

Israel and Palestine:

# A Brief Background to the Modern Conflict

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Towards the end of the 1800s as the Jewish people were facing more persecution and anti-Semitism in Europe, there were questions as to how the Jewish people can overcome this. The biblical Promised Land led to a political movement, Zionism, to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

From 1920 to 1947, the British Empire had a mandate over Palestine. At that time, Palestine included all of Israel and today's Occupied Territories, of Gaza, West Bank, etc. The increasing number of Jewish people immigrating to the "Holy Land" increased tensions in the region. European geopolitics in the earlier half of the 20th century in the wider Middle East region contributed to a lot of instability overall. The British Empire, especially, played a major role in the region.

During World War I, in 1916, it convinced Arab leaders to revolt against the Ottoman Empire (which was allied with Germany). In return, the British government would support the establishment of an independent Arab state in the region, including Palestine. Yet, in contradiction to this, and to also get support of Jewish people, in 1917, Lord Arthur Balfour, then British Foreign Minister, issued a declaration (the Balfour Declaration). This announced the British Empire's support for the establishment of "a Jewish national home in Palestine."

As a further complication, there was a deal between Imperial Britain and France to carve up the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire and divide control of the region. The spoils of war were to be shared. As in 1885 in the Berlin Conference where Africa was carved up amongst the various European empires, parts of the Middle East were to also be carved up, which would require artificial borders, support of monarchies, dictators and other leaders that could be regarded as "puppets" or at least could be influenced by these external powers.

After World War II, the newly formed United Nations (which then had less developing countries as members) recommended the partition of Palestine into two states and the internationalization of Jerusalem. The minority Jewish people received the majority of the land. The State of Israel was proclaimed on May 14 1948, but the Arab states rejected the partition of Palestine and the existence of Israel. The armies of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Trans-Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Egypt attacked but were defeated by the Israeli army.

While the Jewish people were successful in creating their homeland, there was no Palestine and no internationalization of Jerusalem, either. In 1948 for example, Palestinians were driven out of the new Israel into refugee camps in Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and other regions. At least 750,000 people are said to have been driven out (or ethnically cleansed, as some have described it). However, this aspect is not usually mentioned by mainstream media when recounting various historical events.

In 1956, Britain, France and Israel invaded the Sinai peninsula after Egypt nationalized the Suez canal due to fears of loss of a major economic trading route entry point for the West to the rest of the Middle East. While Egypt was defeated, international (US, really) pressure forced their withdrawal.

In 1967, Israel simultaneously attacked Egypt, Syria and Jordan in a "pre-emptive strike" against the Arab troops along its borders. Israel captured key pieces of land, such as the strategic Golan Heights to the north on the border with Syria, to the West Bank from Jordan and the Gaza strip from Egypt. In fact,

Israel more than doubled its size in the six days that this war took place. Since then, negotiations have been around returning land to pre-1967 states, as required by international law and UN resolutions.

In 1973, Egypt and Syria attacked Israel on the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur to attempt to regain their lost land, but failed.

In 1978, the Camp David accords were signed between Israel, Egypt and the US, and Israel returned Sinai back to Egypt in return for peace between them. To many in the Arab world, Egypt had sold out to US pressure. To the US and Israel, this was a great achievement; Egypt was obviously not to be underestimated in its capabilities, so the best thing would be to ensure it is an ally, not an adversary.

Also in 1978, due to rising Hizbollah attacks from South Lebanon, where many Palestinian refugees still were, Israel attacked and invaded Lebanon. In 1982, Israel went as far up Lebanon as Beirut, as bloody exchanges followed between Israeli attempts to bomb Yasser Arafat's PLO locations, and Hizbollah retaliations. In 1985, Israel declared a strip of South Lebanon to be a Security Zone (never recognized by the UN, and hence Israel was always occupying this other nation.) Many civilians were killed on both sides. Israeli forces were accused of massacres on many occasions. After 22 years, Israel withdrew in May 2000. One of the leading Israeli military personnel was Sharon.

In the late 1980s came the Palestinian uprising -- the Intifada. While there was much of a non-violence movement initially, the mainstream media concentrated on the violence. Young Palestinians confronted Israeli troops with nothing more than sling shots and stones. Thousands were killed by the Israeli military. Many suicide activists killed Israeli soldiers and caused other damage. Many innocent civilians were killed on both sides.

