict with Fatah but also to political and financial sanctions imposed by the United States and international institutions, which refused cooperation, assistance, and recognition of the Hamas-led government (Levitt, 2006, p. 250).

After the swearing-in of the new parliament, Israel imposed sanctions, including the suspension of the transfer of customs revenues collected on behalf of the Palestinian Authority. U.S. sanctions prohibited all financial transactions related to Hamas. Israel announced that it would prevent the movement of Hamas leaders, including members of the newly elected Legislative Council, between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert stated that no funds that could be used for terrorism would be transferred and that the matter was under review. U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared that the United States would not fund an organization that calls for the destruction of Israel, supports violence, and rejects commitments under the Road Map. American senators also emphasized that aid to a Hamas-led government must be cut off unless Hamas dismantles its military wing and abandons efforts to destroy Israel (Brown, 2006, p. 60).

Tensions between Fatah and Hamas intensified following Hamas's victory in the 2006 elections, and international pressure on the Palestinian Authority increased. Due to the Hamas-led government's refusal to commit to nonviolence, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous agreements, Israel, the Quartet on the Middle East (the United States, Russia, the United Nations, and the European Union), and several Western countries imposed sanctions and suspended foreign aid (Brown, 2008, p. 120). The conflict between Fatah and Hamas escalated into an internal war between the two Palestinian factions, which, after months of fighting, culminated on June 15, 2007, in a complete split between the two sides, resulting in two separate Palestinian administrations that continue to exist in 2025. The administration of the West Bank remained under Fatah within the Palestinian Authority, while governance of Gaza fell under Hamas. This event marked a turning point in Palestinian history, leading over the past two decades to a deadlock in the two-state solution, a severe blockade of Gaza, and four wars between Gaza and Israel. The violent confrontation between Fatah and Hamas resulted in more than 600 fatalities (Hilal, 2006, p. 80). The cause of the conflict was Hamas's

victory in the 2006 elections, which led to the formation of a government headed by Ismail Haniyeh, while the presidency remained with Mahmoud Abbas. The initial point of disagreement emerged when, according to the Oslo Accords, assuming governmental responsibility required recognition of Israel and cessation of attacks—conditions that contradicted Hamas’s charter. Ultimately, political tensions escalated into civil war between Palestinians and resulted in the separation of governance between Gaza and the West Bank (Morris, 2010, p. 160).

After months of intermittent negotiations, on February 8, 2007, Fatah and Hamas signed an agreement to form a national unity government aimed at ending violence and international sanctions following the initial Hamas-led government. However, after Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip on June 14, 2007, Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority, dissolved the Hamas-led coalition government and appointed Salam Fayyad as Prime Minister on June 15 to form a new government. Hamas considered this move illegal. Although the new government claimed authority over all Palestinian territories, in practice, its authority was limited to areas under Palestinian Authority control in the West Bank and did not include Gaza. Thus, Hamas’s right to lead the Palestinian Authority government effectively came to an end (Hopf, 1998, p. 130).

Multiple Attempts to Restore Peace

Intense factional clashes continued in the Gaza Strip during December 2006 and January 2007. After a month of fighting that left 33 people dead, Abbas attempted to integrate the Hamas-led Executive Force into a security structure loyal to the head of the Authority. Hamas rejected this order and announced that it intended to double its forces. On January 6, 2007, Abbas declared the Executive Force illegal and issued an order to dissolve it. The clashes continued until a ceasefire was reached on January 30. Conflicting declarations increased the likelihood of armed escalation. Abbas’s only instrument to enforce this order was coercive action by police and security units under his command, which were relatively weak in Gaza, Hamas’s main stronghold. Heavy fighting erupted after Hamas ambushed, on February 1, 2007, a convoy in Gaza transporting equipment for the Palestinian Presidential Guard under Abbas’s leadership, killing six people. According to diplomats, the equipment was intended to counter the smuggling of more advanced weapons by Hamas to strengthen its growing “Executive Force.” Hamas claimed that these deliveries were intended to provoke internal strife against the group while aid and financial support to the Palestinian population were being withheld (Tilley, 2012, p. 145).

On February 8, 2007, the Mecca Agreement, mediated by Saudi Arabia, brought together Fatah and Hamas leaders and led to the formation of a Palestinian national unity government. This agreement included measures to end internal violence. The national unity government was formed on March 17, but it failed to resolve two major issues: the economic crisis and the security collapse in Gaza. Violent clashes continued through March and April 2007, during which more than 90 people were killed. In mid-May 2007, violence once again erupted in the streets of Gaza. In less than 18 days, more than 50 Palestinians were killed. Leaders of both sides attempted to halt the fighting by announcing dozens of ceasefires, but none lasted more than a few days (Beilin, 2009, p. 115).

