

# The History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict - Part 1

Since 1922 and the establishment of the British mandate for Palestine, the question of what to do with Palestine had been a continuing problem. When Britain accepted Palestine as a mandate, it expected to establish two states: a homeland for Jews of the Diaspora despite Arab opposition. Its ability to satisfy either Arabs or Jews frustrated everyone involved. As the time approached for the actual establishment of an independent Jewish state, the Arabs continued to voice uncompromising opposition. Feeling that it had done all that one nation could do, and unwilling to risk the Arab animosity that was sure to result from partition, Britain turned to the United Nations for help.

## 1. STEPS TO ISRAELI INDEPENDENCE:

The UN sent a commission to survey the situation in Palestine. With both Jews and Arabs demanding complete sovereignty in all of Palestine, the UN General Assembly voted to end the mandate and recommend that Palestine be partitioned into three separate areas. The first area was to be a Jewish state inhabited mostly by Jews. The second area was to be an Arab state. The third area was to be an international zone that would include Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and other nearby holy sites.

Both sides were prepared to fight for their objectives. The Palestine Arabs protested that the UN recommendation violated the principle of self-determination. They began to use force to oppose partition and the establishment of a Jewish state. Armed bands from Syria and Trans-Jordan began to infiltrate Palestine to assist the Palestinian Arabs.

The Zionists, on the other hand, received the United Nations proposal with enthusiasm and resolved to implement it regardless of Arab reaction. The Jews had previously formed a defense force called the *Haganah*, largely to protect themselves against Arab attacks. Out of the *Haganah*, and other underground military units, the Jews of Palestine began to build a national army. At first their troops were familiar only with light arms and hit-and-run guerilla tactics. Gradually, however, they were able to acquire heavier weapons from sympathetic parties.

After the UN partition resolution in November 1947, conflict between Jews and Arabs grew more intense. Raids, reprisals, and counter-reprisals from both sides were frequent. Neither the British nor the UN was able to stop the fighting. The British mandate ended on May 14, 1948, the same day that Israel proclaimed its independence. The next day Arab armies from five neighboring Arab states (Egypt, Trans-Jordan, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon) invaded the new Israeli state. Despite their determination, the Arab armies could not defeat the Israelis. Finally by July 1949, the UN persuaded all the invading nations except Iraq to sign separate armistice agreements with Israel.

## 2. CONTINUING TENSIONS, 1949-1956:

Several issues plagued Israel's relations with Arab nations during the early years of its independence. One of these was the refugee question. About 725,000 Arabs fled Israel to settle in surrounding Arab territories. The fleeing refugees charged that they were driven from their homes by the Israelis. The Israelis, however, claimed that most Arab refugees fled because they were persuaded to leave by their own Arab leaders. Reacting to Israeli refusal to allow them to return to their homes, armed Palestinian groups infiltrated across Israel's borders, causing hundreds of minor and several major incidents of terrorism. Many of the Palestinian refugee population, which today numbers over two and a half million, have continued to demand a return to their homes to Israel.

Besides demands on Israel to allow the return of Arab refugees, Arab leaders demanded compensation for property acquired by Israel and the surrender of territory held by Israel beyond its armistice frontiers. The Israelis rejected most demands for concessions. They believed that concessions would be interpreted as a sign of weakness. Charging the Arab states with trying to destroy Israel, they stated that they would never surrender territory gained in a conflict they did not start. As invaders, Israel charged, the Arab states were responsible for the flight and continuing plight of the Palestinian refugees. They further charged that permitting a return to Israel of these refugees who had been indoctrinated with a hatred of Israel would seriously jeopardize Israel's security.

A further issue complicating the search for peace in the Middle East was the tensions between the United States and the former Soviet Union. The Arabs charged Israel with being a tool of Western imperialism and a means of continuing the Western presence in the Arab world. Israel's economy had been bolstered by Western funds, both from United States government sources and from many people in the United States, and Western Europe who were sympathetic to the Israeli cause. At the same time, many Arab states accepted military and economic aid from the Soviet Union and other Communist countries as well as from the United States, France, and Great Britain.

