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e-mail: gulsenaydin@atauni.edu.tr**THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT THROUGH
AN INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK OF NEOREALISM
AND NEOCLASSICAL REALISM**

This article explains why the Israeli-Palestinian conflict persists despite intense international attention in the face of immense human suffering and repeated diplomatic efforts. It aims to provide an explanatory framework that links system-level pressures to domestic politics on both sides. Guided by Neorealism and Neoclassical Realism, the hypothesis is that power asymmetry, great-power positions, and regional mediation are filtered through domestic coalitions, state capacity, security-sector incentives, ideology, and leadership perceptions to produce a four-dimensional deadlock (Israeli, Palestinian, regional, international) that repeatedly narrows the bargaining space. Methodologically, the paper uses a qualitative, comparative case study across major turning points (1948, 1967, 1973/ Camp David, Oslo, 2006–2007, Gaza wars 2008–2021, and 2023–2025). The main result is a consistent mechanism: external pressures set the stage, but domestic filters determine choices, sustaining territorial ‘faits accomplis’ on the Israeli side and irregular tactics plus international appeals on the Palestinian side, while regional actors contain crises and U.S. support limits multilateral leverage. The contribution is theoretical and integrative: it unifies fragmented findings into a single explanatory framework that is tenable across time and escalation levels. Concerning policy-making, the article points to linked policy packages that work simultaneously on systemic incentives and domestic veto players to expand the bargaining space.

Keywords: Israeli-Palestinian conflict, neoclassical realism, neorealism, power asymmetry, negotiation deadlock.

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e-mail: gulsenaydin@atauni.edu.tr**Неореализм мен неоклассикалық реализмнің
біріккен тұжырымы негізінде
Израиль-Палестина қақтығысы**

Зерттеу жұмысында Израиль-Палестина қақтығысының халықаралық қауымдастықтың тұрақты назарын, ауқымды адам шығынын және көп мәрте жүргізілген дипломатиялық әрекеттерді ескергеннің өзінде неге сақталып отырғаны талданады. Зерттеудің мақсаты – халықаралық жүйе деңгейіндегі қысымдар мен екі тараптың ішкі саясаты арасындағы өзара байланысты түсіндіретін тұғырнамалық негіз ұсыну. Неореализм және неоклассикалық реализм қағидаларына сүйене отырып, автор күш асимметриясы, ұлы державалардың ұстанымдары және аймақтық делдалдық ішкі коалициялар, мемлекеттің институционалдық әлеуеті, қауіпсіздік секторының ынталандырулары, идеологиялық бағдарлар және көшбасшылардың қабылдауы арқылы өңделіп, төрт өлшемді (израильдік, палестиналық, аймақтық және халықаралық) тығырық қалыптастырады деген гипотеза ұсынады; бұл тығырық келіссөз жүргізу мүмкіндіктерін жүйелі түрде тарылтады. Әдіснамалық тұрғыдан мақала негізгі бетбұрыс кезеңдерін қамтитын сапалық салыстырмалы кейс-талдауды қолданады (1948, 1967, 1973/Кэмп-Дэвид, Осло, 2006–2007, 2008–2021 жылдардағы Газа соғыстары және 2023–2025). Негізгі нәтиже ретінде тұрақты механизм айқындалады: сыртқы қысымдар жалпы жағдайды қалыптастырғанымен, шешім қабылдау логикасын ішкі саяси шектеулер айқындайды. Соның нәтижесінде Израиль жағында аумақтық «орнықты фактілерді» бекіту үрдісі сақталса, Палестина жағында тұрақты емес (иррегуляр) тактикалар халықаралық институттарға және сыртқы қолдауға жүгінумен ұштасады. Аймақтық акторлар дағдарыстарды оқшаулауға және басқаруға ұмтылады, ал АҚШ қолдауы көпжақты қысымның ықпалын шектейді. Зерттеудің теориялық үлесі интегративті сипатқа ие: бытыраңқы қорытындылар уақыт кезеңдері мен эскалация деңгейлері әртүрлі жағдайларда қолдануға болатын біртұтас түсіндірмелік үлгіге біріктіріледі. Қолданбалы тұрғыдан келіссөз

лар мен ішкі «вето-ойыншыларға» бір мезгілде ықпал ететін өзара байланысқан саясат пакеттері ұсынылады.

Түйін сөздер: Израиль-Палестина қақтығысы, неоклассикалық реализм, неореализм, күш асимметриясы, келіссөз тығырығы.