The Riyadh Summit was held with a set of strategic objectives, the first of which was to revive the Arab Peace Initiative. This plan called for recognition of Israel by Arab countries in

exchange for Israel's withdrawal to the pre-1967 borders, the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, and a just solution to the Palestinian refugee issue. The main goal of the Riyadh Summit was to reaffirm the plan and garner international support for it. The Summit also pursued other side goals, including strengthening Arab unity and discussing Iranian influence, but its focus was on reviving the Saudi-led Arab Peace Initiative (Miller, 2020, p. 150). This plan was presented as the main focus of the Summit. Arab leaders reaffirmed their commitment to the initiative and called for its acceptance by Israel and the international community. The Arab Peace Initiative is recognized as one of the most important diplomatic initiatives of the Arab world in recent decades, due to its comprehensiveness and emphasis on international law. The summit discussed the political and humanitarian situation in the Palestinian territories, particularly the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The blockade of Gaza, Israeli settlement construction, and the internal conflict between Hamas and Fatah were key topics of discussion. The final statement of the summit, known as the Riyadh Declaration, reflected the decisions and positions of the Arab countries. The key points of the statement were: Reaffirmation of the Arab Peace Plan: The Riyadh Declaration reaffirmed the Arab countries' commitment to the plan and called on Israel to accept it as the basis for peace negotiations. It also called on the international community, particularly the United States and the United Nations, to support the plan. Condemnation of Israeli actions: The summit condemned Israel's actions in the occupied territories, including settlement construction, the blockade of Gaza, and human rights violations, and called for an immediate cessation of these actions. Support for the Palestinian Authority: Arab leaders emphasized political, financial, and diplomatic support for the Palestinian Authority, led by Mahmoud Abbas, and called for an end to internal conflicts between Fatah and Hamas. Strengthening Saudi Arabia's position: Hosting the summit and emphasizing the Arab peace plan strengthened Saudi Arabia's position as a central player in the Arab world. By promoting this initiative, King Abdullah sought to establish his country's leadership role in the region. Impact on international relations: The Riyadh Declaration sent a message to world powers, especially the United States and the European Union that Arab countries were ready to cooperate to resolve regional conflicts, provided that their interests were taken into account. Emphasis on the Palestinian issue: The summit once again highlighted the Palestinian issue as a top priority for the Arab world and ought to increase diplomatic pressure on Israel and its supporters (Khalaf, 2008, p. 170).

Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas Prime Minister, stated in October 2006 that "the problem with the Arab Peace Initiative is that it includes recognition of the State of Israel, which the Palestinian government rejects and will not accept." In the same month, Al-Zahar explicitly declared that Hamas would never change its position, regardless of the intensity of pressure, and that it would never recognize the Arab initiative. After the initiative was revived in March 2007, Hamas maintained an ambiguous policy, and its officials provided differing responses. Fawzi Barhoum, Hamas spokesperson, told *Haaretz* that the issue for Hamas was not acceptance or rejection of the initiative: "We respect Arab efforts to secure Palestinian rights and will act within the framework of Arab consensus. However, the Zionist enemy continues to reject this initiative, and we will not define our position before Israel accepts it." Palestinian sources quoted by *Haaretz* stated that Hamas was inclined to oppose the initiative explicitly but refrained from doing so because it was unwilling to sever relations with the Saudi government (Malley, 2009, p. 60).

International reactions to the revival of the Arab Peace Initiative were generally positive.

Initially, the initiative received support from the Bush administration. According to Ari Fleischer, President Bush praised Crown Prince Abdullah's ideas for full normalization of Arab-Israeli relations following a comprehensive peace agreement; however, the President later emphasized that implementation would be possible only if attacks against Israel ceased (Obama, 2009, p. 5). Barack Obama, Bush's successor, praised the initiative's spirit in the early days of his presidency in 2009 but did not fully endorse its details. In a January 2009 interview with Al Arabiya, he stated, "Look at the proposal presented by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. I may not agree with all aspects of this proposal, but presenting such an initiative requires great courage."

