

Conflict in Palestine

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I'm going to stick my neck out and try to give an historical account of the current conflict in Palestine between the Israelis and Palestinians. This background is necessary for understanding where Judaism fits into the overall picture. Here is my attempt to sort through a long and controversial story in just a few pages.

In the century after the time of Jesus, Jewish patriots led a disastrous rebellion against the Roman occupation of Palestine that led to the destruction of the Jewish Temple at Jerusalem and the deaths of a considerable number of Jewish religious leaders at the hands of the Roman armies. As I understand it, no significant identifiable organized Jewish presence in Palestine existed subsequently until the years just before the creation of the state of Israel in 1948.

It is not as though the Romans killed all the Jews in Palestine, but after the Roman-wrought destruction of Jerusalem, the Jewish people disbursed much more than they had previously, and Palestine came to be dominated by Arabs from the region. Not all the Jews left Palestine, but Palestine was no longer the center of Jewish life and culture, no longer a Jewish homeland. The Jews who remained were occasionally subjected to brutal attack from the majority Arabs. Ideas of Jews returning to Palestine to once again make it a Jewish homeland did not come to much until the 19th Century, when the idea picked up steam in some European Jewish communities, and some small groups of Christian Biblical literalists (mostly in Britain) began to agitate for the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine because they thought that would hasten the return of Jesus.

The idea of a "return" to Palestine gained momentum among European Jews because of long-standing, sometimes-violent, rampant anti-Semitism in various countries of Europe, including Russia, Poland, and Germany. A trickle of immigration to Palestine began, and small Jewish settlements in the area began to emerge by the first decades of the 20th Century (although most European Jews who moved to look for better conditions either stayed in Europe or came to the United States).

As a result of World War I, Britain came to control the Palestinian region (think 1920 for a round number date) and Jewish immigration from Europe into Palestine increased. The Arabs whose families had by then lived in the region for generations began to become quite alarmed that the Jews wanted to establish a Jewish state; however, the British tried to negotiate the idea of allowing Jewish settlements to operate somewhat independently without becoming a separate state. Arabs generally were willing to see Jews in the region as a minority with guaranteed rights, but they were strongly opposed to the idea of a Jewish state in Palestine since that would impose a new political rule on the region,

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foreign to Muslim Arab culture. To try to keep the growing tensions in hand, the British promoted the establishment of a Jewish “agency” that would help to govern Jewish affairs in the area. This “agency” gradually became in effect an unofficial government for the Jewish settlements, as immigration continued and Jewish influence in the area increased. The Palestinian Arabs watched this process with growing resentment and fear for their future, ultimately leading to violent attacks on Jews and their property. Britain made some efforts to keep order, and belatedly tried to restrain immigration of more Jews, in order to lessen Arab worries.

World War II changed the situation dramatically. (Think 1940 for a round number.) With Europe in chaos, and the Nazis rounding up as many Jews as they could, Jewish immigration from many regions was cut off. The war was fought not only in Europe but also in north Africa, not all that far from Palestine. Everyone’s interest turned to dealing with the war, and the Arab/Jew conflict in Palestine was put on hold.

But immediately after World War II, and the end of the Nazi attempt to “cleanse” Europe of Jews, huge numbers of displaced Jewish survivors from Europe began to flood into Palestine, and dreams of a safe Jewish homeland began to flourish. Zionism – the idea of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine – became the leading cause of many Jews. As would be expected, the Arab inhabitants of Palestine were in no way pleased to see Jews by the thousands moving into the region, establishing settlements and displacing Arabs from control of the land. Both the Zionists and the Palestinian Arabs engaged in terrorist acts against each other. Britain was still supposed to be keeping order, but found it impossible. Violence escalated.