Still another issue was the presence of a UN peacekeeping force in the Middle East. The UN Truce Supervision Organization was established to carry out the provisions of the 1949 armistice agreements. Its main job was to patrol the borders between Israel and its neighbors. After Egypt's conflict with Israel, Great Britain, and France over the Suez Canal in 1956, a United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) was set up to patrol the frontiers between Egypt and Israel. But Egypt continued to bar Israeli shipping from the Canal. Although the UNEF did have some success in preventing terrorist acts along the border between Israel and Egypt, such incidents continued along the Syrian and Jordanian frontiers.

### **3. THE SIX-DAY WAR, 1967:**

For some years Egypt had been receiving large supplies of arms from the Soviet Union. In May 1967 Egypt demanded that the UNEF leave its territory and began to send troops and tanks into the Sinai Peninsula to threaten Israel. Another act of provocation was the closing of the strategic Strait of Tiran, thus cutting off Israel's access to the Red Sea and preventing ships from reaching the Suez Canal. These incidents accompanied by threats to destroy Israel precipitated an Israeli attack on Egypt that quickly spread to Syria. Jordan then entered the conflict against Israel. Within six days the Israelis had destroyed the Arab armies. Israel took the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip from Egypt; East Jerusalem and the West Bank from Jordan; and the Golan Heights from Syria. During the height of the brief war, Egypt sank ships in the Suez Canal to block traffic. The waterway remained closed long after the Six-Day War had come to an end.

### **4. SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTIONS 242 AND 338:**

During the 1960s and 1970s, the United Nations adopted two resolutions that attempted to establish the principles for a negotiated settlement in the Middle East. In 1967, the UN Security Council passed **Resolution 242**, calling for an end to all declarations of war and the withdrawal of Israeli troops from territories captured from the Arabs. In addition, Israel and the Arab states were to respect one another's independence and right to live in peace within secure and recognized borders. The resolution also called for a "just settlement" of the Palestinian refugee problem. Advancing a step further, in 1973 the United Nations passed UN Security Council Resolution 338, which states that Resolution 242 proposals should be pursued through negotiations.

### **5. THE OCTOBER (YOM KIPPUR) WAR, 1973:**

Many Israelis believed that their country was the dominant military power in the Middle East. Because of this belief, they thought they would be able to maintain the status quo without making any territorial concessions. Anwar Sadat, Egypt's president, however, was determined to regain the Sinai Peninsula. He convinced Syria to join him in a surprise attack on Israel during October 1973, hoping to return to international attention the question of the territories occupied by Israel.

The attack occurred on the holiest of Israel's holy days. Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), which in 1973 occurred during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. The war lasted only three weeks. Some of the heaviest battles fought since World War II took place on the Egyptian and Syrian fronts. More Israelis were killed in the war than in the entire period since 1948. Although Israel was taken by surprise and initially suffered setbacks on both fronts, it soon recovered and seized the offensive against Egypt and Syria. But the war ended in a stalemate when the United States, the Soviet Union, and the United Nations intervened.

During 1973 and 1974, Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State of the United States, negotiated disengagement agreements between the warring parties. Israel agreed to withdraw its forces from parts of both the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights. Preparations were also made for an international peace conference to settle issues outstanding in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The conference met only once, however.

## **6. DIRECT PEACE TALKS, 1977-1979:**

By November 1977 Anwar Sadat had become impatient with efforts to achieve a peace settlement through an international conference and decided to take the initiative himself. In a surprise announcement he told the Egyptian parliament that he was about to fly to Jerusalem in a direct bid for peace. Sadat's visit and his address to the Israeli parliament was the first direct overture for peace by an Arab leader. It was an event that stirred great enthusiasm throughout Israel.

Despite these positive steps, the process of peace negotiations was long and difficult, taking over a year to finally reach agreement. During the year the negotiations frequently were broken off because of disagreements over the Sinai Peninsula and Jewish settlers in Arab territory. Personal conflicts between Sadat and Menachem Begin, the Israeli prime minister, also occurred. Nevertheless, the negotiations were saved from failure by the mediation of President Jimmy Carter of the United States.

