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TIMELINE: Milestones in six decades of Middle East conflict

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Dec 27 - The following timeline presents some of the main events in 60 years of conflict between Israel, the Palestinians and Arab countries since the founding of the Jewish state.

* State of Israel declared in May 1948. British troops leave and fighting breaks out with Arab neighbors. Some 700,000 Palestinians, half the Arab population of British-ruled Palestine, fled or were driven from their homes. Arab troops intervened but lost some of the land the United Nations had assigned to Palestinians. Armistice pacts halted the fighting a year later but there was no formal peace.

* In 1956 Israel invaded the Gaza Strip and Sinai in conjunction with the Suez Canal campaign launched by Britain and France against Egypt. Israel withdrew six months later.

* In 1965 the Palestinian guerrilla movement Fatah carried out its first military operation inside Israel.

* In 1967 Israeli strikes against Egypt and Syria launched the Six Day War. Israel has occupied the West Bank, Arab East Jerusalem, and Syria's Golan Heights ever since.

* Palestinian guerrillas killed 11 Israelis at the 1972 Olympics in Munich.

* In 1973, Egypt and Syria attacked Israeli positions along the Suez Canal and Golan Heights, beginning the Yom Kippur War. Israel pushed both armies back within three weeks.

* Religious Zionists in 1974 founded Gush Emunim to promote Jewish settlement expansion in the occupied territories.

* In 1976, Israeli commandos at Entebbe, Uganda, rescued over 100 mostly Jewish hostages held by Palestinian hijackers.

* Egypt's President Anwar Sadat, after a landmark visit to Israel ending 30 years of hostility, joined Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and U.S. President Jimmy Carter at the White House in 1979 to sign Israel's first peace accord with an Arab state.

* Two years later, Israeli planes destroyed Iraq's nuclear reactor site, thwarting Saddam Hussein's atom bomb plans.

* Israel handed back Sinai to Egypt in 1982.

* That same year, Israel invaded Lebanon to drive out Palestinian guerrillas. Hundreds of Palestinian civilians were massacred at Beirut's Sabra and Shatila refugee camps by Lebanese Christian militiamen allowed in by Israeli troops.

* In December 1987 the first Palestinian Intifada, or uprising, broke out in occupied territories. About 400 Israelis and 1,500 Palestinians were killed over the ensuing 6 years.

- * In 1988, the Palestine Liberation Organization under Yasser Arafat offered a Palestinian state living in peace with Israel but Israel dismissed the PLO's proposals.
- * Massive immigration of Jews from the Soviet Union began in 1991. Some 700,000 arrived in Israel as Communism collapsed.
- * A Middle East peace conference convened in Madrid that year. In 1993, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Arafat shook hands on the Oslo Accords on limited Palestinian autonomy.
- * Israel signed a peace treaty with Jordan in 1994.
- * Jewish ultranationalist Yigal Amir assassinated Rabin on November 4, 1995.
- * Talks on returning the Golan Heights to Syria collapsed in 2000. Israeli troops quit south Lebanon and the Camp David peace summit with Arafat and Israeli premier Ehud Barak failed.
- * The second Intifada began that same year.
- * In 2003 the Quartet -- the United States, European Union, United Nations and Russia -- made public a "road map" to peace talks. Arafat died the following year and Fatah's Mahmoud Abbas took over as president of the Palestinian Authority.
- * In 2005 Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Abbas declared a ceasefire and Israel pulled its troops and settlers out of the Gaza Strip after 38 years of occupation. Sharon was later hit by a stroke and succeeded by Ehud Olmert.
- * The Islamist group Hamas, steadily rising in power, won the Palestinian parliamentary election in January 2006.
- * War erupted in Lebanon after Hezbollah militants captured two Israeli soldiers and Israel responded with its full military might. At least 1,100 people in Lebanon and 157 Israelis were killed in 34 days of fighting.
- * Hamas forces routed Abbas loyalists in a week of fighting in Gaza in June 2007. Fatah lost all power in the strip. In the West Bank, Abbas dismissed a Hamas-led unity government.
- * In November 2007, a conference hosted by President George W. Bush at Annapolis, Maryland relaunched peace talks, aiming for a deal on a Palestinian state by end-2008.
- * The Annapolis process stalled and Olmert was forced to quit in September 2008 over a corruption inquiry. Speaking as caretaker, he said Israel must give up nearly all occupied land.
- * Hamas tightened its grip on the Gaza Strip and agreed on a ceasefire with Israel in June 2008. But a relatively calm summer gave way to renewed clashes as the truce reached the six-month mark, and the Israeli blockade of Gaza bit deeper.
- * Hamas declared the truce over on December 19 and Gaza militants stepped up rocket attacks on Israel, causing few casualties but sowing fear among Israelis living in rocket range. Both sides signaled they did not want any escalation. But Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said he would not hesitate to use Israeli might to crush Hamas if the rockets did not stop.
- * A day after opening Gaza border crossings to allow deliveries of fuel and food aid, and following top-level talks in Egypt between President Hosni

Mubarak and Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, Israeli forces struck with fighter planes and helicopters, killing over 155 people in Gaza, at least 100 of them Hamas policemen.

(Editing by Douglas Hamilton and Angus MacSwan)

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