

Israel & the Palestinians: A HISTORY OF CONFLICT *in eight key episodes*

As violent protests following the move of the US embassy to Jerusalem attest, the prospect of lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians seems as remote now as ever. Seventy years after the founding of the modern state of Israel, **Matthew Hughes** charts eight key moments in the history of the hostilities

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

An Israeli soldier aboard an armoured personnel carrier waves his national flag as Israeli troops advance into Syria in October 1973 during the Yom Kippur War

The last British soldiers board a ship sailing from the Mediterranean port of Haifa in June 1948, six weeks after the state of Israel was declared

Demonstrators wave a flag showing Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat in the West Bank in 1988 during the first *intifada* (uprising) against Israeli expansion

A Palestinian village is destroyed by British forces in 1938 during the Arab Revolt (1936–39), a conflict fuelled by the proliferation of Jewish settlements on land previously owned by Palestinians





Men from Bethlehem in Jerusalem in 1894, when the territory identified as Palestine was part of the Ottoman empire. At the start of the 19th century Palestine's population was mostly Arab, with a small Jewish minority, but from the 1880s waves of settlers rapidly augmented the Jewish population

1 Early Jewish settlement

19th century

Palestine did not formally exist as a country before the First World War, when the British fixed Palestine's borders after their conquest of what would become Iraq, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. For hundreds of



A view of Jerusalem from the north in about 1870, when it lay within the Ottoman empire

years before the British took control, Palestine had been divided into provinces of the Ottoman empire, and had very few Jewish inhabitants.

Indeed, at the start of the 19th century the Jewish population of the territory soon to be defined as Palestine was small – only about 3%. The majority of the region's inhabitants were Arabs, mostly Sunni Muslim, who had occupied the region since the seventh-century Arab conquest; there was also a sizeable Christian minority. Together, these formed the population that would be considered – despite the lack of a formally recognised country – as Palestinians.

The Jewish people of Palestine in 1800 were not farmers or settlers but instead lived in towns and worked as merchants or religious teachers. As the 19th century progressed, European Jews – influenced by the rise of nationalism in Europe – began to look to Palestine as the place for a possible Jewish homeland. A wave of Jewish people came to the country in an *Aliyah* ('ascent') starting

in the 1880s, making their homes on land bought from Palestinians.

This brought a new type of Jew to Palestine, there to settle the land; these adopted tough new names such as *Oz* ('strength'). More settlers followed as Jewish people fled anti-Semitic pogroms in Europe, a situation exacerbated by the rise of rightwing sentiment that presaged Nazi rule of Germany from 1933.

Settlement was core to Zionism – a Jewish nationalist movement – because it demanded land for a Jewish state. Zionists based their national claim to Palestine on ancient Jewish settlement of the area before the Romans expelled Jews from the region in the second century AD following two major Jewish revolts against their rule. Zionism and Jewish settlement were seen as a return to an ancient Jewish Palestine. "A land without a people for a people without a land" ran a pithy Zionist slogan – yet this was not accurate: the land was already occupied by predominantly Muslim communities.

2 The seeds of conflict

1896–1917

Theodor Herzl's pamphlet *Der Judenstaat* (1896), proposing a Jewish country



In 1896, an Austro-Hungarian Jewish intellectual, Theodor Herzl, published *Der Judenstaat* (The Jewish State), a pamphlet outlining the intellectual basis for the idea of a Jewish country.

There was initially much discussion among Zionists about whether such a place was to be in Palestine or elsewhere. Early schemes proposed such disparate locations as Canada, parts of South America, and British-run East Africa around what is now Uganda and Kenya. European Zionist Jews were looking for a place to make real the Jewish state, and the debate fell between two major camps. The first was willing to accept a Jewish state anywhere, while the other was determined to forge a state in historic Palestine.

In 1905, at the Seventh Zionist Congress in Basel, the dispute was settled in favour of a Jewish state in Palestine rather than some part of the world with no religious or historical connection for Jewish people. Many Palestinians resisted this move to settle in the territory, and expressed their own national identity through channels such as *Falastin*, a newspaper founded in Jaffa in 1911 and named for their homeland. Other responses were more direct, with Palestinians aggressively targeting landowners who sold land to Jewish settlers.

Jewish immigration and settlement set the two communities on the road to war. It would be a struggle in which the Zionists, armed with modern European nationalist ideas, organisation and technologies, had the edge.