In 1978 President Carter convened a meeting between Sadat and Begin at Camp David, the Presidential retreat near Washington, DC. At the conclusion of this 12-day meeting a preliminary agreement was signed. The war between Egypt and Israel ended formally in March 1979 with the signing of a peace treaty in Washington. The treaty provided for normalization of relations between Egypt and Israel, the exchange of ambassadors, the return of the Sinai Peninsula with an international peacekeeping force in the region. For their efforts, both Sadat and Begin were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

## **7. THE WEST BANK AND GAZA STRIP:**

Israel's continued occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip was not resolved by the 1979 treaty. The treaty, however, made provisions for future negotiations about the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Ever since these territories were occupied in the 1967 war, Israelis have been divided over their disposition. Except for Jerusalem, which Israel has made its capital, many Israelis have opposed annexation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Those who favor annexation argue that all of Palestine belongs by historic right to the Jewish state and should not be given up, even as part of a peace settlement. Opponents feel that it is inadvisable to keep territory with such a large Arab population. They point to the high Arab birthrate and argue that Arabs would outnumber Jews in an Israel that included the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

## **8. LEBANON INVASION:**

Israel's continued occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip stirred deep resentment among the Palestinian Arabs. By the 1980s demonstrations and protests were frequent. Most inhabitants sympathized with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the Palestinian nationalist organization that led the fight against Israel. Israeli leaders at the time believed that unrest in the occupied territories could be suppressed if the PLO's bases and headquarters in Lebanon were destroyed. They also felt that destruction of the PLO would end the terrorist attacks launched from Lebanon across Israel's northern border.

In June 1982 Israel began a massive invasion of Lebanon. The invasion was intended to destroy the PLO and to force Lebanon to sign a peace treaty with Israel. Ariel Sharon, Israel's minister of defense, confidently told his government that the fighting would be over in a few days. The fighting lasted for longer, however, and Israeli forces surrounded Beirut, Lebanon's capital, pushing farther into Lebanon than was planned.

The Israelis besieged the PLO forces in Beirut for several weeks. Then through United States intervention, the fighting was ended. Thousands of civilians had been wounded, and many killed. Large-scale destruction took place in southern Lebanon and in the capital. Israel lifted the siege in August after an agreement was reached to withdraw PLO forces from Beirut.

After the PLO forces were withdrawn, Lebanese Maronite Christian militias, allies of Israel, entered two Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut and massacred hundreds of Palestinian men, women, and children. The massacre had a traumatic effect in Israel. To begin with, the war in Lebanon had been unpopular. The massacre aroused widespread criticism and mass protests against Sharon and the war. Many young men refused to serve in the occupation forces in Lebanon. Although Israel agreed to a gradual withdrawal of its forces, the opposition wanted a hastier departure. The issue of the war in Lebanon and demands that Israel end its occupation of Lebanon became major issues in the 1984 election campaign in the Israeli Knesset (parliament).

After that election, the withdrawal from Lebanon was completed except for a narrow strip of land along the Israeli border. None of Israel's major objectives in the 1982 invasion were achieved. Syrian forces remained in Lebanon, which refused to sign a peace treaty with Israel. After several months, PLO forces returned to Lebanon. Lebanon's civil war left the economy and much of the country in ruins. Rival groups

representing all sides agreed to a power-sharing arrangement in 1989. Under this accord, Lebanese leaders are trying to set up an effective government. However, Syria maintains 35,000 troops in Lebanon and has a strong influence over local politics.

In spring 200, Israel withdrew its troops from a none-mile-wide strip in southern Lebanon, which it had occupied since 1978. Israel referred to this area as a "security zone" needed to defend itself against military attacks by radical Islamic groups operating in Lebanon.

## **9. FIRST PALESTINIAN UPRISING:**

In December 1987 a major uprising of Palestinians, known as the *intifada*, in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip occurred. More than half the inhabitants in these territories had lived all their lives under Israeli military control. They had become resentful of the restrictions imposed on them by the Israeli army. These included frequent curfews, deportation of many politically active leaders, arrests without trial for hundreds suspected of terrorist acts, school and university closings, and interference in daily life.

Although the uprising began as a spontaneous demonstration, it soon became an organized movement with an underground leadership that demanded an end to Israeli occupation, the release of all political prisoners, and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. More than 800 people were killed during the *intifada*. Most Palestinians supported the PLO as the leader of the Palestinian nationalist movement. Israel, however, never recognized the PLO, labeling it a "terrorist" organization and never allowing it to operate in its territories.

Furthermore, the Israeli government opposed the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. But disagreement over what to do with the occupied territories continued. The minimum that Palestinians were willing to accept was far more than most Israelis were willing to concede. The maximum that most Israelis were willing to give was far too little for the Palestinians. All the Arab states, including Egypt, supported Palestinian demands for an independent state. This *intifada* ended in 1993.