

Overview of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

Origins (to 1949):

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is essentially a modern conflict originating in the 20th century. However, the roots of the conflict – involving competing historical claims to the same stretch of land - go back thousands of years.

Jewish roots in the area began sometime between 1800 and 1500 B.C. when the Hebrew people, a Semitic group, migrated into Canaan (today's Israel). Around 1000 B.C., their descendants formally established the kingdom of Israel with Jerusalem as its capital. Israel soon split into two kingdoms and was frequently under the control of foreign conquerors: the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and ultimately the Romans. However, despite repeated conquests, the Jews always retained their separate identity, mostly because of their distinctive religious beliefs. The fact that the Jews were monotheists (believers in one God), while their neighbors were polytheists set the Jews apart and instilled in them the idea that the territory of Israel was their "promised land." The Jewish majority in that land was ended, however, when the Roman Empire expelled the Jewish population from Israel following a failed revolt against Roman rule in 135 AD. For the next 1,800 years, the majority of Jews lived in scattered Diasporas (ethnic communities outside of their traditional homeland) throughout Europe and the Middle East.

Meanwhile, the land, which the Romans now named 'Palaestina,' or 'Palestine' in its English form, was inhabited by small groups of Jews, who had gradually returned to the area, along with other local peoples and some colonists brought in by the Romans. In the 7th century AD, Palestine came under the control of Arabs, who introduced into the region the Arabic language (a Semitic language related to Hebrew) and the religion of Islam, (a monotheistic religion related to Judaism and Christianity). Although there remained a Jewish minority in the area, comprising less than 10% of the total population, from the 7th century to the mid-20th century, the majority of the inhabitants were Arabic-speaking Palestinians. Most Palestinians are Muslims, but there is also a significant number of Palestinian Christians. Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived together relatively peacefully during the centuries that Palestine was part of the Ottoman Empire (1517-1918). However, the situation has changed over the course of the last century.

As with so many modern-day conflicts, the struggle between Jews and Palestinians developed as a product of modern nationalism, which spread throughout Europe – and eventually into the Middle East – during the 19th century. Nationalism can be a unifying force, bringing together people of all different social classes and even joining inhabitants of different countries or empires on the basis of a common language, culture, and religion. However, it can also be a disruptive force, calling for the destruction of multi-national empires and leading to discrimination against ethnic or religious minorities.

The rise of nationalism had major repercussions for the Jewish Diasporas of Europe. On the one hand, Jews had an increased opportunity – even pressure - to assimilate and become members of the newly emerging 'nations' in which they lived, an option that brought obvious advantages but would also require them to give up their separate identity. On the other hand, nationalism fanned the flames of anti-Semitism (hostility toward the Jews), a European prejudice

which had originally been based on religious feeling but which now became more intensely political as Jews were seen as ‘foreigners’ hindering the development of national unity. As attacks on Jews increased, especially in Eastern Europe, Jews responded by developing their own form of nationalism - the Zionist movement - which emerged in Europe in the 1880’s and called for the establishment of a Jewish national homeland in Palestine. Inspired by political Zionism, small groups of Jews left Europe and set up farming settlements in Palestine, which was then part of the Ottoman Empire. At first these settlements were small, and the newcomers faced little opposition from the established population. After all, as late as 1917, the Jews were still less than 10% of the total population of Palestine and thus not seen as a threat by the local inhabitants. However, tensions mounted during and after the First World War.

European, particularly British, policies during World War I played a major role in bringing about a conflict between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East. Because the Ottoman Empire (of which Palestine was a part) was allied with Germany and Austria against Great Britain and its allies, the British entered into negotiations with an Arab leader planning a revolt against the Ottoman Empire. During these discussions in 1915, the British promised the Arabs an independent state after the war. Though the boundaries of the proposed state were never formally settled, Arab leaders believed that their people would be united in one large country, which would, of course, include Palestine. In the meantime, the Western powers had other ideas, secretly signing an agreement to divide most of the area into French and British-controlled ‘mandates.’ To make matters more complicated, the British courted international Jewish support by issuing the Balfour Declaration, which supported the concept of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. In essence, control of Palestine was promised to three different groups: the Arabs, British, and Jews! Thus, when the war ended and the British took charge of the Palestinian Mandate, both Arabs and Jews felt that the British had broken their promises to them.