3 Riots and revolt 1917–20

In 1917, during the First World War, British-led troops conquered southern Palestine and took Jerusalem. In the same year, the British foreign secretary, AJ Balfour, issued the so-called Balfour Declaration. Sent as a letter to the Jewish (and Zionist) Lord Rothschild on 2 November, and published a week later in *The Times*, it was a deliberately ambiguous statement of British intent towards Palestine. It did not promise the Jewish people a state in the country; instead, it vaguely expressed the sentiment that “His Majesty’s Government view with favour” the establishment of a Jewish “national home” in Palestine, while also recognising that the region had an existing, non-Jewish, population.

The declaration helped Britain’s war effort in various ways, boosting support in the United States (which had a

significant Jewish population) and providing for British control of Palestine. The Jewish settlers depended on Britain for their survival and, until the Second World War, worked with the British authorities to maintain security in Palestine. Jewish settlement was met with local resistance: in 1920, for instance, rioting broke out as Palestinians opposed British-facilitated Jewish immigration. More violence was to erupt throughout the next two decades.

Jewish-European settlers in this period recorded the mood of colonialism. “We must not forget that we are dealing here with a semi-savage people, which has extremely primitive concepts,” one wrote at the time. “And this is his nature: if he senses in you power, he will submit and will hide his hatred for you. And if he senses weakness, he will dominate you.” Amid such colonial views, the British veered between support for Jewish settlers and for the Palestinians. Their goals were diverging and becoming seemingly irreconcilable.



General Edmund Allenby enters Jerusalem on foot on 11 December 1917 during the British campaign in Palestine against Ottoman forces during the First World War

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Jewish families evacuate Jerusalem's Old City in 1936, during the Arab Revolt – an uprising that followed several years of violence between Palestinians and Jewish settlers

4 Full-scale conflict

1929–47

As violence erupted between the two communities, Jews and Palestinians divided, and people had to take sides. Early Jewish inhabitants in Palestine, and Mizrahi ('oriental' or 'eastern') Jews who came to Palestine from Arab countries and who spoke Arabic, were now confronted by politically mobilised European Jews arriving to settle the land and build a Jewish state. Many of these long-time Jewish occupants of Palestine and the Middle East cut their ties to their Arab neighbours.

An outbreak of extreme violence in 1929 dashed any faint hopes of Jews and Palestinians combining, and revisionist rightwing Zionist organisations grew. Palestinians and Jews prepared for a full-scale conflict. Militant Muslim preachers such as Shaykh 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam mobilised Palestinians, priming them for jihad. The Jewish population prepared much more thoroughly, building a proto-state alongside nascent

political and economic structures, having already established a defence organisation, *Haganah*.

The Jewish community pushed into new land with numerous settlements, and set up a Jewish presence across Palestine. By this point, the Palestinians were in conflict with both the Jews and the British authorities in Palestine, reaching a crescendo in a mass revolt in 1936. The British army crushed the revolt by 1939, but resistance and preparation for further attacks by both communities remained the pattern for the rest of the 1930s and throughout the Second World War.

By the time of the Second World War, the British had shifted their policy from support for Zionism to blocking Jewish immigration to Palestine. They did this, again, to bolster support for their war effort, this time from Arab allies. In the face of Jewish people escaping the unfolding Holocaust in Europe, this caused growing resentment and conflict with Zionists who were trying to save European Jews by helping them get to Palestine.

After the war ended in 1945, the Jewish population of Palestine had

become sufficiently powerful and mobilised to fight Britain, and good Jewish preparation won the day. Jewish terror attacks against British targets helped to force Britain to reconsider its geopolitical priorities. In one of the most infamous attacks, in 1946 the wing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem that housed a British headquarters was blown up, killing almost 100 people. In 1947, Britain decided to leave Palestine. Meanwhile, survivors of the Holocaust who emigrated to Palestine further boosted the territory's Jewish population.

In the November of the same year, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution that proposed the partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states. Under the plan, Jerusalem would be an internationalised city. The suggestion was accepted, albeit reluctantly, by Jewish representatives in the region, because it offered some international acceptance of their aims of establishing a state. Palestinian and Arab groups rejected it, however, arguing that it ignored the rights of most of the population of Palestine to decide their own destiny.