Britain formally asked the newly formed United Nations to solve the enormous problem. The United Nations ultimately voted to *partition* Palestine – setting up a Jewish-controlled region and an Arab-controlled region. Something had to be done with all these thousands of desperate Jews who had no other place to live and who had been so badly mistreated – why not let them have part of their ancient homeland back? The two regions of Palestine were supposed to have a unified economy and so were not supposed to be fully separate nations. This solution was greeted as a victory by the Zionists, although it didn’t give them exactly the separate Jewish state they wanted, but it was bitterly rejected by the Arabs who saw it as theft of their lands and a takeover by Jews whose only claim to the region is that their ancestors had lived there centuries earlier. In fact, the UN partition was based on which regions of Palestine had the most Jews at the time, rather than on which areas of Palestine were the traditional center of Jewish culture. This way of setting up the partition gave the Jews control of regions that were not central to Jewish history, while the Palestinian Arabs retained control of the ancient Jewish homeland. (In no region of Palestine were the Jews a majority at the time of partition, but in coastal regions, they were more prominent than in the traditional heartland.)

The Zionists immediately moved to take over all the territory the United Nations had granted to the Jewish partition, and also some extra. War-weary Britain pulled out, unwilling to try to enforce the partition boundaries or to try to keep the peace. The neighboring Arab states mounted a military attack and occupied parts of Palestine, to keep the Zionists in check, but remarkably they were not successful in taking control of the Jewish partition, since the Jews fought back fiercely. Many of the Arabs who had been living in the areas given to the Jewish partition fled to the Arab-controlled areas, taking

considerable resentment and fear with them, having lost their homes and livelihoods. They felt they had been forced from their homes, farms, and businesses by the influx of Jews, by Jewish attacks on them, and by the decisions of the United Nations.

On May 14, 1948, the Palestinian Zionists unilaterally declared the existence of the State of Israel, to consist of the territories mentioned above. Within hours, the United States officially recognized the State of Israel as a legitimate nation.

As part of the unsuccessful attempt on the part of the Arab states to prevent the creation of Israel, Jordanian armies occupied the West Bank region of Palestine and claimed it for Jordan. This is an area of some 2,200 square miles located west of the Jordan River, and includes large parts of the area known in the Bible as Judea and Samaria— a central part of the ancient Jewish homeland. Later, in 1967 when Arab armies again attempted to destroy Israel, Israel defended itself by occupying the West Bank, much to the dismay of the Palestinian Arabs who had fled there or who had been living there all along, and leading to continuing, often violent, resistance from the Arabs in the area. Israel pointed out that its territory without the West Bank is very difficult to defend militarily because it is so narrow. In 1988 Jordan renounced its claims to the West Bank, leaving the Arabs there with no government to represent their interests. An ad hoc organization, The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) – formed by the Arabs to push for Arab “liberation” not only in the West Bank, but throughout Palestine, by the destruction of the Jewish state – became the default chief representative of the West Bank inhabitants.

Israel negotiated an agreement in 1993 with the Palestinians to grant them a measure of autonomy in the West Bank, supposedly as a step toward the eventual creation of an Arab Palestinian state, with the PLO serving in an administrative capacity—a quasi-government— in the interim. At the same time, as a part of the deal, the PLO changed its public position regarding the destruction of Israel, and seemed to affirm that a satisfactory replacement goal would be the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. There continues to be controversy over whether this public stance on the part of the PLO was genuine, but in any case it is clear that there still are large militant groups of Palestinian Arabs who want either to restrict Jewish control in the area, or to eliminate Israel all together and drive away the Jews. Some of these groups operated independently of the PLO, and always threatened violent trouble if the PLO did not remain sufficiently aggressive in pursuing Arab Palestinian interests.

Also, as a part of the unsuccessful attempt on the part of the Arab states to prevent the creation of Israel in 1948, the Egyptian army occupied a sizeable area of Palestine northeast of Egypt, around the city of Gaza, originally designated by the United Nations as belonging to the Arab “partition” of Palestine. The Israeli army pushed the Egyptians back into a strip only 4-5 miles wide and 25 miles long, near the city. This became known as the Gaza Strip. It now contains huge numbers of Palestinian refugees, living in horrible refugee “camps” under extreme economic hardship. As a result of a 1994 agreement, the PLO was also supposed to serve in an administrative capacity for this region, while the issue of an Arab Palestinian state is worked out. In 1994, the estimated population of the Gaza Strip was 755,200. The corrupt and financially weak PLO, now morphed into the Palestinian Authority, did not (and still does not) provide much in the way of governmental services – sanitation, health care, education, and basic infrastructure are generally lacking in the refugee “camps”. (These “camps” are more like vast urban slums,

but it became common to refer to them as “camps” in order to indicate that they are “temporary”.) Educational and community services came to be provided largely by a violently anti-Israeli organization known as Hamas, operating independently of the Palestinian Authority, and funded surreptitiously by anti-Israeli states and by charitable donations.