The Annapolis Conference, held on November 27, 2007, at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, was one of the most important diplomatic efforts of the early twenty-first century to advance the Middle East peace process, particularly the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Savir, 2008, p. 250). The conference was initiated by the U.S. administration under President George W. Bush and directly led by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Its main objective was to revive direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, strengthen the two-state solution, and establish a framework for achieving a sustainable and comprehensive peace in the region (Elgindy, 2019, p. 200). The Annapolis Conference was diplomatically significant for the participation of representatives from more than 40 countries and international organizations, including key Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt, as well as the United Nations, the European Union, and Russia. The conference had three main objectives: first, to create a platform for direct negotiations between Israel (led by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert) and the Palestinian Authority (led by Mahmoud Abbas) to resolve key issues such as Jerusalem, borders, refugees, settlements, and security arrangements; second, to strengthen the idea of a two-state solution as a sustainable resolution in line with the Road Map and UN resolutions; and third, to bring together key international and regional actors to form a global consensus supporting the peace process and legitimizing U.S. mediation (Khaledi, 2013, p. 220). In addition, the conference sought to strengthen Mahmoud Abbas's position as the legitimate representative of Palestinians, while Hamas was excluded due to its rejection of Israel and the peace negotiations.

The most important achievement of the Annapolis conference was the issuance of a joint statement, agreed to by Ehud Olmert and Mahmoud Abbas under United States supervision. Although general in content, the statement provided a framework for continuing the negotiations. The main points of the statement included the following: Commitment to immediate negotiations: The parties agreed to begin bilateral negotiations immediately after the conference and to reach a comprehensive agreement by the end of 2008 to resolve all final issues. Emphasis on the implementation of the commitments contained in the road map, including a halt to Israeli settlement construction in the occupied territories, reforms of Palestinian institutions, and improvements in the security situation. Two-state solution: Reaffirmation of the commitment to the establishment of an independent, democratic, and viable Palestinian state alongside the State of Israel. International monitoring: The Quartet and the United States were appointed as the main observers to monitor the progress of the negotiations. A committee was also established to monitor the implementation of the parties' commitments. However, the joint statement remained vague in terms of specific details on sensitive issues such as the status of Jerusalem, the precise borders of the Palestinian state, or the right of return of refugees. This ambiguity, partly due to big differences between the parties, was considered a weakness of the statement (Savir, 2008, p. 255).

The Ehud Olmert Convergence Plan Conference was a proposal by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in 2008. It was based on a two-state approach. According to most political commentators, it was the best plan that Israel had ever proposed to Palestine in the form of a two-state approach. However, it also met a similar fate to other plans presented on that day and failed for several reasons (Aruri, 2001, p. 38). It was designed within the framework of a two-state solution. It was presented to resolve the key issues of the conflict, including border demarcation, the status of Jerusalem, the issue of Palestinian refugees, security arrangements, and Jewish settlements (Makovsky, 2008, p. 5). The Annapolis Conference in November 2007, sponsored by the United States, was an attempt to revive peace talks. It aimed to advance the two-state solution and implement the “Roadmap to Peace”. It paved the way for direct talks between Ehud Olmert and Mahmoud Abbas (Adwan, 2009, para. 12). Ehud Olmert, leader of the moderate Kadima party, who had become prime minister in January 2006 after Ariel Sharon’s illness, took a different approach from his predecessor. Unlike Sharon, who had implemented a unilateral withdrawal plan from the Gaza Strip in 2005, Olmert favored bilateral negotiations with the Palestinians (Efrat, 2014, p. 45). The Convergence Plan was initially proposed in 2006 as a unilateral plan for Israel to withdraw from parts of the West Bank and consolidate Jewish settlements in smaller areas. However, in 2008, the plan evolved into a comprehensive peace proposal, presented in direct negotiations with Mahmoud Abbas.

Olmert proposed that the eastern part of Jerusalem, which the Palestinians wanted as their future capital, be handed over to the Palestinian state. The holy sites, including the Haram al-Sharif, would be managed by an international consortium consisting of Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. The proposal was an attempt to resolve religious and political disputes over the holy sites, which had great symbolic and religious significance for both sides. The proposal showed greater flexibility on Israel’s part than in previous negotiations, such as the Camp David negotiations. However, it still raised sensitivities for the Palestinians, as it did not give them full control of East Jerusalem (Hanieh, 2013, p. 50). In the issue of Palestinian refugees, which has always been one of the most complex issues in the conflict, Olmert proposed that a limited number of refugees, around 5,000, would be symbolically returned to Israel, but that the majority of refugees would be resettled in the Palestinian state, the current host countries, or third countries (Little, 2002, p. 42). He also announced that the United States was prepared to accept 100,000 Palestinian refugees as citizens, subject to the signing of a peace agreement (Segev, 2000, p. 625).

