Intifada is Arabic for “shaking off” but in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict it came to mean “uprising.” Between 1987 and 2005, two intifadas aimed to create a Palestinian state. The first began in December 1987 and ended with the September 1993 signing of the Oslo Accords, which provided a framework for peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. The second (“al-Aqsa”) intifada began in September 2000. Although no event signaled its end, most analysts agree that it ran its course by late 2005.

The proximate causes of the first intifada were intensified Israeli land expropriation and settlement construction in the West Bank and Gaza after the electoral victory of the right-wing Likud party in 1977; increasing Israeli repression in response to heightened Palestinian protests since 1982; the emergence of a new cadre of local Palestinian activists who challenged the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) – a process aided by Israel’s stepped-up attempts to repress political activism and break the PLO’s ties to the occupied territories in the early 80s; and, in reaction to the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the emergence of a strong peace camp on the Israeli side, which many Palestinians thought provided a basis for change in Israeli policy. With motivation, means, and perceived opportunity in place, only a precipitant was required for collective action – a fatality involving a military vehicle that was rumored to be an act of Israeli revenge for a stabbing a few days earlier.

Most of the Palestinian rioting took place during the intifada’s first year, after which a shift occurred from throwing rocks and Molotov cocktails to attacking with rifles, hand grenades, and explosives. The shift occurred mainly because of the severity of Israeli military and police repression, which intensified after Palestinian attacks became more violent. According to data from B’Tselem, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, 1,265 deaths due to collective violence occurred during the 69 months of the first intifada, nearly 90 percent of them Palestinian.

Pragmatism crystallized alongside the violence. In 1988, the PLO accepted American conditions for opening a dialogue – rejecting terrorism, recognizing Israel’s right to exist, and accepting UN Security Council resolution 242 calling for Israel’s withdrawal to its pre-1967 borders. With the intifada proving to be politically and economically damaging to Israel, a new Israeli government was elected in 1992 with a mandate to sue for peace. The United States pressured both sides to come to the bargaining table, and negotiations resulted in the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. The Accords reiterated the PLO’s 1988 commitments, while Israel recognized the PLO as the Palestinian people’s legitimate representative, agreed to withdraw in stages from the West Bank and Gaza, and allowed the creation of a Palestinian Authority (PA) to govern those areas. Outstanding matters were to be settled over the next five years.

Just as the PLO turned to pragmatism, a new organization, Hamas, turned in the opposite direction, articulating a vision of an Islamic state in all of historic Palestine. In 1993, it rejected the Oslo Accords, and in a move to scuttle peace talks, initiated a series of suicide attacks against Israeli targets. Between 1993 and 1997, 20 such bombings killed 175 Israelis and their attackers. Israel retaliated but in a focused way. Some 635 fatalities due to collective violence were recorded in the 84 months between the signing of the Oslo Accords and the beginning of the second intifada, just 40 percent of the
monthly fatality rate during the first intifada. The ratio of Palestinian to Israeli deaths was a relatively low 1.6:1. Talks continued.

Israel never stopped building settlements in the occupied territories during the Oslo lull, and the Palestinians tried to force the issue by importing arms and building up security forces in violation of the terms of the accords. As a result, talks broke down in 2000 in a wave of frustration and mutual recrimination. Shortly afterwards, Prime Ministerial candidate Ariel Sharon visited the esplanade of al-Aqsa mosque as an assertion of Israel’s sovereignty over Islam’s third holiest site. Rioting broke out, and Israeli police responded with lethal force. Unrest quickly spread throughout the occupied territories. The second intifada had begun.

The second intifada was much more violent than the first intifada, and the ratio of Palestinian to Israeli deaths due to collective violence was much less skewed. Over 64 months, 4,361 fatalities were registered, for a monthly fatality rate 3.7 times higher than that during the first intifada. The ratio of Palestinian to Israeli deaths was 3.4:1, largely because 138 suicide bombings took the lives of 657 Israelis and their attackers.

In March 2002, following an especially horrific suicide bombing that killed 30 people and injured 140, the Israeli army launched Operation Defensive Shield. Some 20,000 troops reoccupied the West Bank and part of Gaza in order to “crush all forms and all elements of the terrorist infrastructure,” in the words of the Defense Minister. A year later, Israel started building a physical and electronic separation barrier in the West Bank to prevent suicide attacks. Completion of a similar barrier in Gaza in 1996 ensured that only a fifth of suicide attacks were launched from Gaza during the second intifada, and the new barrier soon proved similarly effective in the West Bank. Also helping to suppress the uprising were some 210 state-directed assassinations of Palestinian military operatives and political leaders.

Although the violence had nearly petered out by 2005, the conditions causing it had in some respects worsened. Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank continued. Tight controls were placed on the movement of goods and people, stifling economic growth. Negotiations were at a standstill. The PA lost support amid charges of widespread corruption. Many Palestinians now turned to Hamas, which won the 2006 legislative elections and took power by force in Gaza in 2007. After two intifadas and the death of nearly 5,000 Palestinians and 1,400 Israelis, nothing had been resolved.

Further Reading