Relations between Palestinians and Jews declined rapidly. The Balfour Declaration had alarmed Palestinians, who saw it as British favoritism toward the Jewish minority. Their fears grew as Jewish immigration increased dramatically, particularly after the rise of Hitler to power in Germany. To Jews fleeing from persecution in Europe, Palestine was one of the few places of refuge, especially as the United States and other countries closed their doors to refugees desperate to escape Nazi persecution. However, to Palestinians, the arrival of a large Jewish immigrant population altered the balance of the population, displaced many people from their land, and threatened their goal of establishing an independent Arab state in the region. Violence soon erupted between the groups.

The situation deteriorated in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Survivors of the Holocaust swelled the number of Jewish immigrants to the region, and the Allied victors, horrified by the revelation of large-scale genocide in Europe, were reluctant to stop them. As violence between Jews and Arabs grew, the British declared its Mandate over Palestine to be unworkable, turning control of the area over to the United Nations. U.N. Resolution 181 divided Palestine in two: giving 55% of the land to the Jews and 45% to the Palestinians, while putting the city of Jerusalem under a separate international authority. The Jews accepted the proposal and proclaimed the creation of the state of Israel in May 1948; the Palestinians rejected the loss of their territory. Fighting broke out in which neighboring Arab countries supported the Palestinians.

Israeli forces were victorious. (Israelis call this war “The War of Independence;” Palestinians call it “The Catastrophe.”) As a result of its victory, Israel increased its territory by 30%, and more than 700,000 Palestinian refugees fled or were driven from their homes. Many

ended up in refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan, or other areas, camps that were to become permanent places of residence. In the meantime, an additional 900,000 Jews moved to Israel over the next several years. Thus, in the first half of the 20th century, the population and balance of political power in the area underwent dramatic changes.

An On-Going Conflict:

Although the United Nations brokered an end to 1948 war between Israel and the Arab countries, the area remained unstable. Both sides built up their military capacities in preparation for further conflict. In the meantime, many Palestinians, frustrated by the refugee crisis and the reduction in their political and economic position, joined resistance groups. In 1964, a number of these groups merged to form the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), which soon came under the leadership of Yasser Arafat.

War erupted between Israel and its Arab neighbors several times over the next decades: in 1956, 1967, and 1973. The Six Day War of 1967 was especially significant as Israel took over and occupied the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights, Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. According to international law, this occupation, which continues until the present, is NOT permanent. Not only was Israel now several times larger than in 1948, but one million Palestinians had come under Israeli rule. In addition, over 200,000 more Palestinians became refugees (mostly going to Jordan). Beginning in 1977, Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin launched a campaign to establish Jewish settlements in the occupied territories. Although the settlement policy is controversial among Israelis and is not legal under international law, hundreds of thousands of Jewish settlers have moved and are still moving to East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza. As a result of the settlements, Palestinians lost more of their land. In addition, the settlements have created conflict by establishing armed settlers and Israeli troops within the occupied territories and by drastically limiting Palestinians' freedom of movement (as Israeli-only access roads built to link the settlements and containment walls/checkpoints erected to protect them block Palestinian movement). Palestinian civilians are frequently the victims of settler violence, and Palestinian guerillas have struck back by killing civilians within Israel. The conflict spread to neighboring Lebanon, where the PLO and Israeli army both took an active role in the Lebanese Civil War. A vicious cycle ensued: Israelis, citing security concerns, limited the political, economic, and travel capability of Palestinians, while Palestinians, frustrated by their treatment at the hands of Israelis, increased their resistance activities. The United States periodically attempted to start peace negotiations, but its tendency to be more sympathetic to Israeli concerns reduced the effectiveness of these efforts.

By late 1987, the Palestinians were in open revolt, a spontaneous movement which came to be called the first "intifada" (Arabic for "resistance" or "shaking off"). Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, mostly young people, participated in civil disobedience (refusal to pay taxes, boycotts, strikes) and in throwing rocks at Israeli troops. The Israeli army responded with force, killing over 1,000 Palestinians, hundreds of whom were children under the age of 16. Israel began to draw criticism, both at home and abroad, for its treatment of Palestinian civilians. Similarly, Palestinian bombing attacks continued to target Israeli civilians.

