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Mideast Peace Process

Since ICOF's last reports on the Mideast peace process in March 2001 and September 2002, hopes for peace rose when, after over two years of violence, Israel and the Palestinians began negotiating a "road map" for peace and Palestinian militant groups agreed to a temporary cease-fire. [Click here for the latest developments concerning this controversial issue.](#)

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Since 1993, Israel and its Arab neighbors have been engaged in historic talks aimed at achieving peace in the Middle East and ending decades of political turmoil, occupation, terrorism and war. In some respects, peace has appeared within closer reach in the 1990s than at any time since Israel was founded more than 50 years ago. Yet age-old animosities between Israelis and Arabs, stoked by decades of hostility and violence, continue to pose enormous obstacles and breed distrust that threatens to sink prospects for peace.

At its heart, the conflict in the Middle East is similar to conflicts that have been waged throughout much of history; two peoples are fighting over land that each claims as its own. In November 1947, as part of a United Nations proposal, the state of Israel was established in Palestine the following year as a homeland for Jews. The creation of Israel marked a victory for Jews, many of whom had been emigrating to Palestine since the late 19th century.

However, the settlement of Palestine by Jews and the creation of Israel displaced many Arabs living in the region who also regarded it as their homeland. The people who were living in Palestine have allied with Israel's Arab neighbors during the past five decades to fight Israel and reclaim the land. Israel, which is backed by the U.S., has proven to be a formidable foe, however. In successive wars between Israel and Arab countries, Israel has been able to seize land from its Arab neighbors. Those lands--the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), southern Lebanon, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights--have been occupied by Israel ever since.

More than five million people live in Israel, and another 2.5 million Palestinian Arabs live in the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. ("Occupied territories" is often used to refer only to the West Bank and Gaza Strip.) Following the wars, the U.N. adopted resolution 242, the so-called land for peace resolution. Under the resolution, which was approved by both Israel and Arab states, Arabs agreed to recognize Israel in return for Israel's promise to withdraw from the occupied territories.



Reuters/Gary Hershorn

President Clinton brings Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO leader Yasir Arafat together for an historic handshake after signing the Israeli-PLO peace accord at the White House on September 13, 1993.



Jeremy Eagle

Resolution 242 forms the backdrop of the ongoing Mideast peace negotiations. One of the chief goals of the negotiations is the formation of a sovereign Palestinian region in the West Bank and Gaza. Israel has begun to withdraw gradually from the territories and to transfer authority to the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), a self-governing body headed by Yasir Arafat.

In return for control of the land, Arafat and the PNA have renounced terrorism, long a tactic of Palestinian resistance. Among Palestinians, however, Arafat is losing his influence, a development that has hampered his ability to curb terrorism waged by extremist Palestinian groups.



Reuters/Ron Kedem

July 30, 1997. Israeli civilians help evacuate the injured following two suicide bombings of a crowded outdoor market in West Jerusalem. At least 15 people, including the bombers themselves, were killed in the blasts. The military wing of Hamas, a militant Palestinian Islamic organization, claimed responsibility for the attacks.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, meanwhile, has cited Palestinian terrorism as proof that Arafat and his followers are not upholding their part of the land for peace bargain. Furthermore, many Jews simply do not trust Arafat, whom they regard as a terrorist and liar. Despite his public renunciation of violence, Arafat has failed to show that he is committed to stamping out terrorism and fulfilling obligations under the peace accords, they say.

At the same time, Netanyahu has lost the confidence of his own government. Netanyahu's own right-wing coalition, which is dominated by parties supportive of Israel's territorial expansion, has accused the prime minister of risking Israeli security by sacrificing too much land to Palestinians. U.S. officials, the European community and politicians from the Israeli left, on the other hand, have accused Netanyahu of scuttling the peace process by moving too slowly and making unfair demands on Palestinians.

Disputes over Netanyahu's handling of the peace process led the Israeli Knesset (parliament) to dissolve his government in December 1998. The future of the peace process, which has been in a state of limbo ever since, now hinges on the outcome of new elections, scheduled for May 1999.

[See 1999 [Election Campaign Shakes Up Israeli Politics](#)]

The Founding of Israel

Although Israel was established in 1948, the goal to create a Jewish state in Palestine originated much earlier, with the Zionist movement. Founded by Theodor Herzl in Basel, Switzerland in 1897, the Zionist movement encouraged Jews to resettle in the "promised land" of Palestine, the birthplace of Judaism. Although Palestine had been the site of the Israelite Kingdom in the 12th century B.C., Jews had been expelled from the land during successive control of Palestine by foreign empires, including the Roman and Ottoman Turk empires. In a dispersal known as the diaspora, they moved to other countries in the Middle East, Europe and Africa.

The goal of early Zionists was to reunite Jews and create a nation where they could maintain their cultural and religious identity. As nationalism and anti-Semitism intensified in Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Zionism became increasingly attractive to Jews, who began to move to Palestine in greater numbers.

In 1918, with the help of Arabs and resettled Jews living in Palestine, Great Britain was able to seize control of the territory from the Ottoman Turks. To secure the help of Arabs during the war, the British promised them independence. Yet to win the support of Jews, the British made contradictory promises to make a Jewish "national home" in Palestine. The promise to Jews was enshrined in the Balfour Declaration, issued in 1917.

The contradictory promises made by Britain inevitably led to a showdown between Arabs and Jews, both of whom used violence to defend their claims to the land. Near the end of the 19th century, close to 95% of the people living in Palestine were Arab Palestinians, and they felt that Britain had betrayed them by promising their land to a third party. Zionist Jews, meanwhile, felt that they had finally reclaimed a legal right to their ancestral lands after thousands of years in exile. By 1945, Jews had increased their population in Palestine to 600,000, from just 12,000 in 1845.



Archive Photos

An "exodus" Jewish liberty ship arrives in Haifa, Israel. July 18, 1948.



Archive Photos
Arab soldiers at a training camp near Amman in northern Trans-Jordan. May 15, 1948

The conflict between Arabs and Jews cooled during World War II. After the war, revelations of the horrors perpetrated by Nazi Germany during the Holocaust created worldwide sympathy for Jews and Zionism. Some 100,000 Jews, including thousands of Jewish survivors of the Nazi death camps, flocked to Palestine following the war.

