

The use of armed violence

Some Palestinians and Israelis choose armed violence to achieve their goals.

This violence has killed and injured thousands of people, including many civilians. Sometimes this has been the result of war between Israel and the neighbouring Arab states, such as Egypt, Jordan and Syria, but there has also been fighting within Israel and Palestine.

Between 2000 and 2014, B'Tselem – the Israeli human rights group – recorded 8,166 conflict-related deaths, of which 7,065 were Palestinian and 1,101 Israeli.

Palestinian violence

According to the Jewish Virtual Library, 3,791 Israelis were killed by Palestinian terrorism between 1948 and 2014, many of them civilians.

Palestine does not have a powerful army like Israel, but several Palestinian organisations have armed groups. These include Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and Hamas. They have all fought Israel, but they don't agree on everything and sometimes clash with each other. The Palestine Liberation Organisation recognised Israel and renounced violence and terrorism in 1993, but some groups continued to fight.

These groups argue that they have the right to armed resistance under international law. They fight the Israeli military, but have also hijacked civilian planes, bombed buses and hotels, fired rockets at towns, and attacked with guns and knives. Their deliberate targeting of civilians breaks international law and means they are categorised as terrorists. Some attacks involve suicide bombs or fighting until killed.



Palestinians killed, including terrorists, are praised by some as “shahid” or martyrs, and their posters are a common sight in Palestine. Israeli civilian deaths have declined since 2005, although there was a surge in violence in 2015–16.

Terrorism

Organised violence against civilians to achieve a political aim.

Martyr

Someone who chooses death for their cause. The Arabic word is “shahid”.

Civilian

Someone who is not a member of the armed forces or an armed group.

Israeli violence

Although Jewish armed groups fought the Arabs and British in the 1930s and 40s, the state of Israel today has a powerful army, navy and air force. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have modern tanks, warplanes and artillery. Israeli forces have fought in Syria in recent years, but most of the military are in occupied Palestinian territory or Israel.

In the West Bank and Gaza Israeli forces are present every day and regularly use force against Palestinians. The casualties mount when Israel conducts bigger operations.

Israel's big assaults have killed a lot of Palestinian civilians, particularly in Gaza. Operations in 2006, 2009, 2012, 2014 and 2016 were supposed to attack Hamas and other groups firing rockets at Israel, but most of the Palestinians killed were civilians. This strategy has been described as “cutting the grass” – containing Palestinian militants, but never ending the fight.

Israel also has strong defences. Enclosing the West Bank and Gaza with barriers makes attacks harder, and the ‘Iron Dome’ defence system shoots down rockets fired at Israel. Israel argues that its military operations are necessary to guard against Palestinian armed groups.

Aside from IDF operations authorised by the Israeli state, some Israeli settlers take violent action against Palestinians. According to B'Tselem, Israeli civilians killed 25 Palestinians between 2009 and 2018. Read more about this in the Israeli settlers case study.

Examples of violence

Egged bus bombing

In 2002 a Hamas suicide bomber blew up bus 32A from the Egged bus company in Jerusalem during rush hour, killing 19 people and injuring 72 more. This kind of attack was common during the Second Intifada, killing hundreds of Israeli civilians.

Violent “response to Gaza protests”

Palestinians in Gaza organised six months of protests called ‘The Great March of Return’, beginning in March 2018. They called for the right of return for Palestinian refugees and an end to a siege of the Gaza Strip by Israel and neighbouring Egypt. They were organised by grassroots Palestinian organisations and were mostly nonviolent, with some throwing objects at the border barrier. Israeli forces used lethal force against the protesters. According to al-Jazeera, 194 Palestinians were killed. “Of them, 141 were killed during demonstrations, including 28 children, one woman, two journalists, three paramedics and three differently abled people.” One Israeli soldier was shot and killed.

The ‘Knife Intifada’

There was a swathe of attacks on Israelis in 2015–16. This included attacks on worshippers, dozens of knife and gun attacks, and the use of vehicles as weapons. According to the Israeli government, 38 Israelis were killed, including 31 civilians. 235 Palestinians were killed and thousands were detained, though often not charged. Victims included the Jewish Benita family, stabbed at Jerusalem’s Lion’s Gate as they went to pray at the Western Wall. Aaron Benita was killed; his wife and two-year-old son were injured. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was criticised for saying this was “heroic”.

Hebron stabbing and shooting

In Hebron in 2016, a Palestinian called Abdel Fattah al-Sharif stabbed an Israeli soldier in the hand and shoulder before being shot and subdued. While he was lying wounded, another soldier called Elor Azaria shot Sharif in the head at close range, killing him. A video of the killing on the internet caused a lot of debate in Israel. Azaria eventually served nine months in prison for manslaughter.

