

Introduction

On October 9, 2023, the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas launched a barrage of at least 2,200 rockets into Israel from the Gaza Strip, killing 1,200 Israelis, including 35 U.S. citizens. This met an immediate response from Israel, which declared war and fired aerial bombardments with ground operations in Gaza (Zanotti). Only three weeks after the Hamas assault, over 1.4 million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip have been internally displaced, and, as of March 12, 2024, 31,000 Palestinians in Gaza have been killed, becoming the deadliest conflict in the region since the 1948 Arab-Israeli war (Zanotti). Despite the rising conflict of the current Israel-Hamas war, peace in the West Bank and Gaza Strip is possible. This essay will explore the decades of historical conflict between the two groups and current challenges. With the United States acting as a key outside player, this essay will focus on how the U.S. can successfully intervene through diplomatic agreements, consistent public advocacy, and incorporating lessons from past mediations of similarly deeply-rooted conflict.

History and Ongoing Challenges

The Israel-Hamas War remains a continuation of the ongoing conflict that has been apparent since the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in 1948. After the United Nations passed Resolution 181 in 1947, two states, following the Peel Commission in 1937, became established in Palestine—one Jewish and one Arabic—as the Israelis declared independence soon after on May 14, 1948 (Brown 5). The United States backed Resolution 181 despite the Department of State's endorsement of a trusteeship (with limits on Jewish immigration and separation of Palestine into Jewish and Arab provinces but not states) as U.S. President Harry S. Truman recognized the new nation of Israel, establishing formal diplomatic relations between the United States and Israel (Office of the Historian). However, the conflict continued with the 1967 Arab-Israeli War as United States Foreign Service personnel under the Johnson administration failed to seek a ceasefire of Israel by not withdrawing from its occupied territories in return for peace settlements with Arab neighbors (Office of the Historian). Consequently, the war raged on into the 2006 Lebanon War with United States policy standing firmly behind Israel, refusing to demand a ceasefire to counter Hezbollah's influence in the region (Leigh 1). By 2023, the U.S. government continued to support Israel's right to defend itself, supplying air defense capabilities and munitions to fight against Hamas attacks (Garamone). To create peace-building efforts and

follow its interests, the American Foreign Service intervened in the Middle East conflict, developing a strong diplomatic partnership with Israel.

The continuation of the conflict brings difficulty and potential expansion of the war elsewhere, requiring a strong, persistent effort from the U.S. Foreign Service. In December 2023 the United States, through USAID, provided over \$21 million in humanitarian assistance for the people of Gaza and the West Bank, leaving 2.2 million people in need of support, building on the \$100 million of U.S. assistance from Biden on October 18, 2023 (USAID). Furthermore, the U.S. Central Command forces, including Army personnel specializing in aerial supply delivery, sent over 38,000 meals along the coastline of Gaza to citizens requiring aid (Clark). Assisting the people of Gaza advances the American Foreign Service's interest in rebuilding an environment conducive to diplomatic efforts by addressing the humanitarian crises in the Middle Eastern region. However, this did not stop the conflict from expanding into Lebanon and Syria. The Lebanese militant group, Hezbollah, fired more than 100 rockets into northern Israel on March 12, 2024, which was the heaviest in months of cross-border strikes since October 7th, displacing 80,000 Israelis from areas near the border with Lebanon (Kim and Vinograd). Israel had also launched airstrikes against several targets in Syria with the Syrian state (Sella). This ties in with the Iran-Israel proxy conflict that has continued since February 16, 1985, with Hezbollah and Hamas all receiving financial and material support from Iran, provoking a wider war (Riedel). These challenges represent only a fraction of the countless obstacles confronting the Foreign Service in the Middle East.

Efforts Thus Far and Further Solutions

American diplomats have been working on discussions to end the current Gaza war through three different tracks: (1) reaching a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas; (2) reshaping the Palestinian Authority; (3) pushing Israel to agree to the creation of a Palestinian state (Wong). First, the United States with Qatar and Egypt pushed for a truce between Israel and Hamas with a proposal for an initial six-week cease-fire, during which Hamas would release around 40 out of 100 remaining hostages captured in the Gaza attacks (Barnes). President Biden believed negotiators were nearing an agreement stating, "My hope is by next Monday, we'll have a cease-fire," hoping to halt Israel's military operations within a week after February 26, 2024, but Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, still talked about further military action (Levenson). Second, ideas such as transferring the power within the Palestinian Authority from the current president,

Mahmoud Abbas, to a new prime minister (with Abbas maintaining a ceremonial role) to reduce the corruption and dysfunction within parts of the West Bank have shown progress with numerous ideas being considered, but such plans still have a long road ahead from some ideals opposed by some parties (The Times of Israel). Lastly, the Biden administration revived a three-way deal under discussion with Saudi Arabia to have Saudis agree to formal diplomatic relations with Israel, contingent on Israel agreeing on the conditions for the creation of a Palestinian state (Wong). Through this, the U.S. Foreign Service is helping to create further relations not only between the two opposing groups—Israel and Palestine—but also among neighboring nations in the Middle East. Overall, this translates to the safety and goodwill of the United States alongside the growth of peace throughout the region.

There is much still to be done: the United States Foreign Service must vigilantly uphold its reputation globally, countering opposing ideologies by advocating for peace through various diplomatic tracks and further agreements. In this case, America must follow through on every threat and defeat opposing obstacles in foreign policy to maintain credibility. If America cannot stand against challengers or opposers in one place, the hatred will disseminate, making the United States world power crumble. For example, the United States must continue reaching a ceasefire and offering humanitarian assistance to reduce the blockade in Gaza, as about 75% of the people in that region face food insecurity (Adami). It also must fully revamp the Palestinian Authority (PA)—which has been losing its popularity due to lack of protection of Palestinian communities from Israeli attacks—because nearly half of the Palestinian population have an unfavorable view of the United States, largely unchanged since 2021, meaning the legitimacy problem of the PA must be solved to regain the trust of the Palestinian people (Adami). Furthermore, polls gathering United States opinion have shown that 52% of Americans support a two-state solution to the conflict (Pew Research Center). Still, growing skepticism from Palestinians and Israelis requires that the United States quickly reach negotiations toward a separate state before the window for the solution fully shuts. Former U.S. Ambassador to Israel Ed Djerejian has stated, “There is no military solution to this conflict, only a political one” (Harvard Kennedy School). This means that the path towards peace and stability must be built around a two-state solution to end the cycle of perpetual conflict. The two-state solution is better than other solutions, including a one-state solution, because most Western countries, including the US and EU, support this resolution with both sides too “opposed to be able to reach an agreement autonomously” (Abrams).

The resolution of the Troubles conflict in Northern Ireland also draws valuable lessons. Stemming from centuries of English control, settler colonization, and tensions between Irish nationalists seeking independence, discrimination against the Catholic

minority by the Protestant majority led to civil rights protests in the 1960s, which met with violent state repression (McAllister). Protestant unionists desired Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom, while Catholic nationalists wanted a united Ireland, causing decades of violence. However, by 1998, the Troubles came to an end after both sides signed the Good Friday Agreement, keeping Northern Ireland a part of the United Kingdom, but giving residents there the chance to have either British or Irish citizenship. Through U.S. intervention there was room for diplomacy with leaders on both sides, which no one before 1998 would have imagined possible (Toft). Similarly, the United States through the Foreign Service must assist Israelis and Palestinians to come to agreements, fighting for diplomacy and international cooperation to make significant progress towards reconciliation and the end of violent disputes. This political reconciliation may currently feel impossible, but so too did resolution for the Troubles feel out of reach with numerous ceasefires similarly agreed upon and broken along the way, including the Provisional IRA's 1975 ceasefire (Craig).

Conclusion

With the conflict persisting in the Middle East region, the U.S. Foreign Service faces daunting challenges, from navigating geopolitical tensions to countering deeply entrenched ideological divides. U.S. Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, at a press availability in Israel declared: "To have a region that's more integrated in which everyone can feel secure, including Israel... Hard choices need to be made in order to get there" (U.S. Department of State). While the road ahead has numerous obstacles—including the continuous mistrust apparent between Palestinians and Israelis after the conflict—the steadfast diplomacy, humanitarian aid, and strategic alliances in continuation of the three tracks of solutions allow the Foreign Service to promote reconciliation between the two groups. As history has shown, even the most intractable conflicts can be resolved through tireless dedication, diplomacy, and the unwavering belief in the power of communication, bridging divides toward peace out of vicious discord.

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