The massive influx of Jewish immigrants rekindled the conflict between Arabs and Jews, and bouts of violence and terrorism resumed. Unable to reconcile their conflicting promises to Jews and Arabs, the British asked the U.N. to find a solution to the conflict. In 1947, the U.N. unveiled a plan that called for a partitioning of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states. Jews accepted the plan, but Arabs opposed it.

Despite Arab opposition, the Jewish state of Israel declared its independence on May 14, 1948. Palestinian forces subsequently joined Arab armies already fighting Israeli settlers. The ensuing Arab-Israeli war ended with a decisive victory for Israel, which was able to capture land that had previously been set aside for the Palestinians. Consequently, when armistice lines were drawn between Israel and its Arab neighbors in 1948-49, Palestinians were left without a country.

War and First Steps Toward Peace

During the next three decades, Israel grew stronger militarily and its population grew fivefold, largely due to Jewish immigration. In June 1967, Israel launched what it called a preemptive strike against Egypt, Jordan and Syria, which had each been amassing troops along the Israeli border. The war ended six days later, with Israel scoring a quick victory.

As a result of the so-called Six-Day War, Israel amassed large swaths of land from its Arab neighbors. From Egypt, Israel took the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip; from Jordan, it took the West Bank, including Arab East Jerusalem; and from Syria, it took the Golan Heights. In seizing those regions, Israel increased its Arab population by 1.5 million people.

After the war, the U.N. Security Council passed resolution 242, which has remained the keystone of diplomatic peace efforts in the Israeli-Arab conflict. The resolution calls for the "withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict" and requires all states in the area to recognize the sovereignty and territorial integrity of every other state. The resolution was unanimously adopted but, despite the resolution's emphasis on "the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war," Israel has maintained that the resolution's terms permit it to annex parts of the Palestinian territory seized in 1967. Israel has also insisted on its need to retain a presence in the occupied territories for security reasons.



Reuters/Jim Hollander/Archive Photos
Palestinian youths on the West Bank hurl rocks at Israeli soldiers during a February 1988 demonstration.

Even then, however, Israel's political parties were sharply divided over how to deal with the occupied territories. Many members of the nation's Labor Party favored withdrawal from the territories, at least from those areas that were not considered essential for Israel's security. Yet the country's Likud bloc opposed any land concessions to Arabs. Likud is composed of many orthodox religious groups who claim that Jews have a historical and biblical right to "Greater Israel," an area covering all of Palestine, including the West Bank.

In October 1973, Egypt and Syria attacked Israel in an attempt to reclaim the land they had lost six years earlier. Israel gained territory in the war, but suffered large casualties. In a bid to prevent further bloodshed, the U.S. helped broker an arrangement under which Israel agreed to disengage part of its military from the Sinai in 1974.

During the next decade, Israel's continued rule over the occupied territories fueled Arab nationalism and triggered an upsurge in violence. Unable to match Israel's military prowess in face-to-face combat, many Arabs turned to guerrilla warfare and terrorism instead. The most brazen acts of terrorism were committed by military units, or cells, of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), a political body formed in 1964 to represent the displaced Palestinian people.

The PLO bombed Israeli marketplaces, bus stations and airports. Despite worldwide condemnation for its use of terrorism, the PLO gained international recognition, including observer status at the U.N. in 1974, as the legitimate representative of Palestinians.

Acknowledging the enormous strains that constant fighting placed on their respective communities, Arabs and Israelis began to make overtures toward peace in the late 1970s. A breakthrough occurred in 1979, when President Jimmy Carter (D) sponsored

talks between Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachim Begin at Camp David, Md. Under the Camp David peace accords, Israel and Egypt agreed to end their 30 years of conflict and Israel agreed to withdraw fully from the Sinai.

Oslo: A Turning Point

One persistent obstacle to peace in the Middle East was the refusal of the PLO and Israel to recognize one another. In particular, right-wing Israelis, who dominated Israeli politics in the 1970s and 1980s, considered the PLO a terrorist organization bent on decimating Israel at any cost. Many said that Israelis' views were not without merit, given the PLO's long history of terrorism. In its charter, the PLO not only denied Israel's right to exist but explicitly stated its goal to destroy the Jewish nation.

The standoff between Palestinians and Israel began to break in 1988, when the PLO, headed by Arafat, recognized Israel and renounced terrorism. Few Israelis trusted the PLO's move, however. Indeed, 1987 had marked the beginning of the *intifada*, or uprising, in the occupied territories. The *intifada*, which lasted until 1993, was marked by Arab-led demonstrations, strikes and rock-throwing attacks on Israelis. Israeli soldiers' often brutal response to such demonstrations repeatedly drew condemnation from the U.S. and U.N.



Reuters/Ahmed Jadallah

Yassir Arafat at the opening of a Palestinian mill complex near Gosh Gatif in the Gaza Strip. June 7, 1996.

Nevertheless, Arabs and Israelis slowly edged closer to peace on the diplomatic front. In 1991, representatives from Israel and neighboring Arab states held the first-ever comprehensive peace talks between their countries. While Israel made the exclusion of the PLO a condition for its participation at the peace talks, Israeli officials did agree to meet with other Palestinian representatives. After 10 rounds of talks in Washington, D.C., however, the parties were deadlocked, and the peace process teetered on the brink of collapse.

Unknown to the parties in Washington, D.C., secret face-to-face negotiations were also taking place in Oslo, Norway between the PLO and high-level officials in the Israeli government. The extraordinary talks between the bitter enemies resulted in an unprecedented peace accord that was publicly revealed in August 1993. The next month, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, leader of Israel's Labor Party, and Arafat met in Washington, D.C. to sign the pact. For their efforts, they shared the Nobel Peace Prize the following year.

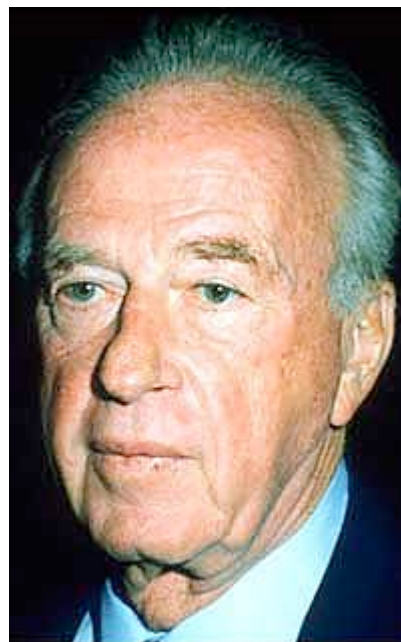
The so-called Oslo accords, which are based on fulfilling U.N. resolution 242, commits Israel to withdraw gradually from the Gaza Strip and West Bank under terms to be finalized by successive rounds of talks. In 1994, the PNA was established as a self-ruling body with power to govern the ceded territories.