The negotiations between Olmert and Abbas in 2008 included several rounds of talks in which the details of the convergence plan were discussed. Olmert presented Abbas with a proposed map outlining the borders of a Palestinian state, but Abbas refused to sign the agreement immediately, requesting a more detailed review (Shavit, 2013, p. 45). According to Olmert, in subsequent interviews, Abbas did not reject the proposal outright, but the negotiations did not conclude due to disagreements over some details and political conditions. Mahmoud Abbas described Olmert’s plan as “very serious” but refused to accept it. Several reasons have been given for this decision, including a lack of confidence in Olmert’s political stability. In 2008, Olmert faced corruption charges and announced his intention to resign. This made Palestinians doubt whether he could implement the agreement. The dispute over land swaps was another problem, with Abbas arguing that the proposed 1.9 percent swap, compared to Olmert’s 6.3–6.8 percent, was insufficient and would undermine the territorial integrity of the Palestinian state. Internal disputes between Fatah and Hamas, which had taken control of the Gaza Strip in

2007, had put Abbas in a difficult position. Hamas was opposed to any negotiations with Israel, and accepting the plan could have weakened Abbas's position among the Palestinians (Zertal, 2007, p. 60).

The Beginning of the Gaza-Israeli Wars

The First Gaza-Israeli War was the first of four wars between Gaza and Israel that took place after Hamas won the Gaza secession election and Israel imposed a blockade on it. The First Gaza War was a 22-day conflict that began on December 27, 2008, and ended on January 18, 2009. On one side of the war, Hamas and Islamic Jihad forces faced each other, and on the other side, the Israeli army. The war was also known by other names. Palestinian fighters called it the Furqan War, Israel called its operation Cast Lead, and in Iran, the war became known as the 22-Day War (Amnesty International, 2009, p. 5). Israel's claim to have started the war was to stop rocket attacks from Gaza into the 48 territories. At the same time, Palestinian fighters saw it as part of their struggle to liberate the territories and also to protest the severe and condemned siege of Gaza. Palestinian casualties in the war exceeded 1,000, more than 70 percent of whom were children and civilians, while the other side suffered only 13 casualties (B'Tselem, 2009, p. 10).

On December 15, Israel assassinated a senior Palestinian commander in Jenin, triggering a new round of attacks between Israel and Hamas. The following day, December 16, Hamas declared the end of the ceasefire, a day before its official expiration. On that day, more than 20 rockets were fired from Gaza into southern Israel. On December 19, Hamas refused to enter into negotiations to extend the six-month ceasefire, and its spokesman announced that it would not be extended. Hamas spokesman Ayman Taha stated that the decision was due to the "enemy's failure to adhere to its commitments" to ease the crippling siege of Gaza and halt attacks. Palestinian sources stated that Hamas was willing to extend the ceasefire, but only on improved terms, including the full reopening of border crossings with Israel, the reopening of the Rafah crossing with Egypt, a complete ban on Israeli military activity in Gaza, and the extension of the ceasefire to the West Bank. Israel was not prepared to accept these terms (Yaqub, 2004, p. 3).

In the Dignity incident on 29 December 2008, the motorboat Dignity, belonging to the Free Gaza Movement, set sail from Cyprus for Gaza carrying humanitarian aid. The boat, which was carrying Irish human rights activist Kaima Batteri, Cynthia McKinney, former US Representative and Green Party candidate in the 2008 presidential election, journalists from Al Jazeera and CNN, such as Carl Penhall, and three surgeons, including Dr. Elena Theoharous, a member of the Cypriot parliament, was carrying 3.5 tons of medical equipment. The boat crew reported that several Israeli naval vessels approached their boat. David Halpin, a member of the Free Gaza Movement, said that Israeli officers radioed the captain to stop heading toward Gaza, but he refused. According to CNN reporter Penhall, an Israeli vessel rammed the motorboat, causing heavy damage. Penhall admitted that he did not have a clear view of the Israeli vessel at the time of the incident. Other crew members reported that several Israeli vessels fired machine guns into the water. The activists claimed that their boat was clearly in international waters, about 70 to 80 miles or 90 miles from the Gaza coast. McKinney said that the Israeli vessel rammed the boat about three times, twice from the front and once from the side (Al Jazeera, 2023, p. 5).

