

Understanding the Israeli-Arab Conflict

Terms to know:

Zionist – a person who believes Jews should have a country of their own

Palestine – a territory with mainly people of Arab descent (not a country – never was, and isn't today)

- *It was given the name by the Romans to describe this region 2000+ years ago (Palestina- which actually means land of the Philistines – which is funny because there were very few Philistines living here at the time...)

- *There is no such thing as an ethnically “Palestinian” person – they are simply Arabs who live in this region

- *Today a Palestinian is defined as a person of any religion who traces his/her ancestral roots to this region we call Israel/Palestine

Arab – an ethnic group of people from in & around the Arabian Peninsula

Israel – a country created in 1948 by the United Nations

PLO – Palestinian Liberation Organization – a group designed in 1964 to support the idea of an independent Palestinian state (country)

Gaza Strip and West Bank – pieces of land located inside Israel set aside by the United Nations for Palestinians to live in

Timeline

Hebrews (Israelites) – descendants of Isaac, son of Abraham – living in the “Promised Land” that today we would call Israel – ca. 1400 BCE

After the death of Hebrew King Solomon 931 BCE, the kingdom divides –
Israel in the north – captured by Assyria
Judah in the south – captured by Babylon (Nebuchadnezzar) ca. 600 BCE

Many of the captured Hebrew people (now commonly called Jews) desire to head back to their “Promised Land” (aka Zion). These people are called Zionists.

But by the time they make their way back, other people – mostly Arab people – are living there.

Ottoman Empire starts in Turkey and spreads throughout Middle East 1453 CE. They are ethnically Arabic, and religiously Muslim. They are a mighty empire that eventually spreads from Egypt to Hungary to the Caucasus Mtns. to the Persian Gulf. At one time or another the Ottoman Empire included 37 different countries!

Ottoman Empire starts to decline late 1600s CE, facing threats from Russia and Austrian Empires.

Series of wars in Europe between 1914-1918 left Ottoman’s very weak & driven out of most of Europe and North Africa.

During WWI 1914-1918 the Ottoman’s sided with Germany (because of their mutual hatred of Russia). They are on the side of the “Central” forces. (Great Britain, France, Russia & eventually USA were the “Allied” forces.)

To weaken the already failing Ottoman Empire, the British encouraged Arabs living inside the Ottoman Empire to revolt against the Ottoman powers. The British provided them money and weapons. (This is known as the Arab Revolt.) The man who made the deal w/the British was Sharif Hussein, and the letters between him and the officials of Great Britain still exist, and you can see that Britain promises him his own Arab kingdom that would include the whole Arabian Peninsula plus Syria and Iraq. (It is important to note that the majority of local people DID NOT support the Arab Revolt.)

The Hussein and the Arab Revolt managed to take control of some major cities, and then Great Britain came in and captured some more. The British even made a flag for the people of the Arab Revolt to fly when they captured a city:



Despite the promises made to Hussein and the people of the Arab Revolt, Britain and France made a secret deal in 1915-1916 about how to divvy up the land captured from the Ottomans. This is known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement. The plan became public 1917 when the Russians found out and exposed it to the world.



The Sykes-Picot Agreement created huge tension between the British and Arabs.

During WWI Zionists were pressuring Britain to give them a cut of the Ottoman Empire to create a Jewish country. (This had been pushed hard since the 1800s)

Foreign Secretary for Britain Arthur Balfour (and others) was sympathetic to the Jewish desire for a homeland. In 1917 Balfour wrote a letter to Baron Rothschild, a leader in the Zionist community, confirming Britain's support for a Jewish country.

At this point the British had 3 different agreements with 3 different groups for what to do after WWI:

- Turn Ottoman Empire over to Hussein as an Arab kingdom
- Divide Ottoman Empire w/France
- Create a Jewish country in the "Promised Land"

End of WWI in 1918 and the Ottomans were totally out of power.

Note: This is the frustration for Shi'ite Muslims, who were in charge of the Ottoman Empire. Remember when we talked about how Osama bin Laden was frustrated that his people used to be a major power and now are not? This is when they stopped being in power.

The League of Nations (predecessor to the United Nations of today) decided what to do w/the territory of the Ottomans. The League drew up the map of the Middle East you see today. They assigned different European countries in charge of different areas until each country could “stand on its own 2 feet.”