The suffering on both sides has led to peace negotiations (See below.), but these have produced limited results. Tension and violence continue to this day.

Important Issues Separating Israelis and Palestinians:

1. Security. Random attacks and acts of terrorism are problems faced by both sides. Israelis resent that they can't walk down a street without worrying that something – or someone – will blow up beside them. Palestinians resent that they are frequently mistreated by Israeli soldiers or that their houses and possessions are bulldozed if a person in their family is accused of attacks against Israel – or if Israel wants the land to build settlements, roads, or containment walls. Israelis say the presence of soldiers and use of extreme tactics are necessary to keep their people safe; Palestinians say that such measures are what drive them to attack Israel. Any peace effort would have to take into account the desire of both groups for greater security for their lives and property. It is important to note that Israelis, in particular, rank security as their number one concern. In addition to the protection of individuals and property, Israelis want their country to be secure from outside attack. Therefore, many consider the recognition of the state of Israel by their Arab neighbors an important key to the security of their country and of their people.

2. Right of return for Palestinian refugees. This issue is one of the top priorities of the Palestinians, who feel that all refugees and their descendents should have a right to return to their place of origin. Many of them have lived for decades (some for over 60 years!) in refugee camps with a very poor standard of living. For Israelis, the problem is that, due to a high Palestinian birthrate, there are now 4 million people descended from the original refugees. If they all returned to Israel and joined the 1 million Arabs currently living there, that would make a population of 5 million Palestinians and 5 million Jews in Israel, which alters the Jewish character of the state. In addition, Israelis worry that returning Palestinians would want to reclaim their original lands and evict the current Jewish owners. Some Palestinians feel this is only fair; many Israelis feel that it would be wrong to displace people who have been living on that land for several generations. A settlement that is fair to everyone will be difficult to achieve.

3. Control of Jerusalem. This city is holy to Jews (original religious center), Christians, (site of Jesus' ministry and crucifixion), and Muslims (site from which the Prophet Muhammad is believed to have ascended into heaven). The problem: Who should control it, or how should control be shared?

4. Israeli troops in Palestinian territories. Israelis say their troops are necessary to provide security; Palestinians say the Israeli troops harass or even attack innocent people. Palestinians want their own troops in charge of Palestinian areas. The question, for Israelis, is whether Palestinian troops would be able to control their own extremist factions.

5. Israeli settlements in Palestinian lands. Since the 1967 war, tens of thousands of Jewish settlers have moved into the Gaza strip and the West Bank, claiming the Israelis have a right to that land dating from Biblical times. Palestinians resent the settlers for taking over Palestinian lands, instigating violence against Palestinians, and causing the presence of Israeli troops and the building of walls and checkpoints. Many moderate Israelis agree, seeing the settlements as a stumbling block to peace, but they face a tremendous challenge in how to close the settlements without provoking opposition from Jewish residents of these areas.

6. Movement of people and goods in the West Bank and Gaza. Israelis consider the checkpoints, walls, special roads, and other restrictions on the movement of Arab inhabitants to be important for Israeli security. However, such restrictions severely hurt the Palestinian economy by limiting their trade and employment opportunities – and even making it difficult for farmers to get to their fields. The restrictions also limit Palestinian access to health care, schools, and families/friends in other cities. The peace process would have to balance the Israeli need for security with the Palestinian need for greater freedom and economic wellbeing.

7. Water. Water is scarce in the area, and Israel controls the resource both within Israel and in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Palestinians resent that Israeli settlers on the West Bank use six times the amount of water that Palestinians are allowed to use. Environmentalists worry about the diversion of water from the Dead Sea, endangering its ecosystem.

8. The propaganda and language of hate. Both Palestinians and Jews are split among moderates and extremists, and extremists on both sides portray the other side as less than human. On the surface, the problem of words seems less pressing than problems of hostile soldiers, suicide bombers, or refugees. Yet, in reality, the underlying fear and hatred promoted by extremists on both sides make it difficult to achieve the mutual respect necessary to compromise.

