

CHAPTER TWELVE

TESTING “LAND FOR PEACE”

In late 2003, when it seemed that Israelis and Palestinians were at a stalemate in their efforts to end the conflict between them, Israel’s prime minister, Ariel Sharon, startled the world by proposing that Israel withdraw all Israeli troops from the Gaza Strip and evacuate all the Jews living there and in four settlements in a small area of the West Bank. Even more surprising, Sharon said he was ready to take these steps without demanding any moves in return by the Palestinians.

The plan shocked many Israelis; Sharon was considered a hawk because he often advocated using military force to suppress Palestinian violence and because he was a vigorous advocate of building Jewish communities in the Palestinian territories. In addition, when Sharon was campaigning for reelection as prime minister earlier in 2003, he had criticized his opponent's plan to withdraw unilaterally from parts of the territories, the very move he was now making.

Sharon's position on Jewish settlements in the territories had evolved, however, as he became convinced that it made little sense to devote resources—in particular, Israeli soldiers—to defend eighty-five hundred Jews living among more than one million Palestinians. Furthermore, he believed Israel could never annex the Gaza Strip because the Palestinians living there would then become Israeli citizens, making it more difficult for Israel to remain a Jewish state. Sharon concluded that the prospect for peace and security for Israel would be enhanced by disengaging from Gaza. The Palestinians would also benefit by no longer being subject to Israeli authority, and they would have the chance to start to build their state.



Look Closer

The Gaza Strip comprises about 140 square miles, roughly twice the size of Washington, DC. After Israeli forces captured the area from Egypt in 1967, the government began to encourage Jews to move there in the early 1970s. The population slowly grew until a total of seventeen hundred families lived in twenty-one settlements in Gaza.

After the Oslo agreements, the Palestinian Authority assumed control over about 80 percent of the area. But escalating violence, especially after September 2000, led Israel to impose stricter restrictions on Palestinians in the area and to engage in frequent military operations to prevent terrorist attacks.



The decision to evacuate Gaza and four West Bank settlements caused great upheaval in Israel as Jewish settlers living in Gaza and their supporters protested the idea. Jews living elsewhere in the West Bank were especially vocal because they feared they might be asked to leave their homes next. Many Israelis also argued that it was unfair to ask Jews to move out of Gaza after the government had encouraged them to move there in the first place in the interests of creating a security foothold there.

Still, many Israelis supported Sharon’s plan, and the Knesset in October 2004 voted to approve the plan, even though Sharon’s own party voted against it. Protests against the plan became so heated that some feared Israel might be on the verge of a civil war.



ARAFAT DIES

In the midst of the heated debates over Sharon’s plan, Yasser Arafat suddenly died in November 2004, and many people around the world expressed the hope that his death would remove an obstacle to peace in the region. Arafat had been the unquestioned leader of the Palestinians for decades but was viewed by the Israeli government, and ultimately by the Bush administration and many world leaders, as an immovable obstacle to a peace agreement.

Arafat was replaced by Mahmoud Abbas, a man who had negotiated with Israel in the past and who was seen to be a potential partner for peace. It soon became apparent, however, that Abbas did not have the ability to stop the ongoing violence against Israel.

ISRAEL REMOVES SETTLEMENTS

Israel, meanwhile, went ahead with plans to close Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip, offering Jews in Gaza money to resettle elsewhere. But many still refused to leave their homes. Finally, the army was sent to physically remove anyone who had not left voluntarily by August 17, 2005.

Though some skirmishes occurred during the evacuation process, the operation went relatively smoothly. Most of the settlers protested peacefully, and the soldiers sent to carry out the evacuation acted with great sensitivity to make the

Have You Heard of Mahmoud Abbas? (1935-)

Mahmoud Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen, was born in Safed on March 26, 1935. He left as a refugee for Syria in 1948 and worked as an elementary school teacher before earning a Ph.D. in history. He was a founding member of Fatah and a member of the Palestine National Council and the PLO Executive Committee.



He returned to the territories in September 1995 and in March 2003 was named the first prime minister of the Palestinian Authority. However, he never had full authority because Yasser Arafat insisted that all decisions be cleared with him. Abbas wound up resigning in frustration after just four months in office. Following Arafat's death, Abbas was elected president of the Palestinian Authority on January 9, 2005, and no elections have been held since.