The Zeytoun massacre. The Daily Telegraph reported that in the Zeytoun neighborhood, in the

early morning of 4 January, Israeli forces evacuated about 110 members of the extended Samouni family to a warehouse belonging to the family, where they waited for 24 hours without food or water (Beinin, 1998, p. 1). From 6:35 am on 5 January, the building was hit several times by artillery shells. Some people inside the building were killed by falling debris; while others tried to escape the building, most of the dead died outside from shrapnel. Initial reports indicated that 60 to 70 people were killed, but the UN put the total death toll at 30, 11 of whom were Samouni family members. A small number of survivors, some wounded and others carrying dead or dying bodies, managed to reach the main north-south Gaza road, where passing vehicles took them to the hospital. A Red Crescent volunteer stated that the wounded remained at the scene: “We could not reach them and it was no longer safe for us to remain” (United Nations, 1973, p. 45).

The Second Gaza–Israel War (2012) was an eight-day war between Gaza and Israel that took place between 14 and 21 November 2012 (Davis, 2016, p. 480). It was the second war between Gaza and Israel after Hamas won the 2006 elections and the subsequent siege of Gaza. Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and other militants fought on one side, and the Israeli army on the other. As in other conflicts, the war was internationally criticized for the disproportionate number of casualties. While the Israeli army killed 150 Palestinians, more than half of whom were civilians, only six were killed on the other side (B'Tselem, 2013, p. 5). Israel's stated goal at the start of the war was to stop rocket attacks from Gaza, while Palestinian militants saw their goal in launching rockets as an attempt to end the siege of Gaza (Efrat, 2014, p. 120). Before the start of the war, tensions between Israel and Palestinian groups in Gaza had been high due to reciprocal attacks. In October 2012, more than 170 rockets and mortars were fired from Gaza into southern Israel. Also, improvised explosive devices near the border and an attack on an Israeli military patrol inside Israel further increased tensions. Restrictions imposed on Palestinian fishermen, including a reduction in the fishing zone to three nautical miles instead of the 20 miles set in the Oslo Accords, contributed to the escalation. There were reports of repeated Israeli naval attacks on Palestinian fishermen and the seizure of their boats and equipment. The new round of tensions that led to the operation began on November 10, when an anti-tank missile fired from Gaza hit an Israeli army jeep near the Qarni crossing, wounding four soldiers, two of whom were reported to be in critical condition. On the same day, four Palestinian teenagers aged 16 to 18 were killed in an Israeli airstrike on a sports stadium while playing soccer. Rocket and mortar attacks on Israel continued and intensified the following day. In total, 64 rockets were fired on November 11, with longer-range rockets causing more damage (Sfard, 2018, p. 10).

The Third Gaza–Israel War was the third war between Gaza and Israel since the establishment of Hamas rule over Gaza in 2006 and the subsequent Israeli blockade. The third conflict between the parties was an eight-week war that began on July 8 and lasted until August 26, 2014, during which the Israeli army targeted approximately 2,000 Palestinians, 70 percent of whom were civilians, while the other side suffered fewer than 70 casualties (B'Tselem, 2014, p. 5). In early 2014, Gaza remained under a tight military and economic blockade despite the ceasefire agreement. Crossings were closed, exports were halted, and exit permits for Palestinians were limited. On June 12, 2014, three Israeli settlers were kidnapped from the West Bank. Israel blamed Hamas for the incident, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that he had conclusive evidence of Hamas involvement and linked the kidnapping to Palestinian reconciliation. The Israeli army said the two main suspects in the kidnapping were known Hamas members. Hamas denied involvement in the incident, blaming