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**Израильско-палестинский конфликт
в рамках интегрированной концепции неореализма
и неоклассического реализма**

В статье рассматриваются причины устойчивости израильско-палестинского конфликта, сохраняющегося несмотря на пристальное международное внимание, масштабные человеческие потери и неоднократные дипломатические инициативы. Цель исследования – предложить объяснительную рамку, связывающую системные факторы международной политики с внутривнутриполитическими процессами по обе стороны конфликта. Опираясь на неореализм и неоклассический реализм, автор выдвигает гипотезу о том, что асимметрия сил, позиции великих держав и региональное посредничество преломляются через конфигурации внутренних коалиций, государственную состоятельность, стимулы силового сектора, идеологические установки и восприятия лидеров. В результате формируется четырехуровневый тупик (израильский, палестинский, региональный и международный), который регулярно сужает пространство для переговоров. Методологически работа использует качественное сравнительное исследование случаев, охватывающее ключевые поворотные этапы (1948, 1967, 1973/Кэмп-Дэвид, Осло, 2006–2007, войны в Газе 2008–2021 и 2023–2025). Основной вывод состоит в выявлении устойчивого механизма: внешние воздействия задают контекст, однако конечный выбор определяется внутривнутриполитическими ограничителями. Это поддерживает на израильской стороне политику «свершившихся фактов» в территориальном измерении, а на палестинской – использование нерегулярных методов борьбы в сочетании с обращениями к международным институтам и общественному мнению. Региональные участники в основном ориентированы на локализацию кризисов, тогда как поддержка США ограничивает потенциал многостороннего давления. Теоретический вклад исследования носит интегративный характер: разрозненные объяснения объединяются в единую рамку, применимую на разных временных отрезках и уровнях эскалации. В прикладном плане предлагаются взаимосвязанные пакеты мер, одновременно воздействующие на системные стимулы и внутривнутриполитических «вето-игроков», что может расширить пространство для переговоров.

Ключевые слова: израильско-палестинский конфликт, неоклассический реализм, неореализм, асимметрия сил, тупик переговоров.

Introduction

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains a central issue in International Relations because it has proved resistant to diplomacy even when international attention and mediation are intense. This resistance poses a clear theoretical and practical problem: how do highly asymmetric rivals continue to fight, bargain, and entrench themselves for decades despite recurrent frameworks aimed at stopping violence and settling status questions? Recent developments have aggravated this problem rather than resolved it. In May 2024, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ordered Israel to halt military operations in Rafah as part of binding provisional measures; in June 2025, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly overwhelmingly demanded an immediate, unconditional, and lasting ceasefire; and in August 2025 Israel's political-security cabinet approved a plan to

take control of Gaza City –all of which increased attention but did not end the war or close the bargaining gap (ICJ, 2024; UN Geneva, 2025; Cornwell, Al-Mughrabi, & Greenfield, 2025). All these events reinforce the relevance of the topic and the ongoing need for comprehensive answers.

Existing studies provide valuable historical accounts and partial explanations, but a significant gap remains. Although existing studies examine war outcomes, diplomatic efforts, institutional arrangements, emerging actors, and the effects of settlement growth, closures, or targeted killings, they rarely connect system-level constraints with domestic-level filters in the cumulative analysis of all turning points. This study fills that gap by integrating two complementary strands of Realist theory in International Relations to explain why the conflict persists and intensifies over time. The hypothesis is that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict persists because it is

locked in a four-dimensional (Israeli, Palestinian, regional and international) deadlock.

Theoretically, the study explains the persistence of the conflict using Neoclassical Realism, which links pressures from the international system to leaders' choices through domestic filters, such as coalitions, state capacity, ideology, and threat perceptions (Rose, 1998; Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016). In the background is the Neorealist premise that the distribution of power sets basic constraints; however, Neoclassical Realism adds that internal politics and leadership assessments shape the concrete response to those constraints (Waltz, 1979; Rose, 1998). In short, external pressures matter, yet their effects depend on how domestic channels shape them (Schweller, 2006).

Methodologically, a qualitative comparative case study approach is applied across the turning points in the conflict (1948, 1967, 1973, Oslo, the 2006 election and 2007 split, Gaza wars 2008–2021, and 2023–2025), using a theory-guided comparison through which the same questions about external constraints, domestic filters, leadership perceptions, and resulting policy choices are asked for each turning point (George & Bennett, 2005). In specific cases, process tracing links particular decisions to these mechanisms (Beach & Pedersen, 2013). The aim is to show how systemic pressures (for example, great-power alignment and regional mediation) pass through Israeli and Palestinian domestic politics to result in the four-dimensional deadlock described in the hypothesis. To realize this aim, the study utilizes both primary and secondary resources.