Faces of Israel



Oudi, seventeen, is part of the third generation of his family to live in the town of

Yerucham in the Negev desert. His grandparents came to Israel from Morocco in the late 1950s. His father is a bus driver, and his mother serves as a nurse in the regional hospital in the city of Be’er Sheva.

Oudi is a big fan of basketball and loves to watch Israeli, American, and European professional teams on television. Oudi plays basketball for his town’s local team and enjoys traveling every two weeks to other areas in Israel to play games. Besides sports, Oudi loves films and is hoping to learn to become a filmmaker after his military service.

traumatic process of removing Jews from their homes as painless as possible. Many thought the evacuation might be violent and take months to complete, but it was done in only a few weeks.

As the Palestinians had requested, Israel destroyed all of the houses belonging to the settlers but left behind greenhouses built by Israeli farmers so the Palestinians could use them to build their economy.

Gaza after the Withdrawal

Most Israelis hoped that when they ended thirty-eight years of military rule in Gaza the Palestinians would respond by stopping violence against Israel and taking steps to build the infrastructure for their own state. For years, peace activists had said Israel should trade land for peace, and now here was a test case. Israel had given up land; would the Palestinians offer peace in return? The answer came quickly when Palestinian terrorists fired rockets from Gaza into Israel and began building up their arsenal by smuggling weapons from Egypt.

Since the Israeli withdrawal, terrorists in Gaza have attacked Israel with thousands of rockets and mortars, and the Palestinian Authority has been

Look Closer

Palestinians sometimes claim they are descendants of the Canaanites and were in Israel before the Israelis. But there is no evidence they are related to the Canaanites, who disappeared three thousand years ago. In fact, no one knows if any of the Canaanites' descendants survived or what ethnic or national identity they would have if they had survived. The Palestinians can trace their origins to the seventh century, when people from Arabia swept into Palestine as they conquered lands in the Middle East. From that point until the early twentieth century, the Palestinian population was small and only began to grow significantly in the twentieth century, after Jewish immigrants began to improve the quality of health care and create economic opportunities that attracted Arabs from neighboring areas.

unable or unwilling to stop them. During this time, the Palestinians have made little progress toward building a state and have proved to be violent rather than peaceful neighbors, which has made Israelis increasingly reluctant to make additional territorial concessions.

Hamas and Fatah

The situation worsened when Hamas won the Palestinian election in 2006. Since that election, Hamas and the rival Palestinian leadership from Abbas's Fatah movement have fought for power in the Palestinian Authority.

Hamas refuses to recognize Israel or renounce terrorism, and says it will not honor past agreements that Arafat had signed with Israel. Consequently, Israel has refused to negotiate with Hamas, and the international community has imposed restrictions on financial aid to the Palestinian Authority for as long as Hamas refuses to recognize Israel's right to exist and renounce violence.

After about fifteen months of attempted coexistence and even a national unity government between Hamas and Fatah, Hamas seized power in Gaza in



STRAIGHT from the Source

“Nobody does Israel any service by proclaiming its ‘right to exist.’ Israel’s right to exist, like that of the United States, Saudi Arabia and 152 other states, is axiomatic and unreserved. Israel’s legitimacy is not suspended in midair awaiting acknowledgment. There is certainly no other state, big or small, young or old, that would consider mere recognition of its ‘right to exist’ a favor, or a negotiable concession.”

—ABBA EBAN, FORMER ISRAELI FOREIGN MINISTER, IN THE *NEW YORK TIMES*, NOVEMBER 18, 1981

June 2007 in a violent coup. This action led Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas to appoint a new caretaker government in the West Bank that was committed to ending Hamas’s political rule. While Israeli leaders agreed to talk with Abbas, he did not represent all Palestinians, and most Israelis did not believe he had the ability to sign or implement any agreements.

THE SECOND LEBANON WAR

The failure of Israel’s disengagement from Gaza to bring progress toward peace wasn’t the only setback during this time. In 2000, Israel had also unilaterally withdrawn its troops from southern Lebanon, where they had been stationed since Israel invaded in 1982. Israeli leaders had hoped that when their troops left Lebanon, the Lebanese government would then deploy its army along the border to disarm terrorists and maintain order, but that did not happen. Instead, Iran and Syria supported Hezbollah attacks on soldiers and civilians in northern Israel while Hezbollah continued to build its terrorist network.