Implementation of the Oslo accords has been hobbled by various Palestinian and Israeli groups that remain fiercely opposed to the land for peace deal, however. Extremist Palestinian groups, most notably Hamas, have repudiated Arafat's compromises with Israel and have repeatedly bombed Israeli targets with the hope of derailing the peace process. Many right-wing and orthodox Jews also oppose the accord, which they fear will jeopardize Israel's security. Extremist Jews have also turned to violence; in November 1995, Rabin was assassinated by Yigal Amir, a right-wing Jew opposed to the peace process.

Rabin's successor, Shimon Peres, had trouble keeping the peace plan on track as increased terrorist violence, mostly perpetrated by Hamas, prompted a backlash against the accords within Israel. In the May 1996 elections, Israelis ousted Peres's Labor government and elected Netanyahu of the right-wing Likud bloc.

Although Netanyahu was associated with the Greater Israel goals of his right-wing supporters, he appeared willing at first to accept the framework for peace hammered out by his predecessors. Relations between Arafat and Netanyahu, however, have been rocky. Peace talks sputtered to a halt in February 1997, when Netanyahu's government announced the construction of a vast new Jewish settlement in traditionally Arab East Jerusalem. The move, which Palestinians regarded as a violation of the peace accords, precipitated a 19-month deadlock in peace negotiations.

Prodded by U.S. President Clinton (D) to renew talks, Netanyahu and Arafat met in October 1998 at the Wye River Conference Center in Maryland. There they signed an agreement known as the Wye Memorandum. Under the agreement, Israel is obligated to withdraw from an additional 13.1% of the West Bank. Also as part of the accord, the PNA made assurances that it would crack down on terrorism and the PLO reaffirmed the nullification of all articles in its charter calling for the destruction of Israel. [See 1999 Issues and Controversies: [Key Provisions of the Wye Accord](#)]



Archive Photos/Laurence Agron
Yitzhak Rabin

Wye Renews Old Debate

Netanyahu's signing of the Wye agreement rekindled debate over the current approach of offering land to Palestinians in the hopes of securing peace in the Middle East. Critics of the Oslo and Wye accords say that accommodating Palestinians by sacrificing the occupied territories will do nothing to stem violence between Arabs and Israelis. They particularly distrust Arafat, who they contend has repeatedly failed to suppress extremist Palestinians who they say want to destroy Israel.



Reuters/Jim Hollander
Benjamin Netanyahu greets Likud supporters after receiving news of the final vote count, giving him victory. May 31, 1996.

Israelis who oppose the peace accords cite both religious and strategic reasons for not wanting to turn over the occupied territories to Arabs. Many ultra-Orthodox Jews believe that they have a biblical right to the entire land of Palestine. Furthermore, many Israelis are fiercely opposed to sharing Jerusalem, the Israeli capital and holiest city to Jews, with Palestinians. Jerusalem was made the capital of ancient Israel by David, the Israelite King who is one of the core figures of the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament). When Israel captured East Jerusalem from Jordan in 1967, it declared the city the "eternal and undivided" capital of Israel.

Some opponents of the accords say that Israel's success in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, which many Jews call the War of Independence, and its triumph in the 1967 war affirmed Israel's right to the land. Many right-leaning Israelis argue that, despite their exile from the region thousands of years ago, Jews never lost the rights to those ancestral lands. Even many secular Israelis are concerned that Palestinian control of the West Bank could restrict access to places, such as Hebron and East Jerusalem, that are culturally and historically important to the Jewish heritage.

Others argue that turning over the West Bank and Gaza to Palestinians would threaten Israel's security and jeopardize the safety of Jewish settlers in the occupied territories. There are some 150,000 Israeli settlers living within the borders of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and many settlers are concerned that the formation of a Palestinian state would place them in constant conflict with their

Palestinian neighbors.

Furthermore, some analysts predict that the possible formation of a Palestinian state in the occupied territories could increase the likelihood of war. Rather than end their attempt to destroy Israel, Palestinians may intensify their campaign against Israelis once

they gain a more secure foothold in the region, warns Norman Podhoretz, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute. Podhoretz argues that territorial concessions to Palestinians would give Arabs a strategic base to build up an army and deploy weapons against Israel.

Israelis Blame Palestinians

Many people who oppose or remain skeptical of the peace accords say that Palestinians have so far failed to do enough to stem terrorist violence as they had promised under the agreements. Far from ushering in peace, the Oslo and Wye accords have simply brought increased bloodshed, says Mortimer Zuckerman, editor in chief of *U.S. News & World Report*. "Since the Oslo 'peace process' began five years ago, more than 280 Israelis have been murdered...in over 1,000 terrorist attacks--a worse death toll than in the 15 years before a peace agreement was adopted," he notes. Zuckerman calls Arafat's pledges of peace a "sham."

Indeed, Arafat's seemingly contradictory comments on terrorism have stoked fears among Israelis that his true motives are not directed at peace. As he had on many prior occasions, Arafat pledged in October 1998, "We will never leave the peace process, and we will never go back to violence and confrontation." Less than a month later, however, Arafat affirmed his intention to declare Jerusalem, the third-holiest city to Moslems, the capital of a new independent Palestinian state and warned that a new uprising against Israel may be imminent. "Our guns are ready," he said. "We will take them up if they try to stop us from praying in Jerusalem."

Others say that providing land to the Palestinians would effectively reward terrorists. Giving land to Palestinians would only show extremist Palestinians that their terrorist campaign succeeded, and it would encourage them to continue using violence to achieve their goals, critics say.

Arafat's opponents say that he has violated the Oslo and Wye accords by, among other things, refusing to reduce the PNA police force. Under the terms of the Oslo accord, the PNA is allowed a civilian police force of no more than 30,000 members. But critics say that Arafat's police force has become a virtual army of 50,000 troops who are armed with weapons that were banned by the Wye and Oslo accords.

Even those who favor the peace agreement say that Arafat's governance of the PNA has been incompetent and abusive. "The state Arafat is building is both corrupt and relatively brutal," writes Nicholas Goldberg in the *Nation* (November 23, 1998). Goldberg, a former Middle East correspondent for *Newsday*, adds, "Torture is common, deaths in custody are not infrequent, bribery has become a way of life and free speech, if it is critical of Arafat, is not tolerated."