The Peace Process:

As the violence took an increasing toll on both sides, there have been efforts to achieve a peaceful settlement. In September 1978, during a conference at Camp David organized by American president Jimmy Carter, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat signed a peace agreement between the two countries, which led to an Israeli withdrawal from Sinai. However, even though Israel and Egypt had begun negotiations, conflicts within Israel were escalating.

Direct talks between Palestinian and Israeli authorities only began in 1991. Under pressure from the United States and the Soviet Union, a series of talks was held in Madrid, Spain, between the Israeli government, individual Arab states, and the PLO. However, some Israeli and Palestinian leaders sought a less public and politically charged environment and entered into secret discussions in Norway. The result was the signing of the Oslo Accords by Israeli leader Yitzhak Rabin and PLO leader Yasser Arafat in 1993.

According to the Oslo Agreement, Israel would withdraw forces from Gaza and the West Bank town of Jericho and grant greater autonomy to the Palestinians. Eventually Palestinians would be able to elect a Self-Government Authority in these areas. In return, the PLO agreed to recognize the state of Israel, a step that Israelis felt was vital to their security. In 1994 a Palestinian Authority was established under Arafat, and Jordan had joined Egypt in recognizing the state of Israel. Critics of the Oslo Accords charge that the agreement did not address many of the serious issues that still divided the two peoples.

Unfortunately, these issues were never resolved, and both sides failed to honor parts of the agreement. Israel increased its settlements in Palestinian lands, and Palestinians responded by increasing attacks on settlers. Extremism on both sides led to a further escalation of the conflict. In early 1994, an Israeli terrorist killed 30 Muslim worshippers in a mosque in Hebron, and Palestinian terrorists retaliated with a series of suicide bombings. The peace process quickly broke down.

In 2000, the suffering of both groups led to further attempts at negotiation. Israeli leader Ehud Barak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat met at Camp David to seek a resolution of the conflict. It soon became evident, though, that the fundamental issues dividing the two peoples are difficult to resolve. No definitive agreement was reached, and the peace process remains stalled to the present day.

Developments over the past decade have added a further element of uncertainty. Yasser Arafat died in November 2004, and just over a year later (January 2006), the more militant Hamas party was elected to leadership positions in the Palestinian Authority. Israel has also assumed a more militant policy: In summer 2006, an Israeli invasion of Lebanon and attacks on Palestinians there provoked an international outcry. Also, Israeli colonization of the West Bank and East Jerusalem has increased, resulting in increased confiscation of Palestinian lands for settlements, the construction of walls and restricted-access roads, the expropriation of water and other resources. Between 2008 and 2012, Gaza became a focal point of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, leading to Israeli attacks on the area, and Palestinian attacks on Israeli citizens. Within Gaza, unemployment has skyrocketed, and the standard of living has plummeted.

Therefore, the peace process has stalled time and again. Yet, time and again, both sides – as well as international parties – have attempted renewed negotiations, revealing the deep dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs.

Possible Solutions:

There are two possible solutions to the Palestinian-Israeli crisis. Either one would involve considerable compromises on both sides.

The “one-state solution” would be for the land of Israel and the Palestinian territories that it currently occupies to be joined in one country. The problem for Israelis is that the state would no longer be a Jewish state but one that includes an equal number of Palestinian Christians and Muslims. The problem for Palestinians would be making sure they would have full rights of citizenship.

The “two-state solution” would be to have a country of Israel alongside a country of Palestine (comprised of the West Bank and Gaza). This solution would involve either a division of Jerusalem, a joint Israeli-Palestinian control of the city, or recognition of Jerusalem as an open, international city. The two-state solution would mean that both sides would have to give up their aspirations of controlling the entire area. Israel would have to give up its control of the occupied territories and would have to withdraw all the settlers from areas that they have colonized since 1967. The Palestinians would have to recognize Israel, thus giving up their claims to territories granted to Israel by the United Nations in 1948 and probably to those taken between 1948 and 1967.

Either solution would be difficult to achieve: requiring positive leadership from the international community, the Israelis, and the Palestinians. However, NOT reaching a solution is becoming less of an option as international crises and human rights violations mount. A fair and equitable resolution of the conflict would contribute a great deal to international stability.