



Understanding the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

This is a complicated and nuanced topic with many perspectives. Our goal is to present the history and impacts of this conflict with as little bias as possible. While it may be impossible to cover this topic in a way that satisfies everyone, we hope this information lends some clarity and aids folks in understanding different viewpoints.



Encounter World Religions

Roots of the Conflict

Jews

- Founding story connects Jews to Israel as God promises the land to Abraham's descendants
- For many centuries, Jews are the dominant demographic group in Israel
- 2000 years ago, Jews revolt against their Roman occupiers but lose. The Romans decimate the Jewish community and drive them from the land into the diaspora.

Exile and Return

Exile and return is a recurring theme in Jewish history:

- i) Jews are enslaved in Egypt until God sends Moses to free them whereby they return to Israel
- ii) The Babylonian empire conquers Jerusalem and carts off the Jewish elite into exile (586 BCE). After two generations of yearning for home, they are freed and return to Jerusalem to rebuild.
- iii) After the Roman destruction, Jews were exiled again. Many yearned to return, ending the annual Passover ritual with the words "next year in Jerusalem."



Abraham covenants with God. God rewards Abraham's unswerving loyalty with descendants (the Jewish people) and the land of Israel for them to live on.

Arabs/Palestinians

- Palestinian origins are mixed and histories would vary. A large Arab influx occurred in the 7th century when Arab armies captured the area. Most Palestinian families have dwelt in the area for centuries.

Moses leads the Jews out of Egyptian slavery and back to Israel.

The theme of "exile and return" (to Israel) permeates Jewish history.



Antisemitism

- Anti-Jewish sentiment is ancient but “normal” – regrettably, humans often mistreat minorities and Jews were minorities in the Greco-Roman world.
- Antisemitism is distinct – it goes beyond the typical harsh treatment many minorities face.
- Grows from Christianity unfortunately:
 - i) Early Christians and Jews were at odds and some on both sides acted poorly.
 - ii) Christians were unsafe as they seemed to worship a traitor to Rome. Their very safety required blaming someone else for Jesus' death.
 - iii) These issues got encoded in scriptures that were being written at the time. John's Gospel and Matthew's gospel (e.g. Matt 27:25) caused hatred amongst Christians who read them a thousand years later.
- Jews were generally treated better in Muslim-majority countries than in Christian ones.



Jews in Europe were sometimes forced to wear badges and subject to vile accusations.

In Muslim Countries:

Jews were legally subordinate but autonomous, protected, and had rights. Sometimes experienced violence but also could be well-integrated and contributing to intellectual and cultural life.

In Christian Countries:

Jews often considered killers of God. They were kept in ghettos, made to wear badges, blamed for crop failures or the plague, and subject to denigration and violence. Even accused of killing Christian kids to put their blood in ritual food.



The Romans expelled the Jews from Israel forcing Jews to live in the diaspora



Modern Times

Nationalism

- The emergence of nationalism – namely that a state might rest not on a king but rather be based on a people who share ethnicity, culture, language and/or religion – affected both Jews and Arabs/Palestinians:
- Jews
 - Some advocate creating a state in Israel (Zionism)
 - Others see themselves as Frenchmen or Germans... but ugly late 19th C antisemitic incidents convince many Jews they will never be accepted in Europe
 - Some Jews begin moving to Israel/Palestine
- Arabs begin to aspire to nationhood
 - With British urging, they revolt against the Ottomans in WWI. After the war, Britain takes over the area and renege on their promise to grant Arabs sovereignty.
 - Some locals begin seeing “Palestinian” as their group identity (rather than “Arab”)



Austrian journalist Theodor Herzl organizes the First Zionist Conference in 1897, urging Jews to move to Israel



BALFOUR DECLARATION

- In 1917, Britain pledges publicly to help create a Jewish state in Israel
 - Palestinians or Arabs only referenced as “non-Jewish communities” in the text despite comprising 95% of the population
- Britain opens the door to unlimited immigration of Jews into Palestine. Jews number 20K in Palestine in 1880, about 80K in 1917, and about 800K in 1948. Grow from 2% to about 33% of the population.

Lord Balfour's Declaration promised to establish a Jewish state in Palestine. Jews numbered no more than 5% of the population at the time.



Palestinian Struggle

- Palestinian leaders are repeatedly refused to be heard by the British, the League of Nations and other international bodies for many years.
- Massive immigration leads to Arab displacement
- Make consistent demands to Britain and the international community including:
 - Representative government
 - Majority rule
 - Control over immigration
 - Ending the Balfour Declaration
- Ignored, some Arabs resort to violence against Jews and against British occupiers
- Arab Revolt (1936-1939)
 - Starts as a grassroots strike. Escalates into armed struggle.
 - British use 100K troops to subdue the revolt. Many Palestinian elites are killed or exiled.
 - British agree to halt Jewish immigration.