Palestinians Seek Sovereignty

Palestinians' complaints about Israel are remarkably similar to Israel's complaints about the Palestinians; the PNA says that Palestinians have historical and legal rights to the land, that Israel has repeatedly broken promises made in the Oslo and Wye accords and cannot be trusted, and that Israel is guilty of a decades-long campaign of terror and economic crime against Palestinians.

Palestinians have long argued that Israel's claim to the occupied territories is illegitimate and that its continued occupation of the lands seized in 1967 mark a violation of international law. More than one million Arabs but hardly any Jews were living in Gaza and the West Bank when Israel seized the territories and imposed its control, they point out. By returning those lands to Palestinians, the Oslo accords would begin to rectify Israel's wrongs against Palestinians and help ease tensions between Arabs and Jews, they say.

Palestinians accuse Israel's government of repeatedly trying to delay or kill the peace process by violating the terms of the Oslo and Wye accords. The most blatant example, they say, is Israel's insistence on building new settlements in the West Bank. Under the Oslo accords, Israel and the PNA are prohibited from taking any unilateral action in the occupied territories. Israel violated that provision when it began in March 1997 to build a 6,500-unit settlement in historically Arab East Jerusalem.

Some Palestinian analysts say that Israel is building settlements in areas that would strategically cut off their communities from one another in the West Bank and foil their goal of creating a territorially unified Palestinian state. The settlements have also been condemned by many foreign nations as an inflammatory affront to the peace process. In March 1997, a total of 130 member nations of the U.N. approved a nonbinding resolution calling Israel's settlement plans "illegal and a major obstacle to peace."

Israel was also faulted for jeopardizing the peace process in September 1997, when it authorized an attempted assassination against Khaled Meshal, the Jordan-based political leader of Hamas. The assassination attempt, carried out by operatives of Israel's spy agency Mossad, provoked international outrage. Top Israeli officials said that Netanyahu had admitted to authorizing the assassination attempt. Palestinian officials said that the episode confirmed their belief that Netanyahu cannot be trusted.

Many Palestinians hope that a nation of their own would mean an end to what they say has been decades of discrimination and brutal suppression under Israeli rule. Palestinians, they say, are the victims of torture, discriminatory housing policies and arbitrary arrest by Israelis. Furthermore, they contend that Israel has adopted policies aimed at keeping them downtrodden and poor. Gaza,

for instance, is one of the most impoverished and densely populated stretches of land in the world, even though Israel overall is one of the wealthiest nations in the Middle East.

Throughout the peace process, Netanyahu has intermittently imposed harsh economic sanctions and border controls on West Bank and Gaza. When border controls are imposed, Palestinians are prohibited from leaving the territory. As a result, the thousands of Palestinians who work outside the territories have been repeatedly prevented from reaching their jobs. Netanyahu has defended the sanctions as necessary security responses to terrorist activity. But Palestinians say the sanctions are yet further examples of attempts by the Israeli government to undermine the Oslo accords by "fabricating obstacles" to peace, in the words of Arafat.

Palestinian opponents of the accords, including groups such as Hamas, maintain that Israel and the Palestinians should not negotiate as long as Israel holds so much power over Palestinians in the occupied territories. No treaty would be valid as long as it is made while Palestinians are under the duress of military occupation by Israel, they say. Until Israel completely and unconditionally withdraws from the territory, Palestinians ought to refuse to negotiate and continue their armed resistance against Israel, they contend.

Nevertheless, the peace accords are favored by many Palestinian and Israeli groups, who say that a "two-state" solution could bring a long awaited peace to the region. They say that the emergence of a Palestinian state in the occupied territories could dilute support for Hamas and significantly reduce terrorism. Many Palestinians have turned to violence and terrorism because they have lacked the political and economic power needed to improve their situation while living under Israeli control, according to backers of the accord. By gaining political independence and the opportunity to direct their own economic agenda, Palestinians will no longer need to use terrorism to effect change, they say.

Peace Still Uncertain

When Israel's Knesset voted to dissolve Netanyahu's government, further implementation of the Wye accords was effectively halted, and a new election was subsequently scheduled for May 1999. Although Netanyahu continues to draw strong popular support, his leadership has been vilified as inconsistent by his political rivals and even by former allies. Political divisions within the Likud bloc and a growing political movement to form a centrist coalition have set the stage for what could be a radical realignment in Israeli leadership.

Even before the Knesset vote, a new impasse had stalled the implementation of the Wye accords. As part of a new set of preconditions on the accords, Netanyahu said that Israel would not comply with the Wye agreement unless the PLO abandoned its stated intention to declare a Palestinian state on May 4, 1999. Throughout the past year, Arafat has repeatedly stated that the PLO would declare statehood on that date, which is when the Oslo accords were scheduled to expire and final-status talks on PNA control of the occupied territories were to end.

Clinton and numerous foreign diplomats have at least indirectly urged Arafat to refrain from unilaterally declaring statehood on May 4. They say that Arafat should avoid any inflammatory actions that could further worsen relations between Israel and the PNA. Indeed, some analysts worry that the conflicts that have been simmering between Israel and the PNA over the Wye accords could boil over into full-fledged war if Arafat declares Palestinian statehood.

However, Arafat's support among Palestinians is flagging, and a declaration of statehood, even if merely symbolic, may give him the backing he needs to maintain his authority. Many Palestinians are exasperated by the slow-moving peace process. They expected that, under the terms of the Oslo accords, Israel would have withdrawn from most of the occupied territories by now. Even with the full implementation of the Wye accords, however, the PNA will control only 40% of the territories.

In response, Israelis say that Palestinians are to blame if the peace negotiations have not proceeded as quickly as planned. Israel cannot be expected to agree to the "land for peace" accords if Jews continue to be the targets of vicious terrorist attacks and Israel's security is at risk, they say.

If only because Palestinians and Israelis are beginning to negotiate and acknowledge one another's grievances, the Mideast peace process appears to have taken a significant step toward ending decades of conflict. Only time will tell, however, whether the path begun in Oslo in 1993 will indeed lead to peace or whether it will simply worsen age-old animosities and lead to further bloodshed.