Literature review

Neorealism (Structural Realism) is most closely associated with Kenneth Waltz, whose *Theory of International Politics* (1979) argues that the anarchic nature of the international system and the distribution of capabilities among states result in uniform patterns of state (unit) behavior, independent of domestic characteristics of units (Waltz, 1979: 39–72, 118). For Waltz, the structure, meaning the lack of a central authority in the international system, i.e., anarchy, leads states to act as rational, security-seeking units. All are locked in a self-help system where maximization of security (and sometimes power) is a rational response to anarchy (Waltz, 1979: 48–49, 58–59).

Offensive Realism and Defensive Realism emerged as the two camps in Neorealism over time. The function of the anarchic international system

and whether it promotes nations to maximize their power and influence or their security is one way that these two schools of thought differ from one another. The second point of difference concerns whether expansion and conquest are seen as profitable, and whether they drive harmful state behaviour such as overextension, self-encirclement, and continual expansion. The final distinction is whether states are primarily motivated by the pursuit of security or are revisionists in their aims (Lobell, 2010: 6652).

John Mearsheimer is a leading scholar of Offensive Realism; whose studies have explanatory power for this study. He contributes to Neorealism by arguing that states are not content with sufficient power for security; instead, they aim to maximize their power as the best guarantee of survival (Mearsheimer, 2001: 33). He outlines five core assumptions which renders international system inherently competitive: anarchy, offensive military capability, uncertainty about other states' intentions, survival as the primary goal, and rationality (Mearsheimer, 2001: 21–30).

Critics of Neorealism argue that neorealists struggle to account for when and how domestic attributes – leadership, political institutions, and elite ideologies – intervene in shaping foreign policy outcomes (Ashley, 1984: 239–246). Neoclassical realism, developed by Gideon Rose (1998), responds to the limits of Neorealism by bringing domestic-level factors into realist theory. Rose argues that pressures from the international system are filtered through a country's political structures and the perceptions of its leaders before they take shape as actual policies (Rose, 1998: 51). As such, neoclassical realism opens the black boxes of states and approach them as complex entities whose responses to the international environment are filtered by elite interpretations, political institutions, interest-group pressures, strategic culture, and resource mobilization capabilities (Morozowski, 2024; Lobell et al., 2009).

For Neoclassical Realism, material power is still the primary driver of foreign policy ambition, but the effect of power capabilities is indirect and mediated by a range of domestic variables (Rose, 1998: 146–148). As a result, states sometimes respond slowly or inconsistently to pressures from the international system – a pattern known as under balancing (Schweller, 2004: 159; 2006: 3–5). Neoclassical realism's flexibility helps explain why countries with similar power and facing the same external conditions can still adopt different strategies, and why even strong systemic pressures may

lead to fragmented or less-than-optimal responses, as seen in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

The research in the literature has identified some studies that explicitly employ Neorealism or Neoclassical Realism to analyze several key episodes of the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict. To start with research utilizing Neorealism, Rynhold (2008: 2, 9, 13) points out that while the Oslo Process relied on Liberal principles (2), aligning with Realist principles, changes in the balance of power motivated the parties to negotiate but not to reach a permanent settlement. Talib & Mwango (2015) view the Israeli–Palestinian conflict through the prism of Neorealism by showing that the UN’s ineffectiveness in resolving it arises from the structural realities of the international system rather than from merely procedural weaknesses. Looking from another aspect, Amour (2018) reflects on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict through a neorealist lens and deems it as the outcome of shifting regional power balances and systemic constraints that condition the strategic choices of the parties. He then turns to Neoclassical Realism to explain why Hamas and Fatah have pursued different paths toward reconciliation, pointing to the influence of domestic politics, leadership perceptions, and internal factional rivalries. Similarly, Ivaz (2022: 45) applies Neorealism to show that the policies of neighboring Arab states are driven mainly by pragmatic security concerns and regional power dynamics, which often lead to actions that do little to advance the Palestinian cause. Ullah and Xinlei (2025: 4) also utilize Neorealism but in a critical way to assert that because of its exclusive focus on material capabilities and systemic power politics, Neorealism misguides the analysis of identity-based conflicts and disregards the local political factors that can undermine – or even reverse – the impact of great-power strategies in this context.

