

# The Palestinian quest for statehood

**Events:** In September 2011, Mahmoud Abbas, the chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), submitted a formal request for Palestine's admittance as a full-member state into the United Nations. The following month, the executive committee of UNESCO backed this bid in a 107–14 vote. In November 2012, the General Assembly of the UN voted overwhelmingly to recognize Palestine as a 'non-member observer state', giving Palestine access to other UN bodies, including the International Criminal Court. The emergence of a national consciousness amongst Palestinian Arabs can be traced back to a pre-WWI reaction against increasing Jewish immigration into Palestine (then loosely part of the Ottoman Empire), which was strengthened during WWI by British encouragement for Arab nationalism. The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 meant that the majority of Arab Palestinians became refugees, a problem exacerbated by the 1967 Six-Day War, after which Sinai, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and the Golan Heights were occupied by Israel. The Oslo Accords of 1993, the first face-to-face meeting between the PLO and the government of Israel, prepared the way for the establishment in 1996 of the Palestinian National Authority, which assumed governmental authority, but not sovereignty, for the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

**Significance:** The Palestinian quest for statehood has both legal and political dimensions. The legal status of Palestine is a matter of controversy and some confusion. The founding of the PLO in 1964, uniting a disparate collection of Palestinian Arab groups, did much to strengthen the notion of the Palestinians as a nation or people, separate from the larger Arab people and from existing states, such as Jordan, Egypt, Syria and Lebanon. However, it was not until the establishment of the Palestinian Authority that the Palestinians could be said to have a defined territory and an effective government, albeit one that lacked *de jure* and *de facto* sovereignty. The status of Palestine crucially underlines the role of the UN in establishing statehood through formal recognition. Palestine's transition from being a 'non-state entity' with an observer status in the UN General Assembly (granted in 1974) to being a 'non-member observer state' has not been endorsed by the UN Security Council and falls short of full membership of the UN, and thus full statehood.



Nevertheless, as of April 2013, 132 of the UN's 193 members had recognized the existence of the state of Palestine.

The political dimension of Palestinian statehood is substantially more important, however. The 'Palestinian problem' lies at the heart of the Arab–Israeli conflict and has poisoned the politics of the Middle East for decades. It is thus difficult to imagine meaningful progress in building mutual respect and understanding between the West and Islam, especially the Arab world, without improved relations between Israel and the Palestinians. Those who support Palestine's quest for statehood usually view the so-called 'two-state' solution as the only viable solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. In this view, the continuing denial of the Palestinians' right to sovereign independence can only strengthen political extremism, hostility towards Israel and, probably, violence. However, the creation of a Palestinian state may be difficult to achieve in practical terms. Not only is the Palestinian Authority divided territorially and politically (Hamas, the Palestinian militant group, controls the Gaza Strip, while the Fatah wing of the PLO governs the West Bank), but if a Palestinian state were constructed in line with the 1967 borders, this would mean that some 500,000 Israelis would be defined as living in another country. Many in Israel, nevertheless, have deeper reservations about the 'two-state' solution. For them, implacable Palestinian hatred of the state of Israel would mean that a sovereign Palestinian state would pose an ongoing, and intolerable, threat to the security and survival of Israel itself.