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Contact Information

Information on how to contact organizations that are either mentioned in the discussion of the Mideast peace process or can provide additional information on the subject is listed below:

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Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs

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Keywords and Points

For further information about the ongoing debate over the Mideast peace process, search for the following words and terms in electronic databases and other publications:

West Bank
Benjamin Netanyahu
Oslo accords
Yasir Arafat
Wye Memorandum

Mideast Peace Process Update (September 2002)

Since ICOF last covered [the mideast peace process](#) in March 2001, various attempts to reach some kind of settlement between Israelis and Palestinians proved frustrating and difficult as Palestinian suicide attacks provoked Israeli military reprisals in an escalating cycle of violence. Among the key events:

- In April 1999 the PLO announced that it would not make a decision on whether to declare Palestinian statehood until after Israeli elections. In the past year, Arafat had repeatedly vowed to declare statehood on May 4, 1999, when the Oslo accords were scheduled to expire and final status peace talks end. [See 1999 Facts on File [Palestinians Delay Statehood Decision](#)]
- In May 1999, Ehud Barak was elected Israeli Prime Minister in a landslide victory over Netanyahu. The election seemed to popularly ratify the Oslo and Wye accords' land-for-peace structure. Barak quickly seated his coalition government and pledged to comply with the Wye Memorandum and jump-start the flagging peace process. [See 1999 Facts on File [Barak Elected Israel's Prime Minister, Unseating Rightist Netanyahu in Landslide Win](#)]
- In September 1999, Barak and Arafat signed an accord reviving the peace talks at a ceremony in Sharm el-Sheik, Egypt. Their meeting ended a months-long freeze in peace talks. The new agreement set a February 2000 deadline for talks on a permanent peace settlement and provided for Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank under the 1998 Wye accord. The agreement also provided for the release of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails. In compliance with the Sharm el-Sheikh accord, Israel and Palestinian negotiators met later that month, and Israel transferred 7% of the West Bank to partial Palestinian control. Israel that month also released 199 of the 350 prisoners it had pledged to release. Israel released the remaining 151 prisoners the following month. [See 1999 Facts on File: [Leaders Sign Accord Reviving Middle East Peace Process](#); Facts on File [Final Status Peace Talks Begin](#)]
- In October 1999, Palestinian and Israeli negotiators signed an agreement opening a transportation corridor through Israel, connecting the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza strip. Prior to the agreement, Palestinians could not travel through Israel without Israeli permission, which was rarely granted. The so called safe passage route, which was provided for in the Wye accord, officially opened later that month. [See 1999 Facts on File [West Bank-Gaza Corridor To Open](#); [Middle East Peace Process: News in Brief](#)]
- In February 2000, the self-rule Palestinian National Authority announced that it had indefinitely suspended peace talks, in large part because of a disagreement over Israel's transfer of territory in the West Bank. Israel in January had failed to meet a deadline to hand over 6.1% of the West Bank, following disagreement over which lands would be transferred. Because of the disagreement, the Israelis and Palestinians fail to meet the February deadline for reaching a final peace agreement. [See 2000 Facts On File [Middle East Peace Process: Palestinians Freeze Peace Talks](#); [Arafat, Barak Agree to Resume Peace Talks](#)]
- In March 2000, Arafat and Barak agreed to extend the deadline for a final peace agreement to May 2000. Israeli and Palestinian negotiating teams resumed talks at Bolling Air Force Base in Washington, DC March 21-28, 2000. Although the first day of the talks coincided with final land transfer mandated under the Sharm el- Sheik accord, the meetings ended with little progress toward a final agreement. [see 2000 Facts On File [Middle East Peace Process: Palestinian-Israeli Talks Resume.](#)]
- In July 2000, three parties in Barak's governing coalition quit the government. The defections, announced after Barak agreed to attend an Israeli-Palestinian peace summit, were in protest of expected concessions to the Palestinians by Barak. The stalemate in final status negotiations had seen Barak's political footing crumble and regional tensions escalate. The defections left Barak with a minority government. [See 2000 Facts On File [Israeli Prime Minister Barak's Coalition Collapses as Middle East Summit Begins in U.S.](#)]
- Also in July 2000, Arafat and Barak attended a summit hosted by Clinton at Camp David, Md. During the summit Barak reportedly accepted a proposal under which Palestinians would be given sovereignty over parts of East Jerusalem. However, the summit ended without a peace agreement, and provided Barak's opponents with further evidence of proposed concessions to the Palestinians. [See 2000 Facts On File [Middle East Peace Summit Concludes Without Agreement](#)]
- In September 2000, Israel's opposition leader, Ariel Sharon, angered Palestinians by visiting a Jerusalem shrine sacred to Jews and Muslims. The visit sparked months of armed conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians that left hundreds dead and thousands wounded. Consequently, Barak spent the final months of 2000 focused largely on securing a cease-fire to this latest conflagration. Those efforts proved fruitless and led Barak to abandon the peace process, contending that Arafat had not done enough to end the violence. [See 2000 Facts On File [Palestinian-Israeli Violence Erupts, Killing Nearly 70](#); [Sharon Visit to Holy Site Sparks Clashes](#)]
- Also in September 2000, the PLO again deferred declaring statehood, to allow negotiators to make further attempts to reach a peace agreement. The PLO had set the September deadline a year earlier, to coincide with a rescheduled deadline for reaching a final peace agreement. The September deadline had passed without an agreement. The PLO did not set another deadline for declaring statehood, but instead said it would reexamine the issue at a later date. [See 2000 Facts On File [Palestinians Defer Declaration of Statehood](#)]
- In a move suggesting that both Barak and his peace proposals had lost support, Israel elected Sharon Prime Minister in a landslide victory in February 2001. Barak's popularity had plummeted in the wake of his failure to secure a peace agreement and the mounting violence following Sharon's visit to the shrine. Sharon scuttled Barak's peace efforts when he rejected Palestinian demands to resume peace talks where they left off with the outgoing Barak administration. Sharon agreed to be bound only by the signed accords of Oslo, Wye and Sharm el-Sheik. On the other hand, the

Palestinians demanded that Sharon resume the peace process from where Mr. Barak suspended negotiations. Later in February, Barak agreed to join a national unity government with Sharon. [See 2001 Middle East: [Sharon Declares Oslo Accord Dead; Other Developments](#)]

