

Middle East

In 2011, the United Nations worked to restart talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians with a view to reaching a final settlement under which two States—Israel and Palestine—would exist side by side in peace. The peace effort remained stalled, however, due to several factors, including Israel's continued blockade of Gaza on both land and sea; indiscriminate rocket and mortar fire directed against Israel by Hamas, the ruling political party in Gaza, followed by retaliatory Israeli airstrikes in the Occupied Palestinian Territory; renewed Israeli settlement building and settler violence; and the confiscation of land and destruction of Palestinian property by Israelis in the West Bank. The United Nations considered Palestinian Authority (PA) functions in several areas to be sufficient for a viable State government. The two main political parties of Palestine—Fatah and Hamas—signed a unity agreement to work together in bringing a unified Palestinian State to fruition, but ultimately could not agree on several concessions.

On 23 September, Palestine applied for United Nations membership. The Organization took no action with regard to Palestine's application, but the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization granted Palestine full membership in October. Consequently, the United States and Israel cut certain sectors of aid to Palestine.

The Quartet—a coordinating mechanism for international peace efforts, comprising the European Union, the Russian Federation, the United States and the United Nations—met several times over the year. On 23 September, it proposed a timed framework to restart the peace talks between the Palestinians and the Israelis. The plan included an agreed agenda and method of procedure; comprehensive proposals on territory and security; and a donors' conference to appeal for sustained support to the Palestinians' State-building actions.

On 18 October, Hamas released Israeli Sergeant Gilad Shalit, who had been held in Gaza without international access since 2006, in exchange for 477 Palestinian prisoners—many of whom had been jailed for involvement in attacks on Israelis. The Secretary-General called Shalit's release and the freeing of Palestinian prisoners a humanitarian breakthrough.

The Security Council held 19 meetings throughout the year on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question. The panel investigating the May 2010 flotilla incident submitted to the Council

a final report, which questioned the true objectives of the flotilla organizers and acknowledged the threat to Israel's security from militant groups in Gaza. The decision of the Israel Defense Forces to board the vessels far from the blockade zone, however, was deemed excessive, as was its mistreatment of passengers before they were deported.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East faced further challenges due to the displacement of people as a result of the political and social unrest that occurred in parts of the Middle East and North Africa. The Agency addressed the needs of refugees across the region, including Syrian refugees in Lebanon, who had fled Government suppression of popular uprisings, but budget shortfalls prevented it from meeting the increased demand for its services.

In Lebanon, the Government of National Unity collapsed in January. The absence of political authority in the months that followed led to institutional paralysis and a deterioration of security conditions. In June, the Prime Minister-Designate announced the formation of a new Government, which won a vote of confidence in July. The Special Tribunal established to investigate and prosecute the perpetrators of the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri indicted four suspects in the attack and ruled in favour of a trial in absentia. In August, the mandate of United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) was renewed for one year. UNIFIL withstood three direct terrorist attacks in 2011.

Anti-Government demonstrations in the Syrian Arab Republic began in March and increased steadily in geographic scope and size. Dissidents called for the downfall of the regime, echoing slogans heard across the region. The Syrian authorities reacted with a mix of reform measures and progressively more violent repression, which the Secretary-General condemned. In an August presidential statement, the Security Council also condemned violations of human rights and the use of force against civilians by the Syrian authorities; it called for an end to violence and urged all sides to act with restraint and refrain from reprisals. The Secretary-General also urged President Bashar Al-Assad to end the military campaign against the Syrian people and to engage in meaningful reform. Syrian security forces, however, continued to clash with protesters. The resulting death toll eventually surpassed 3,000 people on both sides.