it on arbitrary individuals; Khaled Meshaal had expressed ignorance of the military details of the operation, although he considered it a legitimate resistance to years of occupation (Shlaim, 2014, p. 20). Israel concealed evidence that the three abductees had been killed immediately until 1 July, and launched a military operation against Hamas positions. This operation was a widespread crackdown on Hamas positions and individuals in the West Bank, ostensibly aimed at freeing the abductees. During the operation, by 2 July, 11 Palestinians had been killed and 51 wounded. Israel had arrested between 350 and 600 Palestinians in 369 raids on the West Bank, including almost all of Hamas's leaders in the region (Amnesty International, 2014). The Al-Aqsa Storm or October 7th offensive, carried out by Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, was one of the largest and most surprising military operations against Israel in the history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The offensive began on October 7, 2023, and was declared a response to the years of occupation and blockade of Gaza. From the Palestinian perspective, the operation was part of legitimate resistance against the occupation. The Hamas offensive began on October 7, coinciding with the Jewish holiday of Eid al-Fitr. Hamas called it Operation Al-Aqsa Storm, and Mohammed Deif, commander of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, announced in a statement that the operation was a response to the 16-year siege of Gaza, attacks on the West Bank, violence at Al-Aqsa Mosque, and the imprisonment of thousands of Palestinians. More than 3,000 to 5,000 rockets were fired from Gaza into Israel. Hamas fighters breached the Gaza-Israel border wall and entered Israeli territory in vehicles, paragliders, and motorboats. They targeted 21 settlements and military bases, such as Beerli, the kibbutzim Nir Oz and El-Wamim. Videos from Al Jazeera show the temporary seizure of military bases and the capture of Israeli soldiers. As a result of the attack, about 1,200 residents of the 48 territories were killed, and about 250 were captured. Israel called it the biggest intelligence failure in history. The Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, which resulted in the deaths of about 1,200 people and the taking of more than 250 hostages, completely halted the normalization talks. On October 14, 2023, in the presence of Anthony Blinken, Saudi Arabia officially suspended the talks and once again emphasized the need for the formation of a Palestinian state. The New York Times reported that before the attack, the agreement was "on the verge of being finalized" and could lead to fundamental changes in the Middle East. However, after the attack, Saudi Arabia moved closer to Iran, especially due to pressure from public opinion in the Arab world (Tolan, 2006).

The Beginning of the Trump Era

The beginning of Donald Trump's presidency in 2017 promised difficult days for many Muslim societies. Restrictions on Muslim entry into the United States, recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, and recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital by the Trump administration—despite contradicting UN resolutions—were among the measures faced by Islamic societies, which were met with weak responses from Islamic governments. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the most important developments were the "Deal of the Century" and the Abraham Accords, both introduced by the Trump administration.

On January 28, 2020, Donald Trump, President of the United States, presented a plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a press conference at the White House alongside Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. This plan, officially titled "Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People," was unveiled after a two-year delay and had previously been rejected by Palestinians, who had not been invited to the meeting. This

plan was developed by a team led by Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and senior advisor. Both the Judea and Samaria Council (representing West Bank settlers) and Palestinian leadership rejected the plan; the former because it included the establishment of a Palestinian state, and the latter because it was considered heavily biased in favor of Israel (Cohen, 2020, p. 120). The plan was divided into economic and political components. The economic part, titled "Peace to Prosperity," was published on June 22, 2019, and the political section was presented in late January 2020. The plan was widely criticized for imposing harsh conditions on Palestinians. Democratic members of Congress had mixed reactions, but prominent Democratic presidential candidates in the 2020 election condemned it as a cover for annexation (Malley, 2019, p. 80). In late June 2019, the economic component of the plan was unveiled at a U.S.-led conference titled "Peace to Prosperity" in Manama, Bahrain. The Palestinian leadership completely boycotted the event. According to Bas Levin in Vanity Fair, the conference was widely criticized by experts, with one describing it as "a Monty Python-style sketch of Israeli–Palestinian peace initiatives" (Bergman, 2020, p. 305).

The declared objective of the Trump peace plan was to formulate the conditions of an agreement that would bring an end to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians and resolve all mutual claims. The designers of this plan anticipated that its implementation would grant Palestinians the right to self-governance, while preventing the conferral of any power that could pose a threat to Israel. This solution also envisaged the establishment of direct flights between Israel and its neighbors. The Trump administration announced that this plan departs from the obsolete paradigms of previous approaches to the Israeli–Palestinian peace process and eliminates two key issues through actions taken in 2017 and 2019, thereby redefining U.S. parameters for a final resolution of the conflict, largely aligned with Israeli positions. These measures included: (1) recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel on December 6, 2017, and (2) announcing on November 18, 2019, that Jewish settlements in the West Bank are consistent with international law. As a clear indication of this break with the past, the United States opened its embassy in the U.S. consulate building in Jerusalem, coinciding with the seventieth anniversary of the establishment of the State of Israel (Waxman, 2019, p. 15).

The Trump peace plan recognizes Palestinian rights to approximately 70 percent of the West Bank. The plan called for land swaps but rejected the idea of "one-to-one land exchange," arguing that Palestinians would not receive 100 percent of pre-1967 territory, but rather land that is "reasonably comparable" to pre-1967 borders. In exchange for Israel's annexation of parts of the West Bank, the plan proposed the potential revocation of Israeli citizenship from approximately 350,000 Arab citizens living in 10 Israeli "Triangle" cities, such as Taybeh, Kafr Qasim, and Qalansawe, through the transfer of these areas to the future Palestinian state. Palestinians would be granted parts of the Negev Desert connected to Gaza via small land corridors. Compared to previous proposals, this plan allocated less territory to Palestinians (Cohen, 2020, p. 130).