- Meanwhile, Israel has also participated in peace attempts with other countries in the Middle East:
 - In December 1999, Barak met with Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa in Washington, D.C., marking the first direct meeting between Israel and Syria in nearly four years. Israel had suspended peace talks with Syria in 1996, in the wake of a series of suicide bombings by Islamic militants that killed scores of Israelis. During the two days of talks, the leaders lay the groundwork for future negotiations. [See 1999 Facts On File [Israel, Syria Open Peace Talks After Four-Year Halt](#)]
 - In January 2000, Israeli and Syrian negotiators met in Sheperdstown, W. Va, in the first substantive round of peace negotiations since Israel had frozen relations four years earlier. However, the talks broke down when negotiators clashed over the return of the Golan Heights to Syria. Israel had seized the Golan Heights from Syria in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Syria insisted that Israel withdraw to the pre-1967 borders. [See 2000 Facts On File [Israeli, Syrian Peace Negotiators Meet in the U.S.](#)]
 - In March 2000, the Israeli cabinet approved a resolution pledging that Israel would withdraw its troops from southern Lebanon. Barak had pledged to withdraw from Lebanon since his election, but the March resolution marked the first time that the Israeli government officially endorsed his pledge. Israel had occupied a strip of land in southern Lebanon, where it maintained a so-called security zone, for 22 years. Israel said it preferred to withdraw from Lebanon in conjunction with a peace agreement with Syria, which held overriding power over the country. However, Israel said it would withdraw whether or not an agreement with Syria was reached. [See 2000 Facts On File [Israeli Cabinet Approves Lebanon Pullout](#)]
 - In May 2000, Israel completed its withdrawal from Lebanon, six weeks ahead of a July deadline set by Israel. The early withdrawal was prompted by the sudden retreat and collapse of the South Lebanon Army (SLA), Israel's proxy militia in southern Lebanon. The Shiite Muslim guerilla group Hizballah had stepped up its attacks against Israel and the SLA as the July deadline approached. [See 2000 Facts On File [Israel Withdraws from Lebanon, Ending Its 22-Year Occupation](#)]
- U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell announced on June 28, 2001, that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat had approved a timeline for bringing a halt to the violence and resuming peace talks. Powell had met separately with the two men during a trip to the Middle East to discuss the future of a fragile cease-fire. The plan would require an initial period of seven days during which no violence occurred, followed by a six-week violence-free cooling-off period. The timeline was based on the recommendations of a panel led by former U.S. Senator George Mitchell (D, Maine). [See 2001 Facts On File: [Arafat, Sharon Back Middle East Cease-Fire Timeline.](#)]
- In what appeared to be encouraging steps toward peace, on September 18, 2001 Arafat instructed his security forces to halt all violence and refrain from shooting at Israeli troops and Sharon ordered the Israeli army to suspend all offensive action against the Palestinians and withdraw from some positions in and around Palestinian-controlled territory. The announcements followed U.S. pressure to halt the violence in the wake of September 11 terrorist attacks on the U.S. because U.S. strategists suggested that the fighting could hamper U.S. efforts to secure the support of Arab and Muslim states for an antiterrorism coalition. In a meeting at the Gaza International Airport a week later, Arafat and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres vowed to move forward with measures to strengthen the cease-fire, although violent clashes were continuing. Within a week of that meeting, at least 27 Palestinians and two Israelis were killed. On September 28, at least six Palestinians were killed, and as many as 80 Palestinians and six Israelis were wounded, as Palestinians marked the first anniversary of the current uprising against Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. On October 2, U.S. President Bush backed the creation of a Palestinian state in a statement that marked the first time that a Republican U.S. president had supported Palestinian statehood. [See 2001 Facts On File: [Israel, Palestinians Declare Cease-fire; Middle East--Arafat, Peres Renew Truce Despite Violence; Other Developments; Middle East--Violence Flares Despite Cease-fire; Other Developments.](#)]
- In a speech at the University of Louisville in Kentucky November 19, 2001, Secretary of State Powell said that the U.S. would increase its efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, although he did not offer a new diplomatic plan or a timeline for a resumption of peace talks. However, he said the U.S. would dispatch high-level envoys to push both sides to implement recommendations for the establishment of a cease-fire and resumption of peace talks. Consequently, on November 27-28, retired Marine Corps General Anthony Zinni and Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs William Burns met with high-ranking Israeli and Palestinian officials as part of Powell's peace initiative. In a security cooperation meeting on December 11, Zinni reached an understanding with both sides that they would refrain from violence for 48 hours. However, after members of the militant Palestinian group killed 10 Israelis in an attack on a bus in the West Bank, on December 13 the Israeli government said it would break off all contact with Yasir Arafat. In response, Palestinian Minister of Information Yasir Abed Rabbo charged that Sharon was planning "a comprehensive war against the Palestinian Authority in order to destroy it." [See 2001 Facts On File: [Middle East--Powell Vows U.S. Push for Mideast Peace; Other Development; Middle East--U.S. Envoys Meet Arafat, Sharon; Other Developments; Israel Severs Relations With Palestinian Leader Arafat; Warplanes Target PNA Facilities.](#)]
- Israel raided Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza Strip March 7-13, 2002, and occupied the West Bank city of Ramallah. On March 13 Palestinian officials ruled out a cease-fire until Israel withdrew. The Israeli offensive came as Palestinian militants launched the latest in a series of attacks on Israeli targets. U.S. President Bush said that

the Israeli military offensive was "not helpful," and suggested that the action went beyond self-defense. His comments came shortly before Zinni returned to Jerusalem on March 14 in an attempt to stop the violence and restart peace talks. It was his third mission in four months. On March 8, Sharon had abandoned his requirement of seven days of total calm as a precondition for the resumption of peace talks, saying, "Negotiations to stop the shooting will be held under fire." Three days later he lifted the travel ban that had confined Arafat to Ramallah since December 2001. Meanwhile, the United Nations Security Council March 12 approved a U.S.-drafted resolution that endorsed the creation of a Palestinian state. It was the first-ever Security Council resolution that explicitly called for a Palestinian state alongside Israel and the first resolution on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that the U.S. had introduced since the outbreak of violence a year and a half earlier. [See 2002 Facts On File: [Middle East Death Toll Mounts as Israel Besieges Refugee Camps and Palestinians Continue Attacks Within Israel.](#)]