Note a problem: When the League drew up the borders, they paid no attention to ethnic divisions, religious differences, resources available, etc. They appear to totally random lines. This means the division of some ethnic groups by political borders, and grouping some traditional enemies into the same country. Their borders do not indicate any sort of traditional difference between, say, a Syrian and an Iraqi. They may have the exact same background, but after 1918 they had been divided by political lines on a map.

Some believe that the borders were actually drawn very intentionally, with a goal of dividing the people to keep the area unstable and unable to rise up very powerfully.

Great Britain controlled the area we now call Israel, as well as Syria and Iraq, 1917-1948. They did allow some local power, including for Sharif Hussein, but they still had to answer to Britain.

The British allowed some Zionists to move into the region we today call Israel (the region was loosely called Palestine at the time, but remember, Palestine is not/never was a country). But they didn't want to anger the locals, so they tried to limit the number of Jews who could move in.

1920s-1940s Jews would try to find illegal ways to migrate into the region, despite Britain's efforts to limit their numbers. This, of course, irritated the local Arabs who felt betrayed by Britain, and had lived in that area since the 1100s CE.

British control of these Middle Eastern territories was scheduled to end in 1948. The United Nations signed “Resolution 181” (aka the Partition Resolution) that created a new country inside this area – Israel. It went into effect May 14, 1948. Jews thought this was a great idea, since they had a country to gain. Arabs did not, as they only had territory to lose. The agreement gave a country to Jews – Israel, and a country to Arabs – Palestine. It kept the area directly around Jerusalem under U.N. control. American President Harry Truman supported the idea.

Palestinians were given 2 chunks of land inside Israel – the West Bank and Gaza Strip – for them to live on.

As of the May 14, 1948, official kickoff of the Israeli state, there were about 150,000 Palestinian people living inside the borders of Israel. They were granted Israeli citizenship and the right to vote. However, in many ways they were treated like 2nd

class citizens. About 40% of Palestinian people's lands were taken by the Israeli government, and they were restricted in the jobs they could hold and where they could go in Israel.

May 15, 1948, Neighboring Arab countries attacked Israel, probably not really because they wanted to create a country called Palestine, but more because they had plans of their own for what to do with the land. Israel and Palestine

From 1947-1949 700,000+ Palestinian refugees fled the land now labeled as Israel. Palestinians claim this is because they were forced out by the Israelis, who in reality wanted all non-Jews out of Israel. According to the Israelis, it was the other Arab countries who encouraged Palestinians to leave the region.

1964 the Palestinian Liberation Organization was formed (PLO).

In 1967 Israel attacked the West Bank and Gaza Strip and claimed those lands as well. They allowed Jews to move into the areas.

America's Role and Perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

- Palestinians generally believe the U.S. is on Israel's side, and they are right, so they don't trust U.S. negotiators when we show up to try to help them work out their problems
 - They did trust President Jimmy Carter
 - Somewhat trusted President Bill Clinton
- Therefore Palestinians feel that negotiations w/the U.S. at the wheel will never truly be fair
- U.S. preference for the Jewish people goes way back. In a letter from John Adams to Thomas Jefferson:
 - "I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize man than any other nation."
- Even our founding fathers discussed their support for creating a Jewish nation.
- When Balfour told Rothschild that Britain would support creation of a Jewish state, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson supported him.
- In 1922 and 1944 U.S. Congress unanimously passed resolutions supporting the creation of a Jewish country.
- Today Jews make up about 2% of all Americans, so it's not that they are a large voting majority. Our support of the Jewish state seems to be rooted more in our "shared values."
- President Obama has expressed the same feelings, saying, "we [America] stand with Israel as a Jewish democratic state because we know that Israel is born of firmly held values that we, as Americans, share: a culture committed to justice, a land that welcomes the weary..."

Discussion Questions:

Summarize the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in 2 sentences or less

What is the Palestinian perspective on why they are right and Israel is wrong?

What is the Israeli perspective on why they are right and the Palestinians are wrong?

What world organization was the one who actually called for the creation of Israel?

If you were Britain, would you have supported the creation of a Jewish state at the end of WWI? Why or why not?

Consider the fact that Israel was officially established in 1948. What great war had just finished? And what group of people had had a really hard time during that war? And could that have played any role in the world having any sort of "sympathy" for the plight of the Jewish people at that time?

What is a possible explanation for why some Muslims are frustrated with the western world?