

30 The Israeli-Palestinian conflict

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Box 30.1: National anthems

As long as in the heart within,
The Jewish soul yearns,
And towards the eastern edges, onwards,
An eye gazes towards Zion.
Our hope is not yet lost,
The hope that is two thousand years old,
To be a free nation in our land,
The land of Zion, Jerusalem
(Israel's national anthem)

With the resolve of the winds and the fire of the weapons
And the determination of my nation in the land of struggle
Palestine is my home, Palestine is my fire,
Palestine is my vendetta and the land of withstanding
By the oath under the shade of the flag
By my land and nation, and the fire of pain
I will live as a Fida'i, I will remain a redeemer,
I will die as a Fida'i – until my country returns
Fida'i
(Part of the Palestinian national anthem)

Introduction

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an ongoing situation that began at the end of the nineteenth century. It plays an important role in Middle Eastern and international politics and is part of the wider Arab-Israeli conflict. Some of the main conflict issues, such as refugees, water and security, affect not only the two sides, but also neighbouring states and international actors further afield. Despite claims that it is religious or ethnic, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is, at its core, a dispute between two nations over land and sovereignty. This chapter aims to broaden the reader's understanding of the conflict and relate it to some of the key concepts and terms discussed in the core chapters of the book.

There are different ways of analysing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It can be viewed as a conflict between two sides that have clear and identifiable concerns and

objectives relating to issues such as land, sovereignty and resources. However, the longevity and intractability of the conflict give rise to other forms of analysis. Issues such as psychology, fear and hatred of the other, sense of victimhood, and religious and ideological considerations sometimes create the impression that there is more to the conflict than land and sovereignty. Therefore, it is vital that students are aware of the different narratives woven by each side, their history and psychology.

Additionally, it is important to note that the sides are not as coherent and unitary as sometimes presented. Although Israel is a state, a multitude of different factions and interest groups operate within it – for example, the Israeli peace movement, Jewish settlers, and different political parties, each pursuing different aims as regards the conflict. The Palestinians do not have a state and are geographically divided. They are also politically divided, with the Gaza Strip ruled by Hamas and the West Bank ruled by the Palestinian Authority (PA).

Historical introduction

The name Palestine was given to the region by the Romans after the suppression of a Jewish revolt in 135CE, and it has remained in use ever since. The modern borders of Israel/Palestine were drawn by the British and the League of Nations in 1923.

At the end of the nineteenth century the overwhelming majority of the population in Palestine was non-Jewish (mostly Muslim, but with a significant Christian minority). The process of Jewish immigration to Palestine as a consequence of the rise of Zionism (Jewish nationalism) and anti-Semitism stood in stark contrast to rising national awareness among the local Arab-Palestinian population. The main aim of Zionism was the return of Jews to Palestine (in Hebrew *Eretz Israel* – the historic-Biblical land of Israel and the birthplace of Judaism) and the establishment of a Jewish state there. Both national groups claim the same land – Palestine/Israel – as their homeland. The often violent struggle between these two nations took place amid the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the establishment of a British Mandate (1919–1948) and the Second World War and the Holocaust (1939–1945).

During the period of the British Mandate several solutions were put forward, including a partition plan, but none gained the acceptance of both sides. Taking into account the horrors of the Holocaust (when six million Jews were killed and several hundred thousand more became refugees), and Britain's inability to resolve the conflict, the United Nations General Assembly voted on partitioning Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab-Palestinian state (29 November 1947 – Resolution 181).

A war ensued in 1948, first at a civil level between Jews and Palestinians, and later between Israel (the Jewish state) and neighbouring Arab states. The war ended in an overwhelming victory for Israel, which took over most of the land. The Arab-held parts of Palestine were reduced to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (22% of historical Palestine), controlled by Jordan and Egypt respectively. The war also resulted in a massive refugee problem. Approximately seven hundred and fifty thousand Palestinians became refugees as a direct consequence of the war. Despite a UN resolution, Israel did not allow the refugees to return. For Palestinians the war is known as the *Nakba* (the Catastrophe) and is characterised by dispossession and expulsion: for Israelis this was their war of independence. As a consequence of Jewish suffering in the Holocaust and the Palestinian refugee tragedy, both nations share a strong sense of victimhood. Therefore the conflict is sometimes seen as a one between two groups of victims.