Despite the overt Islamophobic policies of the Trump administration, to the surprise of political observers, Donald Trump succeeded in bringing Sheikh Mohammed and Sheikh Hamad, the leaders of the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, to the negotiating table with Netanyahu, resulting in the third Arab–Israeli peace agreement known as the Abraham Accords (Quandt, 2005, p. 10). The Abraham Accords were less a reflection of Trump's political acumen and more an indication of shifting Arab priorities. Arab states had long moved toward economic development policies accompanied by limited social liberalization and acceptance of Western lifestyles, albeit excluding democracy and a free press. This governance model, favored by oil



monarchies in the Middle East, was first introduced in the region by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in the 1960s and later adopted by Sheik Zayed in the UAE, spreading subsequently to other Gulf states. Only Saudi Arabia had lagged behind this apparent modernization trend, but under Mohammed bin Salman, it rapidly pursued similar policies. Moderate Arab states not only had begun to neglect the Palestinian cause but increasingly viewed Palestinians as an obstacle to their ambitious development agendas (Jones, 2004, p. 15).

The Abraham Accords consisted of a series of agreements signed on September 15, 2020, during the final year of Trump's presidency, between the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Israel, leading to the normalization of relations among them. Later, Sudan and Morocco also joined the normalization process with Israel. These agreements followed the Trump administration's "Deal of the Century." After its announcement, Israel sought to annex parts of the West Bank; however, the UAE proposed recognition of Israel and normalization of relations in exchange for Israel halting annexation plans (Feldman, 2021, p. 200).

The Abraham Accords emerged from informal cooperation between Israel and Arab states during the 2010s. The Arab Spring and the Syrian civil war intensified rivalry between Iran and regional Arab powers, and Iran's nuclear program led to covert cooperation between Israel and Arab governments. By 2016, meetings between Israeli–Palestinian and Arab–Israeli officials, as well as intelligence cooperation, had become increasingly routine and even publicly discussed in Arab media. By 2017, unofficial cooperation with Saudi Arabia had continued for at least five years, including intelligence sharing and regular contact between officials (Katz, 2009, p. 50).

In January 2020, Trump officially announced his Middle East peace plan alongside Netanyahu. The plan declared that Jerusalem would be the undivided capital of Israel. It recognized Israeli sovereignty over the Jordan Valley and major settlements in the West Bank, amounting to the annexation of approximately 30 percent of the territory. Palestinians were offered fragmented statehood, limited sovereignty, and desert areas near the Egyptian border in exchange. When Benjamin Netanyahu returned to office in May 2020, he indicated that his government would begin discussing annexation of parts of the West Bank in July, in accordance with Trump's proposal. On June 12, 2020, Yousef Al Otaiba, UAE Ambassador to the United States, published an article in *Yedioth Ahronoth* warning that annexation would halt normalization with Arab states. Later, he informed Jared Kushner and Avi Berkowitz that the UAE was willing to normalize relations with Israel in exchange for Israel suspending its annexation plans. This proposal was then conveyed to Netanyahu.