Duma firebombing

Israeli settlers firebombed two Palestinian homes in the West Bank village of Duma in July 2015. Three members of the Dawabsheh family were killed, including an 18-month-old baby.

Settler couple murdered

In October 2015 a married Israeli couple were killed by Palestinian militants, who attacked their car. Eitam and Na’ama Henkin were from the West Bank settlement of Neria. Their four children were in the car.

Jenin Camp

At the height of the Second Intifada in 2002, Israeli forces attacked Jenin Refugee Camp in the West Bank, stating that it was the base for Palestinian attacks. The fighting was fierce, and to reduce its own casualties from booby traps, the Israeli forces used armoured bulldozers to plough through buildings. There were accusations of a massacre, but UN investigators estimated that 23 Israeli soldiers and 52–54 Palestinians, mostly gunmen, were killed.

Palestinian rocket attacks

Particularly from Gaza, Palestinian militants have fired thousands of rockets into Israel. The ‘Qassam’ rockets are cheap, easy to hide and move, but crude. They can’t be aimed precisely, meaning they are indiscriminate weapons. Since 2001 they have killed dozens, including 27 civilians according to B’Tselem, but the rockets also cause fear and trauma for Israelis.

Gaza bombardment 2008–2009

At the end of 2008, Israel launched the three-week Operation ‘Cast Lead’ in Gaza. The stated goal was to stop rocket attacks. There is debate about whether Israel intentionally targeted civilians, but of approximately 1,391 Palestinians killed, 759 were civilians according to B’Tselem.



Journaling

1. What are the similarities and differences between Israeli and Palestinian armed violence?
2. There is an old saying: "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter".

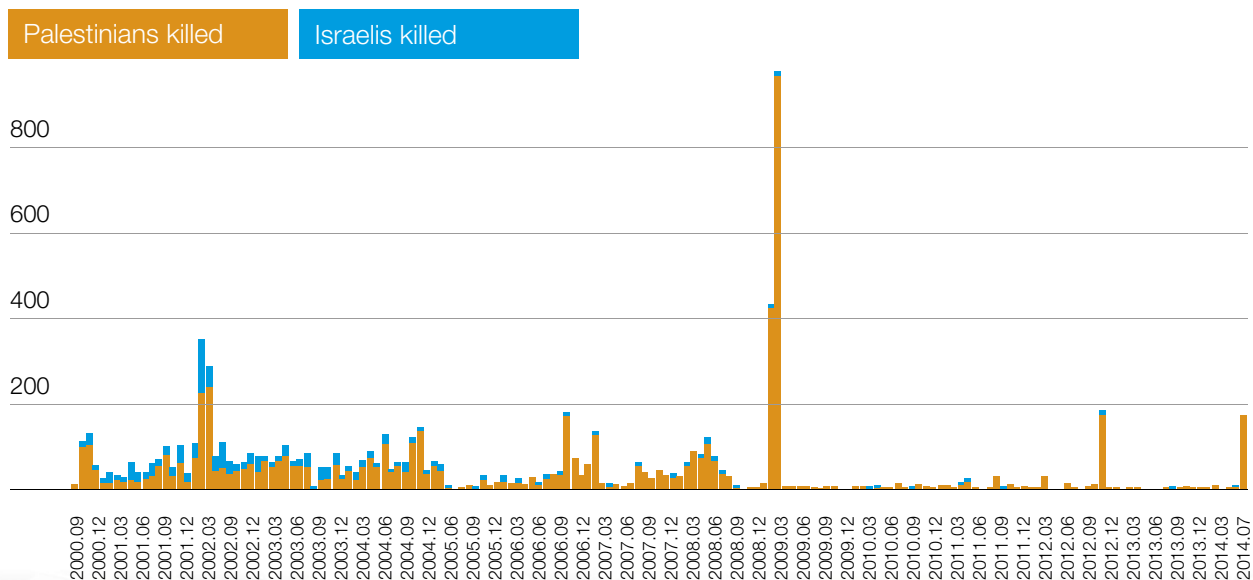
What does this mean, and how true do you think it is for Palestinians and Israelis?
3. Israeli casualties have fallen dramatically in recent years.

Does that mean the conflict is over?

Why? / Why not?
4. How far can anyone be said to be winning in the armed conflict?

Why?

Israel-Palestine conflict: deaths per month



Source: B'Tselem, OCHA