Another body of literature uses Neoclassical Realism. To start with a historical analysis, Ediz (2019: 99–100; 112–17) explains the Balfour Declaration utilizing neoclassical realism and argues that Britain’s systemic concerns and regional balancing needs were translated into policy through elite perceptions and domestic calculations. Erden (2020) also examines the Oslo Peace Process through a neoclassical lens: while international incentives opened a window for bargaining, Israeli and Palestinian leadership coalitions, threat perceptions, and state capacities filtered those pressures and produced fragile cooperation that could not survive shock. In another context, a Neoclassical Realist lens is used to show how Likud governments under Benjamin Ne-

tanyahu balanced ideological commitments to territorial control with pragmatic adjustments to systemic pressures in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Pokrzywiński, 2019: 14). Arıkan (2025) explains the Israeli–Palestinian conflict through neoclassical realism as the result of both international pressures in an anarchic world and domestic factors that influence Israel’s security policy.

Alakel and Arab (2025) is one of the rare studies which integrates two Realist theories into the analysis. This study focuses on the period from 9/11 through the post–October 7 environment and shows that while global powers still matter, regional actors – both states and non-state groups – now shape many security outcomes. Their argument, rooted in structural and neoclassical realism, supports this study’s view that regional mediation often contains crises rather than resolves underlying issues, and that non-state actors complicate any settlement.

To conclude this section, it can be argued that most existing literature focuses on specific episodes – such as the Oslo process or the Gaza wars – without tracing how external and internal factors interact over time. As a result, there is limited overall analysis of how power asymmetry, domestic fragmentation, and regional mediation jointly shape the conflict’s persistence. This gap is especially visible in recent years, where new legal and diplomatic developments have emerged but failed to shift core incentives.

This study addresses that gap by combining both strands of realist theory in a structured analysis of key turning points. It links systemic pressures to domestic responses in both Israeli and Palestinian contexts, showing how these interactions produce a recurring deadlock. The next section explains the methodological approach used to carry out this analysis.

Methodology

This study’s research question is why does the Israeli–Palestinian conflict persist and at times intensify even when there is strong outside pressure to settle it? It starts with the hypothesis that the Israeli–Palestinian conflict persists because it is locked in a four-dimensional (Israeli, Palestinian, regional and international) deadlock. As for the Israeli dimension, superior capabilities, combined with coalition and security-sector incentives, sustain the creation of territorial–administrative facts accomplis (e.g., settlement expansion and outpost regularization, new roads and checkpoints/barriers, land-use and

permit regimes, administrative boundary changes). In the Palestinian dimension, fragmented authority and limited state capacity channel strategy toward irregular tactics and appeals to international platforms, which bring symbolic gains but little material change. Concerning the regional dimension, neighboring states (Egypt, Qatar, Jordan, and key Gulf countries) prioritize regime security, so they tend to mediate and contain rather than reorder alignments. Finally, in terms of the international context, the US gives Israel consistent political, military, and diplomatic backing – for example, by providing security aid and using its veto power in the UN Security Council. This strong support makes it harder for other countries or international bodies to put effective pressure on Israel. Taken together, when these international pressures and internal political factors interact, they leave the two sides with very few options they can both agree on. With so little common ground, negotiations keep stalling and ending in deadlock.

To answer the research question and to test whether the hypothesis holds, the study carries out a qualitative, comparative case study of the main turning points: 1948, 1967, 1973 (and the road to Camp David), Oslo (1993–1995), the 2006 election and 2007 split, the Gaza wars from 2008 to 2021, and the 2023–2025 escalation. These cases were chosen because each reset expectations, rules, or territorial control and therefore reveal how structure and domestic politics interacted over time.

This study utilizes both primary and secondary resources. While primary resources include ICJ and UN documents and news, secondary resources comprise books, book chapters, journal articles, and analytical reports. These materials are organized into a case matrix with four columns (Israeli, Palestinian, regional, international) and four linked questions for each turning point: What were the external constraints? What were the domestic filters? What choices followed? What outcomes resulted?

The approach is novel in the sense that the same two-level realist lens is applied consistently to all major turning points, and the four-dimension framework makes the analysis comparable across time. This design shows systemic pressures and domestic politics combine to reproduce stalemate.

Results and discussion

This section first explores the development of the conflict with a focus on the turning points and then applies Neorealism and Neoclassical Realism

to these turning points to figure out why the conflict endures.

Development of the Israeli-Conflict: Both Arabs and Jews claim Palestine as their homeland and regard the land as historically and religiously paramount. While Israelis trace their existence in the land to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah (Malamat, 1976: 3), Arabs emphasize their lineage to the Canaanites and Philistines, who lived in Palestine long before these kingdoms (Maissy-Noy, 2006: 892). Jews suffered multiple exiles from ancient Palestine, mainly after the conquests by powerful empires, including the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Roman empires (Wilke, 2022). Despite spreading worldwide due to these exoduses, Jewish communities maintained their identity and homeland narratives (Safran, 2005: 36).