In January 2022, Israeli President Isaac Herzog made a historic visit to Abu Dhabi and met UAE leader Mohammed bin Zayed. Although informal cooperation already existed in trade and defense, the Abraham Accords significantly expanded economic relations, including Israeli investments in the UAE. In November 2021, the Israeli investment firm “OurCrowd Arabia” became the first Israeli company licensed by the Abu Dhabi Global Market (ADGM). Public opinion surveys indicate that in Arab states that signed normalization agreements, the majority of citizens hold negative views toward the Abraham Accords. In November 2022, 76 percent of Saudi respondents expressed negative opinions about the accords. A Washington Institute survey conducted between November 14 and December 6, 2023, found that 96 percent of Saudi participants believed Arab states should sever relations with Israel.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the issue of Hamas governance in Gaza and the end of the two-state process in the Palestinian territories. The victory of Hamas in the 2006 elections was identified as a fundamental turning point; an election held based on widespread dissatisfaction with corruption within the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority and the inefficacy of the Oslo negotiations. Contrary to international expectations—which had relied on a Fatah victory as a guarantee of continued negotiation—the parliamentary success of Hamas led to a complete diplomatic deadlock. This development, rooted in Hamas’s jihadist ideology and popular support for armed resistance, not only resulted in extensive international sanctions imposed by the United States, the European Union, and even Arab allies but also paved the way for internal conflict between Hamas and Fatah. These clashes culminated in armed confrontations in Gaza in June 2007, leading to Hamas’s full control over the Gaza Strip, Palestinian political fragmentation, and the geographical-political separation of Gaza from the West Bank. This internal division, described among Palestinians as a “national catastrophe,” fragmented national unity and reduced the Palestinian Authority to a symbolic institution in the West Bank. It also weakened its international legitimacy and negotiating capacity. This internal rift emboldened Israeli unilateral policies and marginalized the prospects of the two-state solution. In the face of this destructive trend, moderate Arab and Palestinian governments put forward diplomatic initiatives to revive the peace process, which, although well-intentioned, ultimately faced ideological and geopolitical obstacles and failed. The Riyadh summit in March 2007, with the Arab League’s proposal for Palestinian unity and the revival of the 2002 peace initiative, was an attempt to moderate the division and pressure on Israel, but was sidelined by Hamas’s rejection and Israel’s firm non-commitment. The Annapolis conference in November 2007, hosted by George Bush and attended by Mahmoud Abbas and Ehud Olmert, focused on bilateral negotiations for the formation of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, but was stalled by the intensification of Israeli settlement activity – which increased from 400,000 to over 700,000 settlers during this period – and the economic crises in the occupied territories, demonstrating how Western-Arab initiatives, without binding implementation mechanisms, are incapable of overcoming Israeli internal obstacles. These defeats, rooted in the regional polarization between the resistance front (Iran, Syria, and Hamas) and the moderate front (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan), paved the way for military escalation and led to four bloody wars between Gaza and Israel; wars that, beyond military objectives, each led to the destruction of Gaza’s infrastructure and the escalation of the humanitarian crisis.

These wars, as symbols of the cycle of asymmetric violence, have been explored in depth: the first war in June-December 2006, with the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier and the barrage of rockets into Gaza, resulted in more than 400 Palestinian martyrs and the siege of Gaza; the first war in December 2008-January 2009 (Operation Cast Lead), with a massive Israeli airstrike that killed more than 1,400 Palestinians and prompted the United Nations to issue the Goldstone Report, which documented war crimes. The second war in November 2012 resulted in the martyrdom of 170 Palestinians with targeted assassinations and reciprocal rocket fire, while the third war in August 2014, with the targeting of Hamas tunnels and heavy bombardment, recorded a record 2,200 Palestinian martyrs, mostly civilians, and reduced Gaza’s infrastructure to uninhabitable ruins. These conflicts, each ending with temporary ceasefires, not only took a heavy human toll with the destruction of 80 percent of Gaza’s infrastructure and persistent food and health crises, but also deepened political obstacles: from strengthening Hamas as a symbol of resistance to justifying concrete Israeli policies, such as

the separation wall and settlements in the West Bank, which reduced the chances of a Palestinian state to a minimum.

The climax of this period was the October 7, 2023 attack by Hamas, known as the “Al-Aqsa Storm,” and was met with a devastating Israeli response; The war, which by the end of 2024 had killed more than 60,000 Palestinians – mostly civilians, including thousands of children and women – and displaced 1.9 million people in Gaza, prompting the United Nations to warn of genocide. Rooted in the accumulation of tensions over decades, the event not only rewrote geographical borders but also emboldened Israel’s unilateral policies – including plans to annex the West Bank and Gaza without consulting the Palestinians – and marginalized international initiatives such as the 2024 Berlin Conference. The consequences of this event, which went beyond human losses to a global migration crisis, economic pressures on refugee camps, and the weakening of the UN’s role in mediation, demonstrate the depth of the obstacles to the realization of an independent Palestinian state: internal divisions, unjust sanctions, asymmetric wars, and occupation policies, which have collectively made the two-state solution an impossible dream.

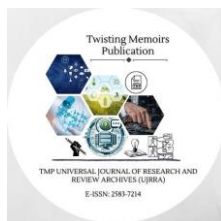
Drawing on diplomatic documents, UN reports, and authoritative geopolitical analyses, this study achieved its ultimate goal of providing a conceptual framework for understanding this period: a period in which Hamas’s victory led to division and sanctions rather than empowerment; moderate initiatives led to devastating wars rather than peace; and structural obstacles brought the chances of a Palestinian state to an existential crisis. Overall, the present study emphasizes the need for a fundamental rethinking of international approaches; one that, beyond punitive sanctions and symbolic initiatives, relies on transitional justice, Palestinian national unity, and binding pressure on Israel to make a lasting peace that recognizes the historical and human rights of both sides possible.

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