1993 saw the Oslo Peace Accord, whereby Israel recognized the PLO and gave them limited autonomy in return for peace and an end to Palestinian claims on Israeli territory. This has been largely criticized as a one-sided accord that benefits only Israel, not the Palestinian people. It resulted in Israeli control of land, water, roads and other resources.

In 1994, Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip and Jericho, ending twenty seven years of occupation. A Palestinian police force replaced them. In 1995, then Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, who had been involved in the latest peace processes, was assassinated by a Jewish extremist.

In April 1996, Israeli forces bombed Lebanon for 17 days, with Hezbollah retaliating by firing upon populated areas of Northern Israel. Israel also shelled a UN shelter killing about 100 out of 800 civilians sheltering there. The UN claimed it was intentional.

October 1998 sees the Wye River Memorandum outlining some Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank but Israel suspends it in January 1999 due to internal disagreements on its implementation. Further attempts through to the beginning of 2000 are made at continuing the Wye River accord, but keep breaking down due to Palestinian protests of continued new Israeli settlements.

Camp David summit in 2000 fails to come up with solutions on Jerusalem. Ariel Sharon's visit to the Mount Temple sparks off the current round of protests and violence.

In all this time then, the Palestinian people have been without any nation, and have had limited rights, while suffering from poverty at the same time. Israel continued to increase and expand their settlements giving up less and less land compared to what was promised. Many Palestinians (that are not Israeli Arabs since 1948) do not have the right to vote, or have limited rights, while paying full taxes. For over 3 decades, the Palestinian people have been living under a military occupation.

The Palestinian National Authority, which Arafat headed with a police force armed by the Israelis, has itself been criticized for not serving the full interests of the Palestinian people. The police have been harsh on cracking down on some Palestinians, to the extent that it has drawn criticisms from the likes of Amnesty International and others.

The frustration and injustice of the treatment of Palestinians has angered many citizens in the Arab world against US/Israeli policies. Palestinian frustration has spilled into extremism in some cases as well. Many militant groups from Palestine and other areas of the Middle East have therefore sprung up in recent years as well as past decades, performing acts of what the West and Israel describe as terrorism and what the groups themselves justify as freedom fighting (though achieving freedom through terrorist actions could arguably still be called terrorist organizations, despite claimed motives). Suicide bombings, and past acts of terrorism have terrorized Israeli civilians, making peace harder and harder to imagine, yet it has been easy to influence and recruit the young, impressionable and angry into extremist causes. As violence continues, it seems that it will remain easy to find recruits to violent causes.

U.S. involvement in the Middle East has also been seen as a critical issue. The U.S. and West's interests in the region had been due to oil. Strong military and financial support of Israel lends well to a powerful ally in the region. (For that reason as well, other Arab dictators and corrupt rulers have also been supported and even helped into power. Saddam Hussein is one of them. Dictators that can be bought provide a useful check against possible popular uprising in the region and therefore, for the US ensure their "security" -- that is, their "national interests" are safeguarded and local puppets profit, while the people of the region end up suffering and losing out.

While the UN Security Council has attempted to pass numerous resolutions critical of Israel the United States has vetoed almost all of them. Nevertheless, there have been some resolutions demanding that Israel return land that was captured in the 1967 war, etc. The 1948 UN Resolution 181 allowed for both Jews and Arabs to live in Israel, which goes counter to claims of some groups that Israel should not exist. Often the international community is critical of Israeli inaction, but the US veto prevents anything coming of it. Instead, Israeli land expansion and settlements have continued. The US has also provided Israel with enormous military aid, to the extent that in the Middle East, Israel has the most advanced and superior military. Their high tech/military industries are also very advanced. Israel also has nuclear weapons capabilities.

An additional source of frustration for the Palestinian people is that the land that is being settled by Israelis are usually prime land, and hence the various peace negotiations usually leave Palestine with the less usable land. Israel also thereby controls water sources. The non-contiguous land (Gaza and West Bank) and the Israeli control over Palestinian movement also means disconnection. This allows the possibility of providing cheap labor to Israel, so it is in their economic interest to pursue this type of division. The mainstream western media has traditionally capitalized on negative imagery and propaganda against Islam and the Arab world as a sort of way to also justify continued presence and involvement there.