The Arab-Israeli conflict began in 1881 when a small group of Zionist Jews fleeing European anti-Semitism emigrated to Palestine, then under Ottoman rule. After Britain took control of Palestine came under British control, Zionists sought statehood through diplomacy and by building communities there. They reached a significant milestone with the Balfour Declaration, expressing British support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine in 1917 (Pressman, 2005: 2-3). With the influx of Jewish immigrants and the subsequent demographic, political, and social changes, the region plunged into inter-communal competition and violence (Danfulani et al., 2021: 26). While the British rule was nearing an end, The United Nations (UN) passed Resolution 181 (the Partition Plan) to divide the British Mandate of Palestine into Arab and Jewish states and bestow Jerusalem with a protected international status in 1947 (Bennis, 1997: 47).

The clashes between Jewish and Palestinian communities before the end of the British mandate, followed by the war involving Arab armies and Israel, concluded in Israel's victory and the establishment of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948 (Khalidi, 1991: 8). As Palestine disappeared from maps, Arabs called their defeat Nakba (Catastrophe) (Dallaseh, 2020). 750,000 Palestinians were displaced, and the former British mandate was divided into the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and the State of Israel (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). While Gaza came under Egyptian rule until 1967, the West Bank was annexed by Jordan. Israel was established on about 78% of historic Palestine following the 1947 UN partition plan, and its borders gained international recognition (Manna', 2013: 91-92).

Israeli success in the next conflict, the 1956 Suez Crisis, fortified its status as a notable regional power (Louis, 2009). In the 1967 War, Israel seized the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights (Machairas, 2017). The UN Security Council Resolution 242, adopted after this war, deemed the acquisition of land through war as inadmissible and demanded the withdrawal of the Israeli army from territories captured in the war (Lynk, 2007: 7). However, it was in the aftermath of this war that Israeli settlement construction in the occupied Palestinian Territories began, coinciding with Israeli control of the West Bank and Gaza (Fahoum and Abuelaish, 2019: 266). Their armies' defeat in the 1967 War also increased sympathy for the Palestinian Resistance Movement in Arab countries (Ghanem, 2023: 18). This set a new course in the conflict against Israel, turning the conflict between Israel and Arab armies into a guerrilla fight against Israel (Siklawi, 2017). Amidst this transformation, in 1969, Yasser Arafat assumed the presidency of the Fatah, Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), the largest guerrilla unit of the Palestinian resistance (Bourdon, 2012: 6).

In 1974, the UN recognized the PLO as the exclusive representative of Palestinians and invited it to participate as an observer within UN bodies (Ben-nis, 2009). The two-state solution framework, which refers to a separate Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, was initially proposed in 1973-74 and solidified as a policy of the PLO by the end of the 1970s (Khalidi, 1985: 88-89).

Arab neighbors of Israel would progressively pull out of the battle against Israel, but not before another significant conflict in 1973 (Kelman, 2007: 289). In the Ramadan or the Yom Kippur War in 1973, Israel managed to halt the initial Arab offensive despite early setbacks. (Kumaraswamy, 2007: 1). The most important political outcome of this round of conflict turned out to be the Camp David Accord. Within the framework of Camp David, the US, Israel, and Egypt agreed to institute a self-governing entity in the West Bank and Gaza to replace the Israeli military administration (Sayegh, 1979: 4). Israel also gave the Sinai Peninsula back to Egypt in 1982 within the framework of Camp David and normalized its relations with Cairo (Shamir, 1982: 795).

The occupation of Lebanon by Israel in 1982 proved to be another turning point. On June 5, 1982, Israel invaded this country to counter the growing influence of Syria and the PLO in Lebanon (Freilich, 2012: 43). Despite the initial success of eradicating

PLO bases, the invasion intensified the clashes with Lebanese militias. It also led to the consolidation of several local Shia Muslim movements in Lebanon, most notably Hezbollah, with the support of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard (Norton, 2007: 466-467). Consequently, Iran came to champion the Palestinian cause when Arab countries had largely deserted it (Khashan cited in Salhani, 2023).