In July 2006, Hezbollah raiders crossed the border, killed three Israeli soldiers, and kidnapped two others. Ehud Olmert, who had taken over as prime minister after Sharon suffered a debilitating stroke in January of that year, ordered an attack on Hezbollah. Fighting escalated as Hezbollah began to fire

thousands of rockets into northern Israel. Over the course of one month, more than four thousand rockets landed in Israel, and hundreds of thousands of Israelis were forced to evacuate their homes or live in bomb shelters.

Although Israel had been attacked first, the ferocity of its counterattacks on Hezbollah caused international opinion to turn against it. As Lebanese casualties began to mount, pressure grew on Israel to accept a cease-fire. In August, the United Nations adopted a resolution calling for Israeli troops to withdraw and

Have You Heard of Ehud Olmert? (1945-)

Ehud Olmert was born in Binyamina, Israel, in 1945. He served in the IDF and was a military correspondent for the IDF journal *Bamachane*. A lawyer, he also holds degrees in psychology and philosophy. Olmert was elected to the Knesset in 1973 and served as a minister in the government from 1988 until 1992. In 1993, Olmert was elected mayor of Jerusalem. He resigned a decade later to return to the Knesset.



In 2003, Olmert was appointed minister of industry and trade, and deputy prime minister. Olmert became an influential member of the cabinet and was one of the first to advocate a withdrawal from Gaza, an idea that ultimately was endorsed by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. In 2005, Olmert joined Sharon and several other former Likud ministers to form the new centrist party Kadima.

On January 4, 2006, Sharon suffered a massive stroke that left him unable to perform his duties as prime minister. Olmert became acting prime minister at that time and was elected prime minister on March 28, 2006, when Kadima received the most votes in the election to the Knesset. He left office in 2009, and was later acquitted on charges including corruption and tax evasion. In May 2014, he was charged and found guilty of bribery while mayor of Jerusalem. The case was subsequently brought to appeal.



for an international peacekeeping force to be deployed along the border to prevent Hezbollah from rearming and threatening Israel.

The Lebanese government was also required to disarm Hezbollah, yet doing so might have provoked a civil war in the country, and it was unwilling to follow through. The Lebanese army did finally move into southern Lebanon, and the strengthened UN peacekeeping force helped to provide a modicum of needed stability on Israel’s northern border.

Nevertheless, in Israel, the Second Lebanon War was widely viewed as a failure. Despite its superior firepower, Israeli forces failed to destroy Hezbollah as a fighting force, and the Israeli government had not been able to prevent its citizens from coming under a barrage of rockets. Later, Israelis learned that the Israeli Air Force had destroyed longer-range rockets that Hezbollah had planned to use against Israel’s major cities, but questions were still raised about how the war was managed. Israelis were also shocked when they learned that the army was ill-prepared to fight a war of this kind and that many soldiers were sent into battle without the equipment they needed.

Israel’s northern border remains a source of concern today, because Hezbollah, with Iranian backing, has essentially taken over Lebanon. Despite a UN resolution and force calling for Hezbollah to be disarmed and smuggling to be halted, Hezbollah has received a steady stream of aid and arms from Iran and Syria. Hezbollah now has tens of thousands of rockets pointed in Israel’s direction.

OPERATION CAST LEAD

The Gaza Strip also continues to be a source of worry for Israelis. When Hamas took over Gaza, it began to bombard southern Israel with mortars and rockets, firing nearly ten thousand over a three-year period. Though only a few Israelis were killed in these attacks, many were injured, and much of the population lived in constant fear, with less than fifteen seconds to find shelter after an alarm sounded to indicate an incoming rocket. Sometimes there was no warning at all.

For three years, Israel launched only limited military operations against the terrorists. However, when Hamas started to fire more accurate and long-range

Faces of Israel



Samir, sixteen, is from Daliyat el-Carmel, in northwest Israel, where his entire family lives. Samir belongs to Israel's Druze minority. His family owns a traditional restaurant, which is very popular among tourists in the region.

