**The conflict between Palestinian Arabs and Jews**

The conflict between Palestinian Arabs and Jews is a modern phenomenon, which began around the turn of the 20th century. Although these two groups have different religions (Palestinians include Muslims, Christians and Druze), religious differences are not the cause of the conflict. It is essentially a struggle over land. Until 1948, the area that both groups claimed was known internationally as Palestine. But following the war of 1948-49, this land was divided into three parts: the state of Israel, the West Bank (of the Jordan River) and the Gaza Strip (1).

Jewish claims to this land are based on the biblical promise to Abraham and his descendants, on the fact that this was the historical site of the Jewish kingdom of Israel (which was destroyed by the Roman Empire), and on Jews' need for a haven from European anti-Semitism (2). Palestinian Arabs' claims to the land are based on continuous residence in the country for hundreds of years and the fact that they represented the demographic majority (3). Arabs do not believe that they should forfeit their land to compensate Jews for Europe's crimes against them.

In the 19th century, following a trend that began earlier in Europe, people around the world began to identify themselves as nations and to demand national rights, foremost the right to self-rule in a state of their own (self-determination and sovereignty). Jews and Palestinians both began to develop a national consciousness, and mobilized to achieve national goals. Because Jews were spread across the world (in diaspora), their national movement, Zionism, entailed the identification of a place where Jews could come together through the process of immigration and settlement (4). Palestine seemed the logical and optimal place, since this was the site of Jewish origin. The Zionist movement began in 1882 with the first wave of European Jewish immigration to Palestine.

Until the beginning of the 20th century, most Jews living in Palestine were concentrated in four cities with religious significance: Jerusalem, Hebron, Safad and Tiberias. Most of them observed traditional, orthodox religious practices (3). Their attachment to the land was religious rather than national, and they were not involved in or supportive of the Zionist movement which began in Europe and was brought to Palestine by immigrants. Most of the Jews who immigrated from Europe lived a more secular lifestyle and were committed to the goals of creating a Jewish nation and building a modern, independent Jewish state.

By the early years of the 20th century, Palestine was becoming a trouble spot of competing territorial claims and political interests. The Ottoman Empire was weakening, and European powers were entrenching their grip on areas in the eastern Mediterranean, including Palestine. In 1917, the British Foreign Minister, Lord Arthur Balfour, issued a declaration (the Balfour Declaration) announcing his government's support for the establishment of "a Jewish national home in Palestine" (5). Britain obtained a mandate over the areas which now comprise Israel, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and Jordan. In 1921, the British divided this region in two: east of the Jordan River became the Emirate of Transjordan and west of the Jordan River became the Palestine Mandate (6). This was the first time in modern history that Palestine became a unified political entity.

Throughout the region, Arabs were angered by Britain's failure to fulfill its promise to create an independent Arab state. In Palestine, the situation was more complicated because of the British promise to support the creation of a Jewish national home. The rising tide of European Jewish immigration, land purchases and settlement in Palestine generated increasing resistance by Palestinian Arab peasants, journalists and political figures. They feared that this would lead eventually to the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Palestinian Arabs opposed the British Mandate because it thwarted their aspirations for self-rule, and opposed massive Jewish immigration because it threatened their position in the country.

Following World War II the British requested that the recently established United Nations determine the future of Palestine. After investigating the cituation, they came to an agreement that the country would have to be divided in order to satisfy the needs and demands of both Jews and Palestinian Arabs. Jews had acquired by purchase 6 to 8 percent of the total land area of Palestine amounting to about 20 percent of the arable land (7).

The UN partition plan divided the country in such a way that each state would have a majority of its own population, although some Jewish settlements would fall within the proposed Palestinian state and many Palestinians would become part of the proposed Jewish state. The Zionist leadership accepted the UN partition plan, although they hoped somehow to expand the borders allotted to the Jewish state (4). The Palestinian Arabs and the surrounding Arab states rejected the UN plan.

Fighting began between the Arab and Jewish residents of Palestine days after the adoption of the UN partition plan. The Arab military forces were poorly organized, trained and armed. In contrast, Zionist military forces, although numerically smaller, were well organized, trained and armed. On May 15, 1948 Zionist leaders proclaimed the state of Israel. Neighboring Arab states (Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Iraq) then invaded Israel claiming that they sought to "save" Palestine from the Zionists. The war ended ended in 1949 (8). The country once known as Palestine was now divided into three parts, each under separate political control of Israel, Egypt, Jordan.

As a consequence of the fighting in Palestine/Israel between 1947 and 1949, many Arabs became refugees. Palestinians in Arab states generally do not enjoy the same rights as the citizens of those states. Palestinian Arabs remained in the area that became the state of Israel. They were granted Israeli citizenship and the right to vote, but in many respects they were and remain second-class citizens (9).

The 1967 war, which lasted only six days, established Israel as the dominant regional military power (10). The Palestinian national movement emerged as a major actor after 1967 in the form of the political and military groups that made up the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) (11). The Egyptian, Syrian and Jordanian armies were decisively defeated, and Israel captured the West Bank from Jordan, the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, and the Golan Heights from Syria. Israel established a military administration to govern the Palestinian residents of the occupied West Bank and Gaza. Under this arrangement, Palestinians were denied many basic political rights and civil liberties. All aspects of Palestinian life were regulated.

The UN partition plan advocated that Jerusalem become an international zone, independent of both the proposed Jewish and Palestinian Arab states (7). In the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, Israel took control of the western part of Jerusalem, while Jordan took the eastern part (8). In June 1967, Israel captured East Jerusalem from Jordan and almost immediately annexed it (10).

The Arab League established the PLO in 1964 as an effort to control Palestinian nationalism (11). Israel refused to negotiate with the PLO, arguing that it was nothing but a terrorist organization. It rejected the establishment of a Palestinian state, insisting that Palestinians should be incorporated into the existing Arab states.

After the 1967 war, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 242 calls for Israeli withdrawal from lands seized in the war and the right of all states in the area to peaceful existence within secure and recognized boundaries (12). For many years the Palestinians rejected Resolution 242, because it does not acknowledge their right to national self-determination or to return to their homeland. It calls only for a just settlement of the refugee problem.

After coming to power in Egypt in late 1970, President Anwar Sadat indicated that he was willing to sign a peace agreement with Israel in exchange for the return of Egyptian territory. It was ignored by Israel and the US, Egypt and Syria decided to act to break the political stalemate. They attacked Israeli forces in the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights in October 1973, on the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur (8). The surprise attack caught Israel off guard.

In September 1978, President Jimmy Carter invited Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin to Camp David, a presidential retreat in Maryland (13). They worked out two agreements: a framework for peace between Egypt and Israel, and a general framework for resolution of the Middle East crisis, i.e. the Palestinian question. Only the Egyptian-Israeli part of the Camp David accords was implemented. In any case, Israel sabotaged negotiations by continuing to confiscate Palestinian lands and build new settlements in violation of the commitments Menachem Begin made to Jimmy Carter at Camp David.

In December 1987, the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza started a mass uprising against the Israeli occupation. This uprising or intifada (which means "shaking off" in Arabic) was a popular mobilization that drew on the organizations and institutions that had developed under occupation (14). It involved many forms of civil disobedience, including massive demonstrations, general strikes, refusal to pay taxes, boycotts of Israeli products. This resistance drew unprecedented international attention to the situation facing Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. The intifada did not bring an end to the occupation. Palestinian activists in the occupied territories demanded that the PLO adopt a clear political program to guide the struggle for independence. In response, the Palestine National Council proclaimed an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and renounced terrorism.

After the Gulf War, the US sought to stabilize its position in the Middle East by promoting a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The administration of President Bush felt obliged to its Arab allies, and pressed the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir to open negotiations with the Palestinians and the Arab states at a multilateral conference convened in Madrid, Spain in October 1991. PLO be excluded from the talks.

A new Israeli Labor Party government led by Yitzhak Rabin assumed office in June 1992 while the Washington negotiations became stalemated. Human rights conditions in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip deteriorated dramatically after Rabin assumed office. Lack of progress in the Washington talks and deterioration of the economic and human rights conditions in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip accelerated the growth of a radical Islamist challenge to the PLO. Violent attacks against Israeli targets by HAMAS (Islamic Resistance Movement) and Islamic Jihad further exacerbated tensions.

Consequently, Israel initiated secret negotiations in Oslo, Norway directly with PLO representatives who had been excluded from the Madrid and Washington talks. These negotiations produced the Israel-PLO Declaration of Principles. It was based on mutual recognition of Israel and the PLO. It established that Israel would withdraw from the Gaza Strip and Jericho during a 5-year period.

During the period of the Oslo process, Israel's governments built new settlements in the occupied territories, expanded existing settlements and constructed a network of bypass roads to travel safely (15). These projects were understood by most Palestinians as marking out territory that Israel sought to annex in the final settlement. The Oslo accords contained no mechanism to block these actions or Israel's violations of Palestinian human and civil rights in areas under its control. The Palestinians' expectations were not accommodated by the Oslo accords.

In July 2000, President Clinton invited Prime Minister Barak and President Arafat to Camp David to conclude negotiations on the final status agreement (16). The distance between the two parties, made it impossible to reach an agreement. Although Barak offered a far more extensive Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank than any other Israeli leader had publicly considered, he insisted on maintaining Israeli sovereignty over East Jerusalem. This was unacceptable to the Palestinians and to most of the Muslim world. Both Arafat and Barak left Camp David usatisfied and having accomplished nothing.

The deeply flawed "peace process" initiated at Oslo, combined with the daily frustrations and humiliations inflicted upon Palestinians in the occupied territories, converged to ignite a second intifada beginning in late September 2000. Likud leader Ariel Sharon visited the Noble Sanctuary (Temple Mount) in the company of 1000 armed guards. This move provoked large Palestinian protests in Jerusalem (17). Israeli soldiers killed six unarmed protesters. These killings inaugurated over a month of demonstrations and clashes across the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The second intifada is far more bloodier than the first one and it did not look like it’s going to end soon.

The conflict is a brain-braking puzzle that seems impossible to resolve, especially when it comes to the question of land and when the question grows to include participation of the entire world. At this point every move becomes dangerous and comes close to the domino effect, when taking away one peace of domino may trigger the entire flow of the consequences. The Middle East situation is one of the dangerous ones, because it doesn’t stand far away from the beginning of the Third Wold War. However, there is no situation that doesn’t have a solution. In my opinion, every conflict can be solved by negotiations and the establishment of diplomatic relations. Arab-Israeli conflict is no exeption. I think that Israel should take it easy on the occupied territories, stop imposing harsh rules. Instead, it should go directly to the negotiations with Palestine. May be it is difficult to give up its pride and firm position, but it is a choice of a constant war or rather peace. In my opinion, peace is much better and safer and it is worth giving up something important to attain something priceless.

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