Arabs who participated in the revolt are expelled from Jerusalem by British soldiers

Colonialism

- For many, the story above fits the definition of settler-colonialism:
 - Foreign control of a local population. Domestic population given no political rights.
 - Intentional immigration of another people.
 - Eventually state is run by the immigrant community. Original inhabitants are dispossessed.

Israeli Perspective

Pro-Israel advocates deny this is colonialism for three reasons:

1. Indigenous: See Jews as indigenous to the land. They were forced out and have now returned.
2. No mother country: Colonies have a mother country that settlers came from. What is Israel's mother country? If Jews left, where would they "return" to?
3. Refugees: Most Jews arrived in Israel as refugees. Early arrivals fled Russian pogroms, the big 1930s surge fled Nazi Germany, and after 1948, many fled from Arab nations that forced them out. We don't typically call refugees colonialists.

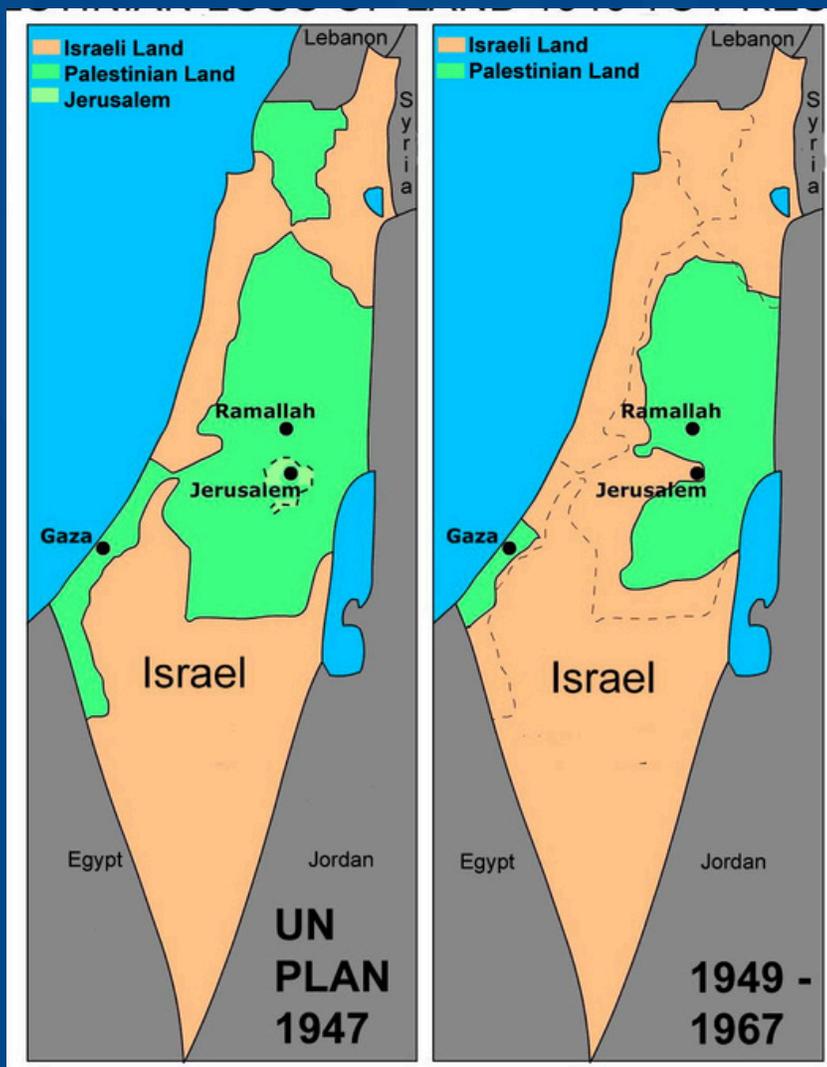


Jewish refugees arriving in Israel from Nazi Germany in 1930s.



Post WWII

- The UN partitioned the land (55% for Jews; 45% for Arabs). Many Arabs would be minorities in a Jewish state, established against their wishes. The Arabs and neighbouring Arab states declared war.
- The Jews won the war, increasing their ownership of the land to about 78%.
- Nakba ("catastrophe")
 - About 700K Palestinians became refugees, forced from their homes and unable to return
 - Nakba has multiple resonances for Palestinians
 - First, the loss of land and sovereignty in 1948
 - Second, the continued loss of land in the West Bank due to settlers (more on this below)
 - Relevant recently with some calling for people of Gaza to vacate areas of Gaza or all of Gaza. Many resist, fearing they will never be allowed back.
- About 700K Jews are forced to flee many Muslim countries (e.g. Yemen, Algeria, Iran, Iraq) and Israel takes them all in



1948 map pre war and after the war.
(UN Plan and then 1948-1967).