In addition to attending school, Samir helps his family run the restaurant and loves to welcome strangers to their village. Proud to be an Israeli, Samir hopes to join a combat unit in the military and become an officer like his older brother.

rockets that reached deeper into Israel and put nearly one million civilians at risk, Prime Minister Olmert launched Operation Cast Lead, on December 27, 2008, sending troops into the Gaza Strip to stop the rocket fire.

The battle lasted only a few weeks, with Israel agreeing to a cease-fire initiated by Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak on January 18, 2009, but approximately fourteen hundred Palestinians were killed during the fighting. Although more than half were believed to have been associated with Hamas, many innocent people died as well: in many cases the terrorists used them as shields and fired their rockets from civilian areas. Though the Israeli government and army took significant measures to avoid the loss of innocent lives—phoning homes, dropping leaflets warning people to leave, and firing warning shots—civilians sometimes were caught in the cross fire.

Although Israel agreed to the cease-fire and withdrew its troops from the Gaza Strip, its leaders made it clear that they would again use force if the rocket fire continued to threaten its population.

Israel successfully stopped the rocket barrages, though terrorists periodically fired mortars or rockets into southern Israel in the following years. Israel's ability to defend itself without mounting a large-scale military operation was greatly enhanced in 2011 when the Iron Dome antimissile defense system was

Look Closer

The alarm goes off, signaling that a rocket is inbound. Imagine trying to get your family to safety in less than fifteen seconds. What if you have elderly parents or a disabled child?

Nine-year-old Tzahar is a resident of Sderot. He’s deaf and can’t hear the alarm. As a result, he’s been injured twice by rockets fired from the Gaza Strip.

Osher and Rami Twito, brothers ages eight and eighteen, were walking home through the town square when the warning siren rang out. They tried to take cover but didn’t make it. A rocket landed nearby and sprayed them with shrapnel. Osher, who loved soccer, had a leg amputated that night and now must use a wheelchair. Rami had a lengthy operation to repair a severe break in his leg.

Their parents moved to Ashdod, a city they thought was beyond rocket range. Now, with technology obtained from Iran, Hamas has fired missiles from Gaza that hit Ashdod and beyond.

deployed. Iron Dome proved successful in intercepting some of the longer-range missiles that Hamas targeted at Israel’s larger cities in the south. However, short range rockets were more difficult to intercept and citizens, especially in Sderot, continued to rely on the alarm system that gives them only fifteen seconds from the time the siren sounds to find shelter.

HAMAS AND THE GOLDSTONE REPORT

Another outcome of Operation Cast Lead was widespread international criticism of Israel’s use of force, which some people considered disproportionate. The UN Human Rights Council appointed a fact-finding commission to inves-

tigate whether any violations of international humanitarian law had taken place during the conflict between Israel and Hamas. Named after its chairman, South African jurist Richard Goldstone, the Goldstone Report, largely based on unverified accounts by Palestinians and non-governmental organizations, was highly critical of Israel's conduct. It also paid scant attention to the three years of Hamas rocket bombardment of Israeli towns and villages that led up to the operation. Investigators made little effort to probe Hamas activities before or during Operation Cast Lead and found no evidence that Hamas fired rockets from civilian homes; that terrorists hid among the civilian population, fired mortars, antitank missiles, and machine guns into Palestinian villages when IDF forces were in proximity; or that Hamas seized and booby-trapped Palestinian civilian houses to ambush IDF soldiers. The findings directly contradicted photos, video, and reports by journalists that showed and described Hamas militants participating in all of these illegal activities.

Even UN Humanitarian Affairs official John Holmes had criticized Hamas for "the reckless and cynical use of civilian installations . . . and indiscriminate firing of rockets against civilian populations," which he characterized as "clear violations of international law."

On April 1, 2011, Goldstone retracted his accusations that Israel had intentionally targeted civilians and was guilty of war crimes during its conflict with Hamas. He said Israel had the "right and obligation to defend itself and its citizens against such attacks." In fact, as Colonel Richard Kemp, former commander of British forces in Afghanistan, testified to the Goldstone committee in 2009, "The IDF did more to safeguard the rights of civilians in a combat zone than any other army in the history of warfare."

FLOTILLA FALLOUT

One of the other consequences of the violence in Gaza was that Israel imposed a blockade on the area to prevent the smuggling of weapons. The blockade was backed by Western nations that continued to insist that Hamas recognize Israel and end terrorism, and it was enforced on Gaza's southern border by Egypt.