- U.S. Vice President Richard Cheney (R) visited 12 nations in the Middle East and Europe March 11-20, 2002, seeking to build Arab support for extending the U.S. campaign against terrorism into Iraq. However, the focus of Cheney's trip shifted from Iraq to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict when many Arab leaders objected to the U.S. emphasis on Iraq, indicating that concentrated U.S. efforts to halt Israeli-Palestinian violence must come first. Toward the end of his trip, Cheney said he would be willing to return to the Middle East and meet with Arafat if he met certain conditions, including publicly calling for a halt to all Palestinian violence and ensuring that his security forces would enforce a cease-fire in Palestinian-controlled areas. [See 2002 Facts On File: [U.S. Vice President Cheney Tours Middle East; Middle East--U.S. Envoy Zinni Visits Israel; Other Developments.](#)]
- On March 29, 2002, Israeli forces assaulted Arafat's compound in Ramallah, as Israel launched a broad military offensive after a Palestinian suicide bomber killed 26 Israelis in Netanya. The bombing was the deadliest attack since the outbreak of Israeli-Palestinian violence in September 2000. On the same day, Prime Minister Sharon declared Arafat an "enemy" of Israel, and three days later he suggested that Arafat could have a "one-way ticket" into exile. On March 30, U.S. President Bush said that he held Arafat personally responsible for the wave of suicide attacks, asserting that Arafat should make greater efforts to end the violence. He added, however, that special envoy Zinni would remain in the region. On March 28, the 22-member Arab League had unanimously backed a peace initiative proposed by Saudi Arabia that offered to normalize relations with Israel in return for Israel's withdrawal from occupied land. The initiative called for a full Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem and Golan Heights. It also said that East Jerusalem would be the capital of Palestine but acknowledged that Jewish neighborhoods would remain under Jewish control. [See 2002 Facts On File: [Israel Storms Palestinian Leader Arafat's Compound and West Bank Cities as Suicide Attacks Kill Nearly 50.](#)]
- On April 17, 2002, U.S. Secretary of State Powell returned to the U.S. from a nine-day tour of the Middle East, after failing in meetings with Sharon and Arafat to reach a cease-fire agreement. Powell also was unable to persuade Israel to commit to a timeline for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Palestinian areas in the West Bank. On April 15, Israel said it would begin withdrawing from Palestinian areas in the West Bank, excluding Ramallah, where Arafat remained confined to his compound; Jenin, where Palestinians alleged that Israel had killed hundreds of civilians in its military offensive; and central Bethlehem, site of an ongoing standoff between Israeli forces and some 200 Palestinian gunmen taking refuge in the Church of the Nativity. In a meeting with Sharon on April 12, Powell reportedly discussed Israel's continuing occupation of the Palestinian areas in the West Bank but did not reach an agreement on a timeline for Israel's withdrawal. Two days later Powell met with Arafat in talks that Powell described as "useful and constructive." The two men reportedly discussed the possibility of calling an international peace conference. [See 2002 Facts On File: [U.S. Secretary of State Powell Ends Middle East Tour Without Cease-fire Deal.](#)]
- Israeli troops and tanks left Ramallah on May 2, 2002, freeing Yasir Arafat after more than a month of confinement in his compound. The pullout was part of a U.S.-brokered deal that also demanded that Palestinians transfer six wanted men to a Palestinian jail where their imprisonment would be supervised by U.S. and British monitors. [See 2002 Facts On File: [Israel Lifts Siege of Palestinian Leader Arafat's Compound.](#)]
- Late on May 7, 2002, Sharon cut short a visit to the U.S. and returned to Israel, after a Palestinian suicide attacker set off a bomb in a club near Tel Aviv, killing himself and 15 others. Sharon's talks with U.S. President Bush had made little progress toward ending the Israeli-Palestinian violence. A week before Sharon's visit, Secretary of State Powell had said that the U.S., Russia, the European Union and the United Nations would sponsor an Israeli-Palestinian peace conference in early summer. Israeli and Palestinian leaders backed the plan, but Sharon rejected participation in any negotiations involving Yasir Arafat. Sharon returned to the U.S. on June 10 and repeated his demand to Bush for a total halt to anti-Israeli violence as a precondition for peace talks. In an interview published on June 12 in the Arabic-language newspaper Al-Hayat, Powell said that the U.S. was considering calling for the establishment of a temporary Palestinian state as a way of advancing Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. [See 2002 Facts On File: [Israeli Prime Minister Sharon Cuts Short U.S. Visit After Palestinian Bomber Kills 15 Near Tel Aviv; Middle East--Mubarak, Sharon Meet With Bush; Other Developments.](#)]
- On June 16, 2002, Israel began construction of a fence that would separate the West Bank from Israel proper. In the first 18-month phase of the project, Israel would build a 71-mile (114-km) fence from Salem Junction, near Jenin in the northern West Bank, to the Palestinian town of Umm el-Fahm, outside Tel Aviv. A second eight-mile fence would also be built near Jerusalem. Two days later, in what was the deadliest attack in Jerusalem since 1996, a Palestinian suicide bomber detonated explosives on a bus, killing himself and at least 19 Israelis. The next day, another Palestinian suicide bomber in Jerusalem killed himself and six Israelis. [See 2002 Facts On File: [Jerusalem Suicide Attacks Kill 25 Israelis;](#)

[Israel Seizes Palestinian Land.](#)]

- In a speech delivered June 24, 2002, Bush demanded that Arafat be replaced before the U.S. would back the creation of a Palestinian state. The call for Arafat's ouster was part of a new U.S. framework for Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts that linked sweeping reforms of the Palestinian Authority (PA) to the creation of a provisional Palestinian state. [See Facts On File: [Bush Backs Creation of Provisional Palestinian State.](#)]
- In the first deadly anti-Israeli attacks since Israeli forces had invaded and occupied Palestinian areas nearly a month earlier, Palestinian militants killed 12 Israelis on July 16-17, 2002. On July 16, at least three Palestinian gunmen ambushed a bus, killing nine Israelis, and the next day two Palestinian suicide bombers launched a joint attack in Tel Aviv, killing themselves and three Israelis. On that same day, representatives from the so-called quartet for Middle East peace--the U.S., Russia, the European Union and the United Nations--met in the U.S. to discuss ways to push peace efforts. The representatives--U.S. Secretary of State Powell, EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana, U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan and Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov--agreed on the goal of Palestinian statehood within three years but disagreed on the steps to reach it. It was the first high-level meeting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since U.S. President Bush had called for Arafat's ouster. [See Facts On File: [Middle East--Palestinian Attacks Kill 12 Israelis; Other Developments.](#)]
- On July 23, 2002, an Israeli fighter jet dropped a one-ton bomb on a residential neighborhood in Gaza City, killing Palestinian militant Salah Shehada and 14 civilians. The same day, the U.S. released a statement criticizing the attack as "heavy-handed," and on the following day the newspaper Yediot Ahronot published the text of a unilateral cease-fire announcement reached by Tanzim, a militia linked to Arafat's Fatah faction, that reportedly had been concluded in Gaza City only 90 minutes before the strike. The announcement promised a halt to "all attacks on innocent men, women, and children who are noncombatants." Because Israeli officials acknowledged that they had been aware of the cease-fire effort, critics accused Israel of deliberately derailing the peace effort. [See 2002 Facts On File: [Israeli Bombing of Crowded Gaza Neighborhood Draws International Condemnation.](#)]
- Three top Palestinian officials met with U.S. officials in Washington, D.C., August 8-10, 2002, to discuss Israeli-Palestinian security issues and humanitarian aid for Palestinians. The officials emphasized, however, that little progress could be made areas unless the U.S. urged Israel to withdraw from Palestinian territory in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Arafat hailed the meetings, calling them "very positive and very important." [See 2002 Facts On File: [Middle East--Top Palestinians Meet With U.S. Officials; Other Developments.](#)]

Mideast Peace Process Update (August 2003)

Since ICOF's last update on [the Mideast peace process](#) in September 2002, hopes for peace rose when, after over two years of violence, Israel and the Palestinians began negotiating a "road map" for peace and Palestinian militant groups agreed to a temporary cease-fire. Among the key events:

- At the end of 2002, the Palestine Red Crescent Society and the Israeli Defense Force reported that as of December 31, Israeli-Palestinian violence had killed 1,972 Palestinians and 716 Israelis since the outbreak of violence in September 2000. [See 2002 Facts On File [Middle East: Israeli-Palestinian Death Tolls Reported; Other Developments.](#)]
- On April 30, 2002, the so-called quartet for Middle East peace--the U.S., Russia, the European Union and the United Nations--published a "road map" for Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations that would lead to the creation of a Palestinian state in 2005. The road map had been laid out in December 2002, but the U.S. had delayed the official announcement of the plan until the appointment of Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas. (In March the Palestinian Legislative Council had created the post of prime minister and Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat had selected Abbas, known as Abu Mazen, who was Arafat's second-in-command in the Palestine Liberation Organization.) Under the road map, Palestinians would commit to ending anti-Israeli violence and to curbing militants and would implement government reforms to increase democracy and transparency in the Palestinian Authority (PA). The plan also offered the creation by December 2003 of "an independent Palestinian state with provisional borders and attributes of sovereignty" and the establishment by 2005 of a "sovereign, independent, democratic and viable Palestine." On May 11, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell met separately with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Abbas to discuss the road map. Abbas endorsed it, but Sharon was reluctant to do so. The following day, Powell traveled to Egypt and Jordan to seek the support of those countries for the road map. [See 2003 Facts On File [Middle East--Palestinian Parliament Approves Premier; Middle East Peace Plan Formally Launched; Middle East--Powell Meets Sharon, Abbas on Peace Plan; Other Developments.](#)]
- Israel sealed off the Gaza Strip on May 12, 2003, barring anyone but aid workers, diplomats and journalists with special government clearance from crossing the border. It was the tightest closure of the crossing since the outbreak of violence in September 2000, and bloodshed subsequently escalated in the area. [See 2003 Facts On File [Middle East--Israel Seals Off Gaza Strip; Other Development.](#)]
- In what were the highest-level talks between Israel and the Palestinians since the outbreak of violence in September 2000, Sharon and Abbas met for about three hours on May 17, 2003. They failed to reach any significant breakthroughs, and over the next three days the "road map" was jeopardized by five suicide attacks in Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip that killed at least 12 Israelis and five Palestinian bombers. As a result of the violence, Sharon postponed a trip to the U.S. that was scheduled for May 20. On May 19, U.S. President Bush (R) reaffirmed his commitment to the

road map and said that the plan "still stands" as a path toward peace, despite the attacks. [See 2003 Facts On File [Middle East--Suicide Blasts Derail Peace Plan; Other Developments.](#)]

- On June 4, 2003, U.S. President Bush met in Aqaba, Jordan with Sharon and Abbas to discuss the first steps toward the implementation of the "road map." Sharon promised to dismantle some outposts of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, and Abbas vowed to end armed Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation. The previous day, Bush had met in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt with Abbas and the leaders of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Bahrain to seek their backing for his peace effort. All five Arab leaders agreed to fight "the culture of extremism and violence" that had perpetuated the conflict and hindered previous peace bids. However, both Israeli settlers and Palestinian militants rejected the road map proposal, and a cycle of violence and retaliation between Israeli forces and members of the militant Palestinian group Hamas militants erupted after the Aqaba meeting. Hamas broke off cease-fire talks with Abbas's government and stepped up anti-Israeli attacks, while Israel increased its attacks on Hamas. [See 2003 Facts On File [U.S. President Bush Meets Israeli, Palestinian Leaders on Peace Road Map; Israeli Cabinet Endorses "Road Map" for Peace; Palestinian Suicide Blast, Israeli Assassination Attempt Threaten Peace "Road Map".](#)]
- Hope for peace in the region grew considerably on June 19, 2003, when, after several weeks of negotiations with Abbas's government, three major Palestinian militant groups--Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Aksa Martyrs Brigade--agreed to temporarily halt anti-Israeli attacks. Hours after the cease-fire was announced, Israeli forces began withdrawing from the Gaza Strip. [See 2003 Facts On File [Palestinian Militant Groups Agree to Cease-fire; Israel Begins Gaza Pullout.](#)]
- In what was the eighth meeting of the two leaders, Bush and Sharon met in Washington, D.C. on July 29, 2003 to discuss the Middle East peace process. Despite Bush's urging, Sharon refused to halt the construction of a security fence on the West Bank--an issue that had recently become a major sticking point in Israeli-Palestinian relations. Sharon stated his gratitude for the ongoing cease-fire but expressed concern that the peace could be short-lived, contending that the Palestinian authority was failing to dismantle the militant groups. Abbas, along with his security minister, Muhammad Dahlan, countered that they could not confront these groups as long as they were upholding the truce. Sharon also pledged that unauthorized Israeli settlements in the occupied territories would be removed.

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