Obstacles to Peace in the Israeli - Palestinian Arab Conflict

Everyone in the world – including a large majority of both Israelis and Palestinian Arabs – would like to see the two sides in the conflict reach an agreement to share the Palestine region and live peacefully as neighbors. However, there are a number of obstacles that keep the two sides from reaching an agreement for a lasting peace:

1. Jerusalem

The city of Jerusalem contains important holy sites for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all of which are located within about five minutes of each other in the “Old City” of Jerusalem, which is located in the eastern half of the city. When the United Nations drew up its original partition plan, they hoped to turn Jerusalem into an international city, which would be run by the U.N. and remain open to everyone.

In the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, Israel captured the western half of the city and Jordan captured the eastern half. In the 1967 Six Days War, Israel captured the eastern half and “annexed” it, making Jerusalem a unified city and officially a part of Israel. Today, Israel considers Jerusalem to be its capital.

Palestinian Arabs make up a majority of people who live in East Jerusalem (none of whom have been granted Israeli citizenship, by the way), and they want that part of the city to be the capital of a Palestinian State. Israel considers this demand to be unacceptable, and will not give up half the city to the Arabs, especially when the “Arab half” contains the major Jewish religious sites, including the Western Wall and Temple Mount.
2. Israeli Settlements and Borders

The borders of Israel, the West Bank, & Gaza Strip were set at the end of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. The West Bank (along with East Jerusalem) became Jordanian territory, while the Gaza Strip belonged to Egypt. The populations of the West Bank & the Gaza Strip were almost solely Palestinian Arab, and were not granted either Jordanian or Egyptian citizenship.

In the 1967 Six Days War, Israel captured both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The Israeli Defense Force (IDF) “occupied” the territories, which meant that the land, and its Palestinian Arab inhabitants, fell under IDF control but did not become part of Israel (or Israeli citizens).

Since 1967, however, Israel has moved a growing number of its citizens into Jewish “Settlements” in the West Bank. These were originally meant to be temporary military outposts (an early warning system against an Arab attack), but over the years the Settlements have become permanent neighborhoods for nearly 300,000 Israelis and are serviced by a road network built across the West Bank that can only be used by Israeli citizens.

The Palestinian Arabs claim that the Settlements are an illegal land grab by Israel, and every time a new settlement is built, Palestinian Arab families lose their homes and farms. They demand that ALL Israeli citizens vacate the West Bank and move back across the 1967 border, known as the “Green Line.”

To compound matters, Israel has built a “security barrier” – a 20 foot tall concrete wall in many places – around and through the West Bank. In many places, the barrier is located to the east of major settlements, effectively putting them on the “Israeli” side of the barrier. Palestinian Arabs claim that the barrier is meant to create a new border to a larger Israel, while the Israelis counter that it is necessary to keep Hamas suicide bombers out of Israel.

The Gaza Strip is a different story. Israel does not allow Jewish Settlements in Gaza, and the military patrols its borders (there’s a wall around it, too), but only enters the territory if a military attack is ordered. Palestinian Arabs are essentially trapped in Gaza, and are responsible for their own well-being and security. Life is very difficult for Gazans – both Israel and Egypt have blockades in place, which are meant to keep weapons out and terrorists in, but often block food, water, medicine, and building supplies as well.
3. Water

As in much of the wider Middle East, water is a very scarce resource in the Palestine Region. Right now, Israel controls the primary water sources in the area and sells a portion of that water to the Palestinian Arabs. A peace deal would require a new water-sharing agreement that would allow both sides to feel confident in their ability to meet their needs.

4. Palestinian Arab Refugees and the “Right of Return”

After the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, about 400,000 Palestinian Arabs voluntarily left or were forced out of their homes that were located in what was now Israel. They moved into refugee camps in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, & Egypt. Their descendants, who now number in the millions, still live in those refugee camps, and have never been made citizens of the aforementioned countries.

Palestinian Arab leaders have always maintained that the refugees have a “Right of Return,” meaning that they – and their children and grandchildren – should be able to move back to their old homes in what is now Israel & gain Israeli citizenship.

The Israeli government considers the “Right of Return” to be absolutely unacceptable – most of the refugees’ homes no longer exist, and moving millions of Palestinian Arabs into Israel & granting them citizenship would erase the country’s Jewish majority, negating its whole reason for being.
Large majorities on both sides would like to put their differences aside, make a peace agreement, and create two countries in the Palestine Region. However, both sides have very small minorities that oppose peace and are willing to do whatever it takes – including violence – to keep a peace deal from happening. Peace talks in the 1990’s led to the assassination of an Israeli Prime Minister by an extremist Israeli, and Hamas and other Palestinian Arab terrorist groups have often responded to peace talks with suicide bombings against Israel.

In both cases, the “five percent” want all of the Palestine Region for their respective country. Extremist Israelis believe that a “Greater Israel” – including the West Bank and Gaza Strip – better matches the borders of the Biblical Kingdom of Israel, while extremist Palestinian Arabs have never accepted Israel’s right to exist, and demand all of Palestine for the Arabs.

Thousands of people are both sides have been killed by the other side over the years. Palestinian Arab militants have long attacked Israeli civilians through suicide bombings, rocket attacks, and cross-border raids. The IDF – whose primary mission is to keep Israelis safe – has always responded to such attacks with modern weapons and brutal force, often killing innocent civilians while targeting militant leaders, fighters, and weapons stashes.
6. The Palestinian Arab Split

In 2007, the PLO and Hamas fought with each other over the control of the Gaza Strip. Hamas won, giving it control of the territory, which effectively limits the PLO to the West Bank and creates two separate Palestinian Arab entities. The PLO is willing to make peace with Israel, but Hamas is not, and Israel is not willing to deal with one side but not the other.

7. Security without Peace

Israel is in a pretty good place right now – its security barrier around and road closures and military checkpoints within the West Bank have made it almost impossible for Palestinian Arab militant groups to launch attacks against it, and the Gaza Strip is completely closed off from the world. Other countries in the region don’t mess with Israel anymore, either – the IDF has better weapons, training, and planning than any other military in the Middle East. With violent attacks way down and Israelis feeling safer and safer every day even without a peace agreement (and with only 25% of Israelis believing that an agreement is possible), why would Israel change the status quo?