Six Day War (1967)

- Pressure mounts for 20 years. Fearing that Arab states will attack, Israel attacks first and achieves a stunning victory against Egypt, Jordan and Syria.
- War had massive consequences
 - Arab nationalism, the dream of one united Arab state, dies.
 - Local people now see themselves as Palestinians more than merely Arabs
 - The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), led by Yassir Arafat, now becomes the voice of the Palestinians
 - Helps spark a religious revival in the Middle East as the attempts by secular Arab rulers to imitate the West (via capitalism, socialism or nationalism) had led to disaster
 - Americans come to empathize deeply with Israel (David vs Goliath story to them) and become very pro-Israel from this point forward
 - With Israel's control of Gaza and the West Bank, Israeli settlers start moving into these areas and establishing settlements, hoping to eventually take all the land



Israel owned the darkest blue (almost black colour) at the war's start but conquered all the blue area in under a week.



Peace with Egypt

- The leaders of Israel and Egypt sign a peace treaty in 1979. Egypt recognizes Israel, Israel returns land taken in 1967 war. The two leaders win the Nobel Peace Prize. Egyptian leader Anwar Sadat is then assassinated.

FIRST INTIFADA (1987- 1993)

- Popular revolt by Palestinians, objecting to Israeli occupation
- Begins with kids throwing stones and strikes
- Image of boys with rocks facing well-armed soldiers causes a public backlash

OSLO ACCORDS (1993)

- Peace agreement between Israeli PM and the PLO
- PLO recognizes Israel. Israel gives some rights to the Palestinians. Settlements however, are never halted. Major issues left unsettled but with a timeline to address them.
- Violence by right wing extremists on both sides undermine hopes for peace (as do the ongoing settlements)
- Israeli and PLO leaders awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Israeli PM is then assassinated.



Jimmy Carter stands with Anwar Sadat and Menachim Begin who together won the Nobel Peace Prize. Sadat was later assassinated.



CAMP DAVID

- Attempt made at a final peace agreement but it fails
- Each side blames the other.

SECOND INTIFADA

- After the Camp David failure, there is an eruption of violence beyond any previous outbreaks.
- Israel's political left essentially disappears as a political force due to the combination of the Camp David failure and the violence afterwards
- Hamas gains among Palestinians as PLO's peace process yielded nothing while settlers used the years to take more and more land.

GAZA WITHDRAWAL

- In 2005, Israel withdrew from Gaza granting partial sovereignty (Israel controls the borders and sea access)
- In 2006 elections, Hamas won in an upset. Hamas has never held elections since.



The failure at Camp David to achieve a final peace, combined with the eruption of the Second Intifada, decimated the Israeli Left.



Today

Israelis

- Feel unfairly treated:
 - many neighbors actively call for its destruction; periodic missiles from Gaza
- For many, October 7 shows why Israel cannot pull out of the West Bank
- Blame Hamas for hard lives of Gazans
- Deep connection to Israel as both heritage and rare place of safety
- Ongoing sense of insecurity due to historic and current antisemitism
- Many feel they took in 700K Jewish refugees from Arab states; why can't these states take in Palestinians
- Believe peace offers all rejected

Palestinians

- Feel uniquely abandoned and without hope:
 - live in horrid conditions for decades and no one cares
- Feel nothing works: Diplomacy with Britain and UN fails; non-violent path fails (tried BDS sanctions to mimic tactics used against Apartheid-era South Africa but it gets called antisemitic.); hence many turn to violence
- Settlers take more and more land year after year, decade after decade
- Believe peace offers for "less than a state" would be unacceptable to any people. Israel plays at wanting peace but really wants to delay for more settlers.
- Don't have anywhere to go and don't want to move: Palestine is home.



Resources

Encounter Resources:

- [Background on The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Part I](#)
- [Backgrounder on Israel-Palestine: Part II](#)
- ["Why Do They Hate the Jews?"](#)
- [Palestinians and The Muslim Other](#)
- [How to connect in times of conflict](#)
- [What to do when the news is bad](#)

Who to follow on social media:

- [Medhi Hasan](#)
- [Shadi Hamid](#)
- [Yossi Klein Halevi](#)
- [Yair Rosenberg](#)



Podcasts:

[Ezra Klein](#) did an amazing job with several podcasts in October and November of 2023 where he **interviewed people from both sides of the issue, as well as an expert on Hamas, and an American who was involved in peace negotiations.**

Books:

- Books - Four books I recommend are
 - Michael Oren's **[Six Days of War](#)**,
 - Robert Wistrich's classic on **[Antisemitism: The Longest Hatred](#)**,
 - Rashid Khalidi's great historical work from a Palestinian perspective **[The Hundred Years' War on Palestine](#)**
 - And finally a book acclaimed for its balance **[Enemies and Neighbours](#)**.

