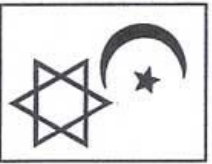


# THE MIDDLE EAST



For the last fifty years, the Middle East has been torn apart by war and conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors. The 1948 birth of the Jewish state of Israel touched off a long period of violence, as armies from five Arab countries immediately invaded the new nation. Since then, Israel and the surrounding Arab states have fought four wars over land sacred to their histories and religions, resulting in thousands of deaths and deep-seated suspicion and mistrust. As Israel and its Arab neighbors wrestled for territories from pre-1948 Palestine, the Palestinians themselves were left without a homeland. Palestinians have campaigned for the creation of a separate Palestinian state for many years. Several nations, including the United States, have urged the Arabs and Israelis to make peace among their passionately divided peoples. After years of difficult negotiations, Israel signed historic peace agreements with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1993 and with Jordan in 1994. Israeli and Arab leaders now face the overwhelming task of carrying out these peace plans while controlling extremist groups that violently oppose the initiatives.

After the assassination of Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin—an architect of the peace agreements—in 1995, Israelis elected a conservative prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. Throughout 1996, Netanyahu was slow to implement the remaining provisions of the 1993 peace plan, and Palestinians became frustrated. Acknowledging the long and difficult process, Middle East observers wondered if Israelis, Palestinians, and their Arab neighbors would remain committed to peace long enough to confront the most divisive issue—the future of the city of Jerusalem. Meanwhile, U.S. officials work to develop a comprehensive policy for the region, one that encompasses not only Arab-Israeli peace, but also other complex issues.

Ehud Barak became Prime Minister in 1999 to 2001, but there were not improvements in the Israeli-Palestinian Peace process. Ariel Sharon became Prime Minister in 2001 and is currently Prime Minister in Israel. His coalition government focused on improving security and preventing terrorism and on implementing Israel's unilateral disengagement plan which was enacted in August 2005, to remove all permanent Israeli presence in the Gaza Strip and from four settlements in the Northern West Bank.

Nonviolent protests in opposition to the pull-out were held throughout the summer. Those advocating suspension or cancellation of the plan say that Jews were promised the territory by God, and that no government has the authority to waive this inalienable right. Other people argued that relocating the Israeli settlers living in the Gaza and West Bank would violate their human rights. Other opponents thought that the plan would leave Israel open to rocket attacks launched from Gaza.

The civilian settlements were evacuated and the residential buildings demolished after 15 August, and the pullout was completed from the Gaza Strip on September 12, 2005, when the last Israeli soldier left the strip. The military pullout from the northern West Bank was completed 10 days later.

Around 1.37 million Palestinians live in the Gaza Strip. The majority of the Palestinians are direct descendants of refugees who fled or were expelled from Israel during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. Poverty, unemployment, and poor living conditions are widespread.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has lost a lot of political support due to the pullout. On November 21, 2005, he formed a new political party, the Kadima party. He was joined only days later by Shimon Peres, who pulled out of the Labour party to join. Sharon's announcement and Peres' past record suggest that it will position itself as a peace party and try to capitalize on the Israeli pullout from the Gaza Strip.