The Palestinians resisted Israeli occupation through the First and Second Intifada in 1988 and 2000, respectively. By increasing civil disobedience and clashes, intifadas marked a shift in the nature of the conflict (Naser-Najjab and Khatib, 2019: 194-201). The First Intifada also led to the emergence of a new political actor, Hamas, and its armed wing, the Izz ed-Din al-Qassam Brigades (Nasrallah, 2013: 59). By the end of the 1980s, it became a significant political force, often ranking second to Fatah of Arafat in elections (Sharoni and Abu-Nimer, 2004: 173). Hamas has gained considerable influence at the expense of PLO, partly because of its well-structured network that offers social services and charity to Palestinians, thereby enhancing civil society (Pina, 2006; Hroub, 2004: 24).

The fading of the First Intifada brought new geopolitical circumstances that served as the foundation for the Oslo peace process (Farraj, 2019). In 1993, Israel and the PLO signed the first of two agreements making up the Oslo Accords. This deal established a peace process referring to the previous UN resolutions and initiated some degree of Palestinian self-government in the West Bank and Gaza. The parties signed a subsequent accord in 1995. These agreements established the Palestinian Authority for the most administrative tasks in these regions. Israel and the US recognized the PLO as a negotiation partner. However, the thorny matters of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the status of Jerusalem remained unsettled (Westfall et al., 2023). The unrelenting Israeli expansion and the unmet Palestinian expectations for improved freedom of movement and socioeconomic conditions led to growing resentment. The Camp David Summit fiasco in July 2000 further fuelled this discontent, setting the stage for a more confrontational approach towards Israel (Pressman, 2003: 114).

The Second (Al-Aqsa) Intifada started in September 2000 following the visit of Israeli politician Sharon to the politically and religiously significant Al-Aqsa compound. It was characterized by an increase in suicide bombings and other attacks by Palestinian factions, including Hamas (BBC, 2004; Matta and Rojas, 2016).

Amid the Second Intifada, Israel's policy of targeted assassinations reached a peak in the spring of 2004 with the killing of Hamas' top figures, Yassin, and his successor, Rantisi. Despite a relentless campaign aimed at weakening Hamas, these events paradoxically led to a surge in its popularity. As Palestinians faced unprecedented hardship and despair, witnessing the destruction and fragmentation of their lands in exchange for their historic concessions, Hamas emerged as a symbol of Palestinian dignity and a defender of their rights (Hroub, 2004: 21-22; Swaraj, 2023: 177). In response to the escalating violence, Israel reasserted its control over the West Bank cities, previously left to Palestinian control by the Oslo Accords. However, after the death of Arafat in late 2004 and the truce between Sharon and Abbas following the latter's election in early 2005, the violence abated (Schachter, 2010: 64-65).

In 2005, Israeli Prime Minister Sharon embarked on withdrawing Israeli forces from Gaza. The following year, the Bush administration, while ambitiously promoting its democracy plan in the Middle East, demanded elections in Palestine. The ensuing elections resulted in Hamas gaining power, causing a split among the Palestinian people that persists to this day (Hirsh, 2023). After the victory of Hamas, the Palestinian Authority has become helpless and hardly relevant, a situation that has been exacerbated in part by the decision of Israeli authorities to sideline and marginalize the Palestinian Authority (Hill, 2023).

In 2007, the strain between the PLO and Hamas reached a critical point, resulting in an armed conflict in the Gaza Strip that ended with Hamas taking over the area. Following this, Abbas disbanded the Hamas-dominated legislature and formed an emergency government. This action essentially reinstated the PLO's control in the West Bank (Brown, 2010), but the loss of the Gaza Strip has turned out to be permanent. Israel's pressure on Palestine has intensified due to the Hamas' uncompromising political stance. The group's aggressive image has also compromised the empathy and backing for the Palestinian cause (Uslu and Karataş, 2020: 110).

After Hamas seized control of Gaza in 2007, Israel implemented a land, air, and sea blockade. Meanwhile, the IDF has carried out a series of operations against Hamas in Gaza: Cast Lead (2008–09), Pillar of Defense (2012), Protective Edge (2014), and Guardians of the Walls in May 2021 (Tivadar, 2021). Meanwhile, thwarting all of US President Obama's attempts to broker peace, Netanyahu ex-

panded settlements in the West Bank after his victory in the 2009 elections (Hirsh, 2023).

The war that began on 7 October 2023, when Hamas and other armed groups killed about 1,200 people in Israel and took more than 250 hostages, has, by August 2025, caused immense civilian suffering and widened instability across the Middle East (OHCHR, 2025). While over 63,000 have been killed and over 160,000 injured in Gaza, famine and disease have been increasing the casualties (Refugees International, 2025). The UN-backed Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) confirmed famine in Gaza City in August 2025, warning that over half a million people face "catastrophic" hunger; at least 361 people, including 130 children, have died from starvation and malnutrition (IPC, 2025; Refugees International, 2025). Due to Israeli restrictions, ongoing bombardment, and looting by the desperate population, it is very difficult to supply food, water, and medical supplies (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2025; UN News, 2025).

The fighting has not been limited to Gaza. Israel used airstrikes, drones, and missiles to carry out almost 35,000 attacks on the occupied Palestinian land, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Iran between October 2023 and June 2025 (Al Jazeera, 2025). Supported by highly sophisticated aircraft provided by the US, these attacks have targeted Israel's regional enemies, demonstrating the country's outstanding capacity to punish its enemies even if they are far away (Al Jazeera, 2025). The United States has limited international maneuvers to end the fighting by continuing to provide Israel with significant political, military, and diplomatic support during the conflict. This support includes security aid and repeated vetoes of UN Security Council resolutions calling for a ceasefire (Brown, 2024). With trust between the parties at a low point, the humanitarian crisis worsening, and the conflict spilling into neighboring states, attempts at negotiations have repeatedly failed, leaving civilians across the region facing ongoing violence, hunger, and displacement (Refugees International, 2025).

Applying the method to the main turning points. In 1948, the end of the British Mandate and the Resolution 181 (the Partition Plan) laid an anarchic ground with few external restraints on Israel. This situation exactly fitted the kind of structure rewarding the actors that can mobilize power quickly, according to Neorealism. From that view, the emerging Israeli side, facing uncertain neighbors and no central authority, moved fast to secure terri-

tory and recognition. Neoclassical explains why this response succeeded: Israeli leaders had cohesive organizations, a clear state-building project, and the capacity to mobilize resources, while Palestinian politics were fragmented and lacked a centralized coercive apparatus. At the end of the day, the structural conditions and the domestic filters interacted to produce Israeli statehood, war, and mass Palestinian displacement – outcomes that then hardened status questions for decades.

In 1967, crisis escalation and shifts in the military balance favored rapid offensive action in a self-help environment – very much a neorealist story about opportunity and fear under anarchy. The war's outcome created a new map and a bargaining frame built around territory and security guarantees. Neoclassical Realism clarifies why policies after the war moved toward settlement building and holding key areas: Israeli security elites prioritized strategic depth; governing coalitions faced incentives from ideological and bureaucratic constituencies; and Arab regimes, dealing with their own domestic constraints, struggled to coordinate a unified response. The result was a pattern of territorial control and a “land-for-peace” logic that never fully closed the gap.

The 1973 war and the path to Camp David show how a painful military shock can reset deterrence and open room for a hegemon to broker deals – a classic neorealist mechanism. However, the form that peace took depended on leadership trade-offs at home. Neoclassical Realism can be used to shed light on how Egyptian leaders gave priority to regime stability and the economy over continuing confrontation with Israel, and how Israeli leadership balanced the need for security against the political repercussions of disengagement. The outcome proved to be a separate peace agreement and a return of the Sinai Peninsula. However, the Palestinian question ended up in a limited autonomy scheme, leaving significant issues unsettled.

Oslo in the 1990s reflected a favorable structural window (U.S. dominance and a reduced threat of interstate war), which a neorealist lens treats as easing the path to agreement. Still, whether that window produced a durable settlement hinged on domestic filters. On the Israeli side, coalition politics and competing narratives constrained how far leaders could go; on the Palestinian side, state capacity was thin and public expectations were high. Neoclassical Realism, therefore, explains the pattern: an interim authority and mutual recognition, but key final-status issues deferred. When day-to-day life did not

improve and spoilers on both sides perceived gains from defection, disappointment fed renewed confrontation.

Between 2006 and 2007, outside powers tried to control Palestinian politics by tying aid and diplomatic access to three demands: recognizing Israel, renouncing violence, and accepting earlier agreements. In a system without a central authority (as Neorealism stresses) pressure works through leverage; it can push but not dictate. What followed was shaped by domestic politics, in line with Neoclassical Realism. Rival factions, fragile common institutions, and competing security forces pulled in different directions. Leaders answered to their own constituencies and guarded their power bases. The outcome was the reverse of what outsiders wanted: the split hardened, with Fatah running the West Bank and Hamas ruling Gaza as two rival centers of authority. In Israel, security policy and public sentiment backed keeping Gaza apart from the West Bank while managing risk. The result was recurring clashes.

From 2008 to 2021, repeated Gaza wars can be best understood by applying Neoclassical Realism: Israeli cabinets prioritized military efficacy and domestic political costs; Hamas balanced its role as both armed actor and governing authority; each side had domestic supporters and organizational incentives that made limited wars and temporary cease-fires more likely than meaningful compromise. The cycle of escalation, punishment, and pause became the default because the domestic filters on both sides translated systemic pressure into short-term fixes rather than long-term change.

The 2023–2025 phase again shows the two levels working together. The Offensive version of Neorealism holds that each state inherently has the capacity to harm or destroy the others, even without advanced weaponry, because the anarchic international system compels them to prepare for and, when advantageous, employ force (Mearsheimer, 1995: 10). While military strength is often measured in sophisticated weapons systems, the theory stresses that even basic means—such as manpower – can function as a credible threat. The October 7 Hamas attack on Israel illustrates this logic: despite Israel's overwhelming technological and military superiority, Hamas leveraged surprise, unconventional tactics, and the mobilization of fighters to inflict significant damage and temporarily alter the strategic balance. However, structurally, from the perspective of Neorealism, strong backing from a key great power, limited coordination among others, and re-

gional mediation set the limits of what Hamas can achieve.

From a Neoclassical Realist perspective, this attack cannot be explained by systemic conditions alone; domestic political calculations within Hamas, leadership perceptions of Israeli vulnerabilities, and the group's need to bolster its legitimacy among Palestinians acted as critical filters that shaped the decision to launch such a high-risk operation under enduring structural constraints. Neoclassical Realism also explains the intensity and persistence of the war: Israeli decision-making was shaped by war-cabinet dynamics, coalition pressures, and security-sector preferences; Palestinian politics were split and capacity was limited, with rival centers of authority and competing strategies. These domestic filters converted the same external pressures into choices that escalated violence, deepened humanitarian harm, and kept the bargaining gap open. In sum, at every turning point, the structure of the system set the stage, but domestic politics decided how the play unfolded – and together they repeatedly reproduced stalemate, resulting in a terrible human tragedy, in addition to harm to the environment.

Conclusion

This study has aimed to explain the underlying reasons for the persistence of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, rather than simply describing or narrating the conflict. It asked how external pressures and internal politics combine to produce prolonged periods of stalemate. To answer this, the paper used a qualitative, theory-guided comparison across key turning points (1948, 1967, 1973/Camp David, Oslo, 2006–2007, Gaza wars 2008–2021, and 2023–2025), supported by selective process tracing. The analysis integrated two realist lenses: neorealism (system structure, power distribution, great-power and regional constraints) and Neoclassical Realism (how domestic filters – coalitions, state capacity, security-sector incentives, ideology, leadership perceptions – translate those pressures into concrete choices).

The analysis has identified the same mechanism across all cases: system-level pressures pass through domestic filters and bring about a four-dimensional

deadlock (Israeli, Palestinian, regional, international). On the Israeli side, superior capabilities, coalition politics, and security-sector incentives foster territorial-administrative faits accomplis. On the Palestinian side, strategy leans toward irregular tactics and international forums due to fractured authority and insufficient capability. This situation leads to symbolic achievements with minimal change in reality. In the region, most governments focus first on protecting their own rule. That is why they usually try to manage and limit crises rather than reshaping the bigger balance of who sides with whom. In the international arena, US backing raises the threshold for effective external pressure while multilateral enforcement remains weak. The most recent escalation (2023–2025) follows the same pattern, indicating that the framework proves to be tenable across time and intensity levels.

The findings support the central hypothesis: persistence is not the product of a single cause but of interacting constraints across four arenas. Neorealism sets the external limits of what is possible; neoclassical realism shows why, within those limits, leaders repeatedly select options that narrow the bargaining space. The contribution is theoretical and comprehensive: it links structure to agency in a consistent way across multiple turning points, turning a fragmented literature into a single causal explanation. In doing so, the study updates our understanding of the conflict from event-driven narratives to a mechanism-based explanation that accounts for both continuity and change.

As for the ways to end the deadlock, the efforts must focus on both levels at once: improve systemic incentives (credible guarantees, coordinated great-power positions, sets of regional security, economic, and political agreements) and reshape domestic filters (who wins or loses from joining a governing coalition, who keeps the security forces in check, how strong and capable state institutions are, and whether leaders are answerable for what they do). Mediators should build connected packages of security, political, and economic steps to reduce veto-player power on each dimension of the stalemate.

Future research can apply the same framework to other protracted, asymmetric conflicts to suggest conflict resolution frameworks.

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