Once again Israel came under criticism for allegedly denying humanitarian goods to Palestinians in Gaza. The Israeli government, in fact, allowed food, medicine, and other items to be transported by humanitarian organizations but also insisted on being able to check shipments for contraband.

In the spring of 2010, a group of pro-Palestinian activists, part of a coalition called the Free Gaza Movement, decided to challenge the Israeli blockade by sailing ships full of supplies from Turkey directly to Gaza. Israeli officials agreed to accept the goods at one of its ports and transfer them to Gaza, but the flotilla organizers refused.

When six ships approached Israeli waters off the coast of Gaza on May 31, 2010, Israeli naval forces met them in international waters. When confronted, five of the six ships agreed to sail to Ashdod after being boarded by Israeli naval personnel. When Israeli naval personnel boarded the sixth ship, the *Mavi Marmara*, they were ambushed by passengers on deck wielding clubs, bats, pipes, and knives. The passengers wrestled one of the naval commandos to the ground, stripped him of his handgun, and threw him over the side, where he landed on a lower deck, thirty feet below, and suffered serious head trauma. At this point the commandos fired on passengers who attacked them, some of whom had handguns that they had taken from commandos. By the end of the fighting, nine passengers were dead and seven Israeli soldiers were wounded.

Though the Israelis were defending themselves, Israel was again criticized for its use of force. The Turkish government was especially angry, since its citizens were injured, and insisted on an apology. The Israeli government refused to apologize for its soldiers defending themselves, which precipitated a crisis in Turkish-Israel relations. The tension in the relationship is potentially serious for Israel’s security and regional standing since Turkey has been one of its most important allies.

CAPTIVE SOLDIERS

Terrorists from Hamas and Hezbollah have kidnapped Israeli soldiers, with the goal of exchanging them for prisoners held in Israeli jails. On a number of occa-

What Would YOU Do?

The kidnapping of an Israeli soldier presents Israel's leaders with a terrible moral, legal, political, and strategic dilemma. Jewish law commands that ransom be paid for a captive unless the price may endanger the community. However, paying a ransom risks encouraging Israel's enemies to take more captives.

Imagine you are the prime minister of Israel. An Israeli soldier has been captured and is being held in Gaza. A terrorist group has informed you that the soldier will be released in exchange for Israel's release of a certain number of terrorists held in Israeli jails. The soldier's family and their supporters protest in front of your house every day, demanding that you bring their child home. The media publicizes the captive's plight and the suffering of his family.

At the same time, the families of the victims of the terrorists, who are now in jail, are sympathetic to the soldier's plight but encourage you not to release the terrorists. They ask, why is one soldier's life more valuable than those of their loved ones who died at the hands of terrorists?

What would you do?

sions terrorists have forced Israel to make lopsided trades. In 1985, for example, Israel traded 1,150 prisoners for three soldiers. In 2004, Israel freed 430 Palestinian prisoners for the bodies of three soldiers and one civilian. In an effort to win the release of more incarcerated Palestinians, Hamas kidnapped nineteen-year-old Corporal Gilad Shalit on June 25, 2006. Hamas refused to allow anyone, including the Red Cross, to visit Shalit, and for years the only indication he was alive was a video released in October 2009. After years of unsuccessful negotiations to free Shalit, an agreement was finally reached in October 2011. Israel agreed to release 1,027 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for Shalit.



Israelis were filled with a mixture of elation and pain over the decision. While Israelis were overwhelmingly happy to see Shalit return home safely after 1,940 days of captivity, they were concerned that Palestinians who had committed heinous terror attacks might return to violence after their release. They also worried that the trade would encourage more kidnappings. Meanwhile, the parents of the victims of the terror attacks asked why the killers of their family members should be allowed to escape justice. The deal touched off a fierce debate over what the government should do in the event a soldier is kidnapped. Israel faced a similar dilemma in June 2014, when three Israeli teenagers were abducted and killed by members of Hamas while hitchhiking in the West Bank. Many of the prisoners released in the Shalit deal were re-arrested during the search for the boys.

“ My
greatest wish
for Israel is that
someday it will be
fully recognized as a
country and no one
will question its
right to exist. ”

MICHAL, AGE 19,
WESTFIELD, NEW JERSEY