During times of Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, from time to time Jewish “settlers” moved into these areas to establish a permanent Jewish presence there. Some of these settlers have religious motivations, to reclaim the land they see as belonging to them by virtue of God’s having given Palestine to the Jews. The vast majority of the settlers do not have these motivations, but are instead looking for economic opportunity, or are motivated by a sense of patriotism, to help expand Israel.

The original settlers snuck into the West Bank, against the law of Israel at that time. They had religious motives, and correctly assumed that the Israeli government would not have the political will to enforce the law and remove them. Subsequently, Israeli government policies with regard to these settlements have varied wildly, from strong support to government destruction of whole settlements. During times of Israeli governmental support for the settlements, one would infer support for the aspirations of those Jews who wish to make Israeli control of these regions permanent. It is not clear what is supposed to happen to the Palestinians living in these areas if that were to happen. However, some years ago, one large and quite substantial settlement in Gaza was bulldozed by the Israelis, with the settlers forced by their own government to relocate, as a peace gesture toward Egypt. And, in just the last couple of years, the Israeli government has required that all Jewish settlements in Gaza be abandoned, as a move toward “disengagement” from the Palestinians. The future of the settlements in the West Bank is contested in Israel today.

It is not hard to imagine the attitude of the Arab Palestinians toward these Jewish settlements. One may well hear from the Arabs that the settlers are not to be considered civilians; they are all Israeli “soldiers” – even the children. This means that when Palestinian militants offer to cease attacking “civilian” targets in Israel, the offer presumably does not include the settlers.

In recent years, the Palestinians continue attacking both the settlers and Jews in other parts of Israel from time to time, often with “suicide” bombings, while the Israeli government tries to protect the settlers from these attacks by launching military raids into the Palestinian “camps” and towns to kill or arrest Palestinians whom they suspect of anti-Israel plotting. These raids often kill or maim innocent people, and destroy the humble homes of the Palestinians. Living conditions in Gaza and the West Bank Palestinian areas deteriorate, breeding more hatred and more “suicide” bombers. (Since Islam forbids suicide, to refer to these bombers as “suicide” bombers is distinctly un-Islamic. Arabs generally refer to them as “martyrs” killed in battle.) Jews are killed by random terrorist attacks, more fear and hatred the result. The cycle of violence, reprisals, retribution, and cries for “justice” continue.

There is now a so-called “road map” to peace, delivered by the United States to both Israel and the Palestinians, and supported by the international community. It is supposed to lead to the creation of a Palestinian state, peacefully coexisting side-by-side with Israel.

But the militant Palestinians are unwilling to give up their arms or their violent revolt against Jewish “occupiers,” while they demand that the thousands of their comrades held for years in Israeli prison camps be released. The political wing of Hamas has been elected to partial control of the Palestinian Authority, probably because they were the only ones providing effective social services in Palestine and not because the Palestinians were voting for violence. But the result is that the exact position of the Palestinian Authority with respect to the destruction of Israel is thrown into question. The Israelis promise to dismantle a few small settlements in the West Bank, while continuing to solidify their positions in the more developed settlements, and building gigantic security walls in the West Bank and along Gaza to keep the Palestinians at bay. These walls are seen by the Palestinians as an attempt to permanently annex the lands on the Jewish side of the wall into Israel. Simultaneously, the religiously committed Jewish settlers feel betrayed by even the mention of giving up any settlements. Israel claims all of Jerusalem, including Arab neighborhoods, and one of the holiest Islamic sites, for a future capital of Israel. Territorial claims and distrust run deep.

Still, there are significant numbers of persons on both sides who desire peace. They do not believe that violence will ever lead to a solution, and they are willing to negotiate a deal in which the Palestinians get part of the region and the Israelis another part, as the “road map” to peace mentioned above calls for. Thus far, this point of view has not received sufficient support to be put into practice on the ground.