British servicemen search the wreckage of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1946 after it was bombed by the Zionist Jewish organisation Irgun. The hotel had housed a British headquarters, and became a target after the British blocked Jewish immigration during the Second World War



5 The birth of modern Israel

1948–49

The First Arab-Israeli War of 1948–49 followed on from the violence between Jews and Palestinians as neighbouring Arab states – for their own political motives as well as to help their Palestinian Arab brethren – intervened in the hostilities. In May 1948, as British troops left Palestine, Zionist leader (soon to become the first Israeli prime minister) David Ben-Gurion declared the formation of the state of Israel, at

which point Egypt, Iraq, Transjordan, Lebanon and Syria attacked Israel in support of the Palestinians.

Israel was born from war, both the legacy of the Holocaust and more immediate conflict when the Arab armies attacked in May 1948. Fighting against the new Israeli army continued until early 1949. Local Palestinian militia units supported the war effort, but were poorly organised and had

little military power. In general, though the Arab forces looked impressive on paper, the military quality of their fighting power and the political unity of their command across different national forces were poor and, as a result, they lost.

Israel's success allowed it to expand its territory to include all of British-run Palestine, with the exception of the hilly West Bank next to Jordan, east

GETTY IMAGES



Palestinian refugees pictured during the first Arab-Israeli War in 1948. At the conclusion of the war the following year, some 700,000 Palestinians had fled or been expelled from the new state of Israel and were refugees in neighbouring territories

Jerusalem (including the Old City), and the territory known as the Gaza Strip, running along the Mediterranean Sea just northeast of the Sinai Peninsula. The result of this expansion was that Israel controlled more than 75% of what had formerly been British-run Palestine – or, in other words, the Palestinians now held less than 25% of Palestine.

What happened next has informed a great deal of how we now understand

the Arab-Israeli conflict. For the Palestinians this was the *nakba* (catastrophe) that turned hundreds of thousands of them into refugees; for Israel, it was triumph in a war of independence in the face of a full-scale assault against its Jewish people.

Both communities saw the events in very different ways. From an Israeli perspective, the Arabs were hell-bent on destroying Israel in 1948, and the war they provoked ended up making thousands of Palestinian people refugees. From a Palestinian viewpoint, the Israelis were acting on a plan to expel them and thus ethnically cleanse the country.

Israel did expel Palestinians, but others simply left as their society collapsed under the pressure of war; even so, more than 100,000 Palestinians remained inside Israel after 1949. Massacre was followed by counter-massacre: Jewish forces killed around 100 Palestinian villagers at Deir Yassin, just west of Jerusalem, in April 1948; shortly afterwards, Arab fighters killed some 80 Jewish medical staff near Jerusalem.

These massacres reveal how both sides emphasise different historical

events, and in different ways. Indeed, histories of this period quickly reveal how divisive this time remains, with accounts often skewed significantly toward one side or another.

The conclusion of the First Arab-Israeli War left two significant political problems, both of which remain largely unresolved today. First, more than 700,000 Palestinians now lived in refugee camps in the Egyptian-run Gaza Strip, throughout neighbouring Arab nations, and in the Jordanian-controlled West Bank. Stateless, without passports and dispossessed, theirs was a squalid existence, and no one addressed their lack of political rights.

Meanwhile, Israel built a functioning Jewish state, drawing in more Mizrahi Jews who had lived for centuries in Arab countries but who were no longer welcome there. But though the Zionists had realised their ambition of a Jewish state, no Arab states recognised it, meaning that Israel was flanked by hostile neighbours. The consequences of the failure to settle the political needs of both communities were to feed directly into the wars that were to come.



Israel and neighbouring territories, 2018



Note: this map is for illustrative and location purposes only

6 Further Arab-Israeli wars

1956–73

Depending on your viewpoint, the causes of the Arab-Israeli wars that followed Israel's formation lie either with an aggressive expansionist Israeli state that preferred war to diplomacy, or with an intransigent Arab front that refused to talk to Israel, wanting instead to eliminate the Jewish state. The Palestinian people were caught in the middle.

Israel escalated border tensions in the early 1950s. This led in 1956 to what became known as the Suez Crisis – an invasion by Israeli, British and French forces of Egypt under its dynamic new pan-Arab leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser. Israelis considered that Nasser started the war by launching attacks into Israel and blockading the port of Eilat, but the war's origins are contested. Israel won the conflict militarily but there was no political resolution, and another war followed little more than a decade later.

The conflagration of June 1967 had major consequences. Across six days of

fighting, Israeli forces destroyed the armies of Egypt, Jordan and Syria, and occupied vast new tracts of land in the Sinai Peninsula, Gaza Strip, West Bank and Golan Heights. Israeli paratroopers also took east Jerusalem, which included the Old City, home to holy sites such as the Jewish Western Wall and the area known to Muslims as al-Haram al-Sharif and to Jews as the Temple Mount.