Palestinian Refugees: According to the UN there are around 4.7 million Palestinian refugees (2012), the majority of whom are descendents of refugees from the 1948 war. There are around two million refugees in the Occupied Territories, two million in Jordan, and half a million in both Lebanon and Syria respectively. Many refugees are supported by UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency), a UN body specifically created to assist Palestinian refugees. The living conditions of Palestinian refugees vary considerably, dependent upon the state in which they reside. In Lebanon, for example, refugees are deprived of most basic rights. A key Palestinian demand is the right of return to Israel/Palestine for the refugees; this demand is also enshrined in international law (UN Resolution 194). Palestinians claim refugees should be given options to return to their previous homes, return to a future Palestinian state, be repatriated in the countries where they reside, and/or receive compensation. Israel claims that it did not create and therefore is not responsible for the refugee problem. It argues that their return, after more than sixty years, is not feasible and that it would undermine the Jewish nature of the Israeli state. Israel insists that the refugees should either be repatriated in the countries where they currently reside or return to a future Palestinian state. In addition, Israel highlights the case of the hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees from Arab states whom it absorbed. This issue is concerned not only with the aspirations of millions of refugees, but also with the future of Israel. The right of return for the Palestinian refugees is seen by Israel as a demographic threat to its survival as a Jewish state.

In 1967 the June war, also known as the Six Day war, between Israel and its Arab neighbours changed the dynamics of the conflict. The war brought about an Israeli victory and the occupation of territories three and a half times its own size, among them the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. At the heart of the current conflict is the future of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip – referred to as the Occupied Territories – their population, the settlements Israel established there, and the fate of the Palestinian refugees. Whether the Occupied Territories should be classified as Palestinian is a hotly-debated issue; however, by and large the international community recognises them as such, and in many cases they are referred to as the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

In 1988 the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) – an umbrella organisation representing Palestinian nationalist groups headed by Yasser Arafat – agreed to a two-state solution. This came as a consequence of the first Palestinian popular uprising – known as the first *Intifada* (shaking off) – against Israel's occupation. Until that moment neither Israel nor the PLO had shown any real interest in finding a bilateral negotiated settlement to the conflict. The PLO maintained its desire to destroy Israel and liberate all of Palestine through violent means; Israel, though stating its desire for peace, continued to build settlements in the territories and to deprive Palestinians of basic rights, leading many to believe its real intent was the de-facto annexation of the territories and the creation of a greater Israel.

Land and borders

In 1993 Israel and the PLO reached a series of agreements known as the Oslo Accords. These accords brought about mutual recognition and saw Israel cede parts of the Occupied Territories to the PLO. Under the accords a Palestinian Authority (PA) was established through democratic elections and given limited

sovereignty over the main Palestinian population centres (known as areas A). The rest of the territories were designated either as areas B (joint control) or areas C, which comprise over 60% of the land and are under full Israeli control. Israel places restrictions on Palestinian movement throughout areas B and C in accordance with its security concerns. This severely restricts Palestinian freedom of movement. Some Palestinian groups, most notably Hamas (the Islamic Resistance Movement), have refused to accept the Oslo accords, viewing them as Palestinian capitulation and a de-facto acceptance of the ongoing Israeli occupation. The main conflict issues, such as Israeli settlements, Jerusalem, future borders and water resources, were left for final status negotiations and were not dealt with in the accords, which were designated as temporary, and were to last for only a few years. However, the sides have been unable to reach an agreement over the final status of the territories.

Water Security: Due to the scarcity of water sources, water security is an important issue in the conflict and in the Middle East region in general. The issue of water security has been integral to Israel's relations with the Palestinians as well as with neighbouring states; for example, Israel's unresolved conflict with Syria and Lebanon is based, to some extent, on access to water sources. Water sources in Israel and the West Bank are controlled by Israel and are not shared equally with Palestinians; Israeli settlers receive a far higher allocation of water for agriculture and private consumption than do Palestinians. Israel also prevents Palestinians from drilling independently for water in the areas it controls in the West Bank. Additionally, Israel uses and controls water from the River Jordan which is the eastern boundary of the West Bank.

