

THE INTRACTABILITY OF THE ISRAEL–PALESTINE CONFLICT: HISTORICAL ORIGINS, FAILED PEACE EFFORTS, AND PATHWAYS TO RESOLUTION

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Abstract

The Israel–Palestine conflict is one of the most enduring and complex disputes in modern history, rooted in competing nationalist claims, historical grievances, and unresolved issues of sovereignty and identity. Since the 1947 UN Partition Plan and the 1948 Arab–Israeli War, cycles of violence, displacement, and failed negotiations have shaped the region’s political, social, and economic landscape. Numerous peace initiatives including the Camp David Accords, Oslo Accords, Roadmap for Peace, and the Abraham Accords, have attempted resolution but ultimately failed to secure lasting peace. This study employs John Burton’s Human Needs Theory and Johan Galtung’s Conflict Transformation approach within a qualitative case study framework to analyze the conflict’s origins, strategies, and recurring failures. Findings highlight power asymmetry, unaddressed human needs, structural violence, geopolitical interference, and internal divisions as key obstacles. The study concludes that sustainable peace requires moving beyond short-term settlements toward inclusive frameworks that address fundamental needs, dismantle inequalities, and foster long-term transformation.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The Israel–Palestine conflict is widely recognized as one of the most protracted and intricate disputes in modern history, with profound implications for regional and global politics. At its core, the conflict is rooted in competing nationalist movements Zionism, which sought the establishment of a Jewish homeland, and Palestinian Arab nationalism, which sought independence and sovereignty in the same territory. Historical grievances, religious attachments to the land, and conflicting political aspirations have intertwined to create a dispute

that has shaped the political, social, and economic dynamics of the Middle East for over a century.

The origins of the conflict can be traced to the late Ottoman period, when increasing Jewish migration to Palestine, particularly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, began to unsettle the demographic and political balance of the region. During the British Mandate (1920–1948), the tensions intensified, particularly following the Balfour Declaration of 1917, in which Britain expressed support for “a national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine. This declaration was welcomed by Jewish leaders but perceived by the

Arab population as a betrayal, as it contradicted earlier British promises of Arab independence.

From the perspective of international law, the Israel–Palestine conflict engages several key principles and legal debates. The right to self-determination, enshrined in the United Nations Charter, applies to both Israelis and Palestinians, creating a complex overlap of national claims. Following the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza Strip brought the Fourth Geneva Convention (1949) into focus, which prohibits the transfer of an occupier’s population into occupied territory rendering Israeli settlements widely regarded as illegal under international law. Moreover, UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 call for Israel’s withdrawal from occupied territories and recognition of all states’ right to live in peace within secure borders. The status of Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees’ right of return, and humanitarian obligations under international law remain among the most contentious and unresolved aspects of the conflict.

The pivotal turning point came with the United Nations Partition Plan of 1947 (Resolution 181), which recommended dividing Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states, with Jerusalem placed under international administration. While the Jewish leadership accepted the plan, Arab leaders rejected it, considering it unjust and a violation of the indigenous population’s right to self-determination. The subsequent 1948 Arab–Israeli War, triggered by the declaration of the State of Israel, marked a defining moment in the conflict. The war resulted in the establishment of Israel but also led to the displacement of more than 700,000 Palestinians, who fled or were expelled from their homes. This mass displacement, remembered by Palestinians as the Nakba (Catastrophe), became one of the central grievances and a symbol of dispossession that continues to resonate across generations (Morris, 2001; Khalidi, 1997).

This foundational period cemented the deep mistrust and antagonism between the two peoples, transforming what might have been a territorial dispute into a broader struggle over identity, legitimacy, and historical narrative. It also laid the

groundwork for future wars, uprisings, and failed peace initiatives, underscoring the enduring complexity of the Israel–Palestine conflict.

Since then, wars, uprisings, and cycles of violence have persisted. The 1967 Six-Day War further altered the territorial map, with Israel occupying the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem territories Palestinians consider essential for their statehood (Pappé, 2006). These developments entrenched the conflict as one not only over territory but also over sovereignty, identity, and security.

The international community has long attempted to resolve the conflict. Key efforts include the Camp David Accords (1978), the Madrid Conference (1991), the Oslo Accords (1993), and the Roadmap for Peace (2003). While each generated hope, none delivered lasting peace (Smith, 2010). The persistence of violence including the First and Second Intifadas, recurrent wars in Gaza, and ongoing settlement expansion demonstrates the limits of existing resolution strategies (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010).

1.2 Problem Statement

The Israel–Palestine conflict, originating from competing nationalist claims since the 1947 partition, has persisted as one of the world’s most intractable disputes. Despite repeated peace accords and diplomatic interventions, including the Camp David and Oslo agreements, cycles of violence and mistrust continue to undermine efforts toward resolution. The inability of these strategies to deliver sustainable peace reflects deep structural, ideological, and geopolitical barriers. This enduring failure highlights the need to critically examine the historical roots of the conflict, the approaches employed for resolution, and the reasons behind their consistent breakdown in order to understand why a lasting settlement remains elusive.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study is significant both academically and practically. Academically, it advances conflict resolution research by examining why peace efforts

in the Israel–Palestine case have failed, applying Burton’s Human Needs Theory and Galtung’s Conflict Transformation approach to situate the conflict within debates on protracted social conflicts. Practically, it provides insights for policymakers and mediators, emphasizing justice, recognition, and human dignity as essential elements for designing more effective peace strategies.

1.4 Research question

- I. What historical factors gave rise to the Israel–Palestine conflict?
- II. Which strategies have been pursued to achieve its resolution?
- III. Why have these conflict resolution efforts failed to deliver a lasting peace in the Israel–Palestine case?

1.6 Limitations of the Study

This study is based primarily on secondary sources, including scholarly publications, historical records, policy documents, and reports from international organizations. Due to the sensitivity of the Israel–Palestine conflict, direct fieldwork in the region was not feasible. As a result, while the research provides a comprehensive examination of the conflict’s origins, strategies, and failures, it does not incorporate first-hand accounts or perspectives from those directly involved.

Literature Review

2.1 Historical Origins of the Israel–Palestine Conflict

The Israel–Palestine conflict traces back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when Jewish and Arab nationalist movements arose in competition for the same land. The Zionist movement, driven by antisemitism and Herzl’s vision, spurred Jewish migration to Palestine, while Palestinian nationalism grew alongside broader Arab identity and anti-colonial struggles. From the outset, the conflict was not only territorial but also rooted in identity, legitimacy, and self-determination (Khalidi, 1997).

The Israel–Palestine conflict intensified during the British Mandate (1920–1948), shaped by the Balfour Declaration, which encouraged Zionist aspirations but fueled Arab resentment over

broken promises of independence. Rising Jewish immigration and settlement, especially during Nazi persecution, sparked unrest such as the Arab Revolt (1936–1939). Britain’s partition proposals failed, and the UN Partition Plan of 1947, accepted by Jews but rejected by Arabs, led to the 1948 Arab–Israeli War, Israel’s creation, and the displacement of over 700,000 Palestinians—the Nakba. Subsequent wars, notably the 1967 Six-Day War, deepened divisions as Israel occupied territories central to Palestinian demands for statehood, entrenching a protracted conflict rooted in identity, legitimacy, and sovereignty (Morris, 2001; Khalidi, 1997).

2.1.1 Conflict Resolution Efforts

Numerous attempts at resolving the Israel–Palestine conflict have been undertaken over the past decades, reflecting the international community’s recognition of the dispute as a central source of instability in the Middle East. However, despite repeated diplomatic initiatives, none have achieved a durable peace, largely because they failed to address the conflict’s fundamental issues.

One of the earliest major breakthroughs was the 1978 Camp David Accords, brokered by U.S. President Jimmy Carter between Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. While the accords succeeded in establishing peace between Israel and Egypt making Egypt the first Arab country to formally recognize Israel, they fell short of addressing Palestinian aspirations. The Palestinian issue was largely sidelined, with only vague provisions for Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza, which were never fully implemented (Quandt, 2005).

The Madrid Conference of 1991, held in the aftermath of the Gulf War, marked a turning point by bringing Israelis and Palestinians into direct negotiations for the first time under international auspices. This paved the way for the Oslo Accords of 1993–1995, a landmark moment in peace diplomacy. Oslo created the Palestinian Authority (PA) and established a framework for phased negotiations that promised eventual Palestinian statehood. The accords generated

significant optimism at the time, symbolized by the handshake between Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat on the White House lawn. However, the process quickly unraveled due to mutual distrust, continued Israeli settlement expansion, internal Palestinian divisions, and outbreaks of violence such as the Second Intifada. By the early 2000s, the Oslo framework had effectively collapsed (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010).

Efforts to revive peace, including the Roadmap for Peace (2003) and Annapolis Conference (2007), failed due to settlement expansion, violence, and political divisions. The Abraham Accords (2020) normalized Israel's ties with Arab states but excluded Palestinians, reinforcing their marginalization rather than advancing a just resolution (Lustick, 2021).

Collectively, these efforts reveal a pattern of short-lived agreements that produced temporary diplomatic successes but failed to address the conflict's core issues: the rights of Palestinian refugees, the question of borders and statehood, the status of Jerusalem, ongoing Israeli settlements in the West Bank, and mutual security concerns. As Shlaim (2014) notes, peace initiatives that avoid grappling with these central issues inevitably collapse under the weight of unresolved grievances.

2.1.2 Reasons for the Failure of Resolution Efforts

Despite decades of peace initiatives, the Israel-Palestine conflict has proven resistant to resolution. Scholars and practitioners highlight a series of recurring factors that explain why negotiations and agreements have repeatedly collapsed. These factors demonstrate not only the complexity of the conflict but also the inadequacy of existing approaches to address its core issues.

2.1.3 Asymmetry of Power

A major barrier to resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict is the stark power imbalance. Israel's military strength, economic advantage, and U.S. support allow it to dominate negotiations, while Palestinians face political weakness, internal divisions, and reliance on aid. This asymmetry prioritizes Israeli security concerns, sidelines

Palestinian demands for sovereignty and justice, and fosters mistrust in the peace process (Finkelstein, 2003).

2.1.4 Unaddressed Human Needs

John Burton's (1990) Human Needs Theory offers a useful lens to understand why agreements have failed. Burton argues that conflicts persist when basic human needs such as identity, recognition, security, and participation are not met. In the Israel-Palestine case, Palestinians' needs for statehood, recognition, and dignity have repeatedly been postponed or minimized in negotiations, while Israeli fears of existential threats and insecurity remain unresolved. The Oslo Accords, for instance, created administrative structures but left core needs such as the right of return for refugees and sovereignty over Jerusalem unaddressed. Without fulfilling these fundamental needs, no peace agreement can achieve sustainability.

2.1.5 Structural Violence

Johan Galtung's (1996) concept of structural violence further illustrates why peace efforts falter. Structural violence refers to systemic inequalities and institutionalized practices that deny people their rights and perpetuate oppression. In the Israel-Palestine context, structural violence manifests in the ongoing occupation of the West Bank, the blockade of Gaza, the expansion of Israeli settlements, and restrictions on Palestinian mobility. These structures not only maintain Palestinian dependence and marginalization but also delegitimize the peace process itself, as Palestinians view negotiations as ineffective in dismantling oppressive systems. Agreements that do not address these inequalities are unlikely to succeed in transforming the conflict.

2.1.6 Geopolitical Interference

External actors have consistently shaped the trajectory of peace efforts, often in ways that undermine neutrality. The United States, the primary mediator in most negotiations, has frequently been criticized for bias toward Israel, particularly in prioritizing Israeli security over Palestinian rights (Kurtzer, 2008). This perception

of partiality erodes the legitimacy of U.S.-led initiatives. At the same time, regional powers such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey have used the conflict to advance their own strategic interests, fueling polarization rather than fostering resolution. Such geopolitical interference complicates efforts to build trust and achieve genuine compromise.

2.1.7 Internal Political Divisions

Finally, internal political dynamics within both Israeli and Palestinian societies have obstructed resolution. On the Palestinian side, the division between Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza has fragmented representation and weakened the Palestinian negotiating position. On the Israeli side, frequent changes in government and the influence of domestic political considerations particularly the growing strength of right-wing parties supportive of settlement expansion have undermined continuity in negotiations (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010).

2.3 Gap in the Literature

Although there is extensive research on the Israel-Palestine conflict, most studies either focus narrowly on historical narratives or analyze specific peace processes. Few studies systematically examine why resolution efforts failed when evaluated through conflict resolution theories such as Burton's and Galtung's. This research aims to fill that gap by combining historical analysis with theoretical evaluation, thereby providing insights into both the origins of the conflict and the shortcomings of peace strategies.

2.4 Main Argument

This study contends that the persistence of the Israel-Palestine conflict exposes the failure of elite-driven peace negotiations and demonstrates the need for conflict transformation approaches rooted in justice, recognition, and grassroots participation.

Theoretical Framework

3.1 Introduction

This study employs two complementary theories of conflict resolution: John Burton's Human Needs

Theory and Johan Galtung's Conflict Transformation Theory. Both provide a deeper understanding of why the Israel-Palestine conflict has proven so resistant to resolution despite decades of negotiation.

3.2 John Burton's Human Needs Theory

Burton (1990) argues that conflicts persist when fundamental human needs such as identity, recognition, security, and development are denied. Unlike interests, which are negotiable, human needs are non-negotiable. Attempts to resolve conflicts through short-term compromises or political settlements fail if they do not address these basic needs.

In the context of Israel-Palestine, Burton's theory explains why peace initiatives like the Oslo Accords collapsed. Palestinians' needs for recognition, statehood, and self-determination were sidelined, while Israelis continued to prioritize security and legitimacy. The asymmetry of addressing Israeli security while neglecting Palestinian dignity and rights created agreements that lacked sustainability (Azar, 1990; Burton, 1990).

3.2.1 Johan Galtung's Conflict Transformation Theory

Galtung (1996) distinguishes between direct violence (physical harm), structural violence (social and political inequalities that deny basic rights), and cultural violence (beliefs and narratives that justify oppression). According to Galtung, sustainable peace requires transforming these structures rather than merely managing hostilities. In Israel-Palestine, structural violence is evident in the occupation, settlement expansion, unequal access to resources, and restrictions on mobility in the West Bank and Gaza. Cultural violence is reflected in narratives that dehumanize the "other," sustaining cycles of fear and mistrust (Bar-Tal, 2013). Galtung's approach emphasizes not only ending violence but also creating equitable structures that address historical grievances and allow for coexistence.

Research Method

This research employs a qualitative case study method, focusing on the Israel–Palestine conflict as a single, in-depth case of protracted conflict. The case study method is appropriate because it allows exploration of complex historical, political, and social processes in their real-world context (Yin, 2014). The study is based on secondary data drawn from a range of credible sources, including scholarly literature such as books and peer-reviewed articles, reports issued by international organizations like the United Nations, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International, as well as official documents from major peace initiatives such as Camp David, Oslo, and the Roadmap for Peace. In addition, policy papers and analyses produced by leading think tanks are incorporated to provide diverse perspectives. The analysis focuses on identifying patterns and themes that directly address the core research questions: the historical origins of the Israel–Palestine conflict, the strategies pursued to resolve it, and the underlying reasons for the repeated failure of these efforts.

A purposive sampling approach is employed to select key peace initiatives that mark significant turning points in the history of conflict resolution efforts between Israelis and Palestinians. These include the Camp David Accords of 1978, which represented the first major attempt at Arab–Israeli peace; the Oslo Accords of 1993–1995, which established the Palestinian Authority and generated international optimism; the Roadmap for Peace of 2003, which sought to advance a two-state solution with international support; the Annapolis Conference of 2007, regarded as the last major negotiation attempt before the escalation of the Gaza wars; and the Abraham Accords of 2020, which normalized Israel’s relations with several Arab states but largely sidelined Palestinian concerns. Together, these cases provide rich material for analyzing both the strategies employed and the reasons for their failure, particularly when examined through the theoretical lenses of Burton’s human needs approach and Galtung’s conflict transformation framework.

Data Analysis / Results**4.1 Findings of the Research**

This section analyzes the Israel–Palestine conflict by addressing the three core research questions: origins of the conflict, strategies attempted, and reasons for failure. The analysis draws on secondary sources and is framed within John Burton’s Human Needs Theory and Johan Galtung’s Conflict Transformation approach.

4.1.1 Origins of the Israel–Palestine Conflict

The conflict originates from overlapping nationalist aspirations and competing claims to the same land. Zionist immigration to Palestine during the late Ottoman and British Mandate periods, coupled with the Balfour Declaration (1917), laid the groundwork for Jewish–Arab tensions (Khalidi, 1997). The 1947 UN Partition Plan (Resolution 181) sought to divide the territory but was rejected by Arab leaders, sparking the 1948 Arab–Israeli War. The war led to the creation of Israel and the mass displacement of over 700,000 Palestinians a central grievance Palestinians continue to identify as the Nakba (Morris, 2001; Pappé, 2006).

Subsequent wars, particularly the Six-Day War of 1967, expanded Israeli control over the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem, intensifying Palestinian demands for self-determination (Smith, 2010). From Burton’s perspective, the persistence of the conflict reflects the denial of Palestinians’ non-negotiable human needs sovereignty, recognition, and identity while Israelis continue to seek security and legitimacy in a hostile regional environment.

4.1.2 Strategies to Resolve the Conflict

Several peace initiatives have been attempted:

- Camp David Accords (1978): Brokered peace between Israel and Egypt but largely ignored Palestinian demands (Quandt, 2005).
- Oslo Accords (1993–1995): Established the Palestinian Authority and set a framework for gradual peace, but left critical issues unresolved, including refugees, Jerusalem, and settlements (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010).
- Roadmap for Peace (2003): Backed by the U.S., EU, Russia, and UN, it outlined steps

toward a two-state solution but faltered due to violence and non-compliance (Shlaim, 2014).

- Annapolis Conference (2007): Reinitiated dialogue but collapsed amid political instability and lack of trust.
- Abraham Accords (2020): Normalized relations between Israel and Arab states such as the UAE and Bahrain, but sidelined Palestinians (Lustick, 2021).
- UN General Assembly Resolutions (2024): Adopted three resolutions reaffirming that a two-state solution remains the only path to lasting peace, while urging ceasefire and humanitarian aid in Gaza.
- Gaza Peace Plan (2025): A multilateral agreement signed in October 2025 between Israel and Hamas, mediated by the U.S., Qatar, Turkey, and Egypt, aiming to end the Gaza war, resolve hostage crises, and reconstruct Gaza.

These strategies highlight a recurring pattern: while some produced temporary progress, none resolved the core issues borders, refugees, Jerusalem, settlements, and sovereignty.

4.1.3 Barriers to Successful Conflict Resolution

a. Asymmetry of Power

Negotiations have consistently been shaped by Israel's stronger military, political, and economic position, leaving Palestinians with little leverage (Finkelstein, 2003). This imbalance undermined the fairness of agreements and reinforced Palestinian mistrust.

b. Neglected Human Needs

Burton's Human Needs Theory explains the repeated failures: agreements such as Oslo addressed political arrangements but not Palestinians' fundamental needs for recognition, statehood, and justice. Without meeting these needs, peace efforts were inherently unstable (Burton, 1990).

c. Structural Violence

Galtung's theory highlights the structural inequalities embedded in the occupation: restricted movement, settlement expansion, and unequal access to resources (Galtung, 1996).

These systemic injustices perpetuated resentment and made peace accords unsustainable.

d. Internal Political Divisions

The split between Fatah (West Bank) and Hamas (Gaza) fractured Palestinian representation, weakening their ability to negotiate collectively (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010). Meanwhile, frequent changes in Israeli governments produced shifting priorities and inconsistent commitments to peace.

e. Geopolitical Interference

External actors have shaped outcomes, often undermining neutrality. The U.S. has been criticized for favoring Israeli security concerns over Palestinian rights (Kurtzer, 2008), while regional actors such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey have instrumentalized the conflict for their own agendas.

f. Lack of Conflict Transformation

Most peace processes focused on conflict management (ceasefires, territorial compromises) rather than transforming the underlying structures of violence. Galtung's framework suggests that without addressing historical grievances, cultural narratives, and structural inequalities, peace will remain elusive.

4.2 Synthesis of Findings

The findings reveal that the Israel-Palestine conflict is deeply rooted in historical grievances tied to identity, displacement, and sovereignty. Repeated peace strategies have failed largely because they prioritized short-term political settlements rather than pursuing long-term transformation. As a result, fundamental issues such as the recognition of Palestinian statehood, the resolution of the refugee crisis, equitable access to resources, and the contested status of Jerusalem remain unresolved. Applying Burton's human needs theory and Galtung's conflict transformation framework, the study demonstrates that sustainable peace requires more than elite-driven negotiations; it demands addressing non-negotiable human needs and

dismantling the structural forms of violence that perpetuate inequality.

Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The Israel-Palestine conflict stands as one of the most enduring and complex disputes in modern international relations. Rooted in competing nationalist claims, historical grievances, and religious symbolism, the conflict has persisted for over seven decades despite repeated peace efforts. This study set out to address three central questions: the origins of the conflict, the strategies employed for its resolution, and the reasons for their repeated failures.

The analysis shows that the conflict's origins lie in the denial of basic human needs sovereignty, recognition, and identity for Palestinians, alongside security and legitimacy for Israelis. Numerous peace efforts, including the Camp David Accords, Oslo Accords, and the Roadmap for Peace, sought to address the dispute but failed to resolve the underlying issues. The application of John Burton's Human Needs Theory and Johan Galtung's Conflict Transformation approach reveals that these failures stem from agreements that prioritized political settlements while ignoring fundamental human needs and structural inequalities.

The findings confirm that the persistence of the conflict is not due to a lack of peace initiatives, but rather to their inability to address power asymmetries, systemic injustices, and cultural narratives of mistrust. Sustainable peace requires more than conflict management it requires conflict transformation.

5.2 Recommendations

5.2.1 Adopt Human Needs-Centered Approaches

Future peace efforts must recognize that identity, recognition, and sovereignty are non-negotiable needs for Palestinians, just as security and legitimacy are for Israelis. Peace frameworks should explicitly address these needs rather than postponing them.

5.2.2 Transform Structural Inequalities

Efforts must move beyond ceasefires and territorial compromises to dismantle structural violence, including settlement expansion, resource disparities, and mobility restrictions. Without equity and justice, peace agreements will remain unstable.

5.2.3 Inclusive Negotiations

Peace processes should involve not only political elites but also civil society actors, grassroots organizations, and marginalized groups. Broader participation can build legitimacy and trust that elite-driven processes lack.

5.2.4 International Mediation with Neutrality

The United States and other global powers should adopt a more balanced approach, while regional organizations such as the Arab League or even multilateral coalitions could play a stronger mediating role. Neutrality and credibility are essential for trust.

5.2.5 Reconciliation and Cultural Transformation

Alongside political negotiations, initiatives promoting dialogue, mutual recognition, and reconciliation are crucial. Breaking down cultural narratives that demonize the "other" can lay the foundation for coexistence, as emphasized by Galtung's cultural violence framework.

5.2.6 Long-Term Conflict Transformation

Short-term agreements should be complemented by long-term strategies that foster coexistence through education, joint economic projects, and shared governance mechanisms. Such measures can create interdependence and weaken hostility over time.

5.3 Final Reflection

The Israel-Palestine conflict demonstrates the limits of traditional diplomacy when human needs and structural inequalities are overlooked. By applying Burton's and Galtung's frameworks, this study highlights the necessity of moving from conflict management to conflict transformation. Sustainable peace will only be possible when both

peoples see their fundamental needs met, their dignity respected, and their narratives recognized.

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