This was a stunning military success for Israel, but the 1967 war also led to political change. A messianic, less secular, settler-based Zionism grew in the recently conquered West Bank, Gaza Strip and Golan. These settlers formed Gush Emunim ('Bloc of the Faithful') in 1974 as an orthodox activist organisation to reflect the new mood in Zionism, while Israel's Jews divided into the more secular versus the more religious.

Meanwhile, humiliated, the Arabs refused to accept their defeat. The result was yet another conflict: the Yom Kippur War in 1973, named for the Jewish holy day of atonement, on which Egyptian and Syrian forces attacked. Though this war proved more successful for the Arabs in its initial phases, the Israelis successfully counter-attacked. The conflict led

Israel and Egypt to sign a peace treaty in 1979. Despite a historic visit to Israel by the Egyptian leader, Anwar Sadat, the issues underpinning the conflict had still not been fundamentally resolved. The Palestinians remained without a state, and their war went on.

Indeed, after the peace with Egypt, Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 to attack Palestinian fighters based there. They remained in southern Lebanon, finally pulling out in 2000 when faced with a new foe in the shape of Lebanese Muslim Shia militia forces such as Hezbollah.

US president Jimmy Carter witnesses an Arab-Israeli peace treaty in March 1979, flanked by the signatories, Egypt's president Anwar Sadat (left) and Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin



7 Stalemate and resolution

1987–96

The lack of any wider political progress had provoked simmering anger among Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza territory occupied by Israel in 1967. In 1987, this finally erupted into a full-scale uprising in Gaza – the *intifada* – which soon spread to the West Bank. Mass riots saw people, including children, throwing stones at Israeli troops and tanks. Soldiers responded with physical violence, some aimed at the children, and with lethal force. The resulting images, beamed around the world, were terrible PR for the Israelis.

Israel's military power was not so effective against unarmed demonstrators as it was against conventional armies. The asymmetric battle between hi-tech weapons and stone-throwers revealed that the side that seemingly holds more power does not always get what it wants. This helped to push the two sides to talk, and Yasser Arafat for the Palestinians and Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin eventually forged a deal – of sorts.

In 1993, the two sides signed a deal that was marked, historically, by Arafat shaking hands with Rabin on the lawn of the White House in Washington DC in front of the US president. It was a



Young Palestinians flee Israeli soldiers during riots in Gaza City in 1993. The violence of the Palestinian *intifada* (uprising) eased briefly when the Oslo Peace Accords were signed in September 1993

8 The continuing conundrum

1996–present

The lack of political dialogue has led to further conflict. Palestinian attacks on Israeli civilians after 1996, and the launch of a second *intifada* in 2000, led to Israel retaliating with the construction of a huge ‘separation’ wall to stop suicide bombers and blockade the West Bank, while simultaneously building new settlements on land taken in 1967.

A withdrawal of Israeli settlements from Gaza in 2005 came shortly before a split within the Palestinians between the Islamist Hamas movement based in Gaza and, on the West Bank, Palestine Liberation Organization-led secular political groups centred around the nationalist party Fatah. The internal divisions within the Palestinian camp that caused this split made it hard to present a unified front in any negotiations with Israel. This made a peace deal problematic because there were now two Palestinian camps – one of which, Hamas, had Israel’s destruction explicitly written into its charter.

Many Israelis were convinced that the Palestinians were not serious about peace. Israeli invasions of Lebanon provoked another conflict with Lebanon’s Hezbollah (backed by Iran), which attacked Israel in 2006. In 2014, Israel launched large-scale attacks into Gaza in response to rocket fire from Hamas militants; more recently, Israeli soldiers have shot protesters from Gaza who have moved against Israel’s border fence.

The conflict rumbles on. Despite ongoing efforts to find a resolution, it still takes a determined optimist to see much future for a two-state solution in which the Israeli and Palestinian states coexist alongside each other. Similarly, a binational solution resulting in a single Israeli-Palestinian state as a home for all communities also seems unlikely. 🌐

A Palestinian prepares to hurl a rock at Israeli forces at the Gaza-Israel border in spring 2018. Protesters demanded that Israel allow the return of Palestinian refugees. More than 100 Palestinians were killed during the campaign



Ivanka Trump, daughter and senior advisor of US president Donald Trump, at the opening of the new US embassy in Jerusalem on 14 May 2018. The relocation of the US embassy from Tel Aviv angered Palestinians



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