In the various rounds of negotiations held since 1993, the issue of land and future borders became paramount. Palestinians demand the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, alongside the state of Israel, in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip with East Jerusalem as its capital. In other words, Palestinians demand a full Israeli withdrawal to the ceasefire lines of 1967 (known as the Green Line). Palestinians argue that by accepting a two-state solution they are relinquishing their rights to 78% of historical Palestine, which they see as a great sacrifice on their part.

Israel has exhibited some willingness to negotiate but its proposals have fallen short of the minimum Palestinian demands. Israel has made clear its refusal to withdraw to the Green Line, claiming that such a move would leave it with indefensible borders. Nonetheless, Israel has demonstrated its readiness to withdraw from some areas; for example, Israel dismantled its settlements and unilaterally withdrew from the Gaza Strip in 2005. However, it claims that subsequent attacks by Palestinian armed groups, principally rocket attacks by Hamas, have shown that further withdrawals are a recipe for renewed violence. Israel contends that the conflict is not about land but about the Palestinian refusal to recognise Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state in its historical homeland. It points to its withdrawal from the Gaza Strip as proof of its willingness to make painful concessions and pursue peace. Additionally, Israel demands that any future withdrawals would have to take into account its security concerns and the Jewish settlements it has established in the West Bank.

Palestinians argue that Israel has demonstrated little willingness to withdraw from the territories. The establishment of settlements, the appropriation of lands, the

building of a separation wall, and the continued blockade of the Gaza Strip are given as examples of Israel's intransigence and desire to control Palestinian lives and further the occupation.

The Separation Wall: A series of barriers, including an eight-metre wall, has been constructed by Israel, ostensibly to follow the Green Line. Israel claims this is a temporary provision to stop the infiltration of terrorists. Israel points to the fact that attacks against it have significantly decreased since the construction of the wall began. The Palestinians accuse Israel of using the wall to unilaterally annex Palestinian land. They point to the fact that the wall is twice the length of the Green Line and that it snakes around most of Israel's settlements. This has resulted in the creation of a seam area of more than 10% of Palestinian land between the Green Line and the wall. Additionally, the wall has, in some cases, physically divided Palestinian communities and separated villages from their farmlands.

It is clear that any solution proposed would need to take into account factors that can sometimes be contradictory: the settlements created by Israel, the viability and contiguity of the Palestinian state, water sources, the administration of holy sites, the fate of Jerusalem, and Israeli and Palestinian security concerns.

Impact of religion

Even though the conflict is not based on religion, religion has been an integral part of it. Moreover, because of the religious significance of Israel/Palestine, the conflict is an important issue for religious communities around the world; Israel/Palestine is recognised by Christians, Muslims and Jews as the Holy Land. Religion, though not the source of the conflict, has played a crucial part in sustaining and exacerbating it. Religious groups on both sides cite Biblical or Koranic verses in support of exclusion and violence. Religious tension and competition, specifically linking religion with nationalism, have hindered a peaceful resolution. Israeli settler groups have used the Old Testament to justify their actions in the Occupied Territories. Hamas, and other Islamic groups, have used religion to justify their refusal to recognise Israel's right to exist and their attacks on Israeli civilians.

Since Israel's creation, there has been an ongoing debate on the place of religion within the Jewish state. Religion has been a feature of Zionism to varying degrees. Jews view themselves as a nation and a religious community, and Israel is the only country in the world with a Jewish majority (Israel's population is around eight million, a quarter of whom are non-Jewish). In addition, a significant proportion of Israelis define themselves as religious. After the 1967 war and the conquest of the Occupied Territories, and in particular the West Bank and East Jerusalem, religion came to play a more central role in Israeli public and political life. The war led to renewed calls among some Israelis for the annexation of the territories and the creation of a greater Israel. However, Israel has opposed annexation, and the idea of a one-state solution, as the inclusion of millions of non-Jews would threaten its Jewish identity and majority. According to Judaism the land of Israel/Palestine (*Eretz Israel*) was promised by God to the patriarch Abraham and his descendants. This promise is at the heart of the Old Testament and Israel's claim to the land. Jewish fundamentalist groups (many of whom live in settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem) are unwilling to compromise over a land they believe to be rightfully theirs.

In recent years religion has also come to play an important role in Palestinian political life. The main opposition to the PLO and the Oslo Accords has been Hamas. It views the Holy Land (*al-Ard al-Muqaddasa*) as part of an endowment given to Muslims by God, and giving away parts of it is therefore not permissible.

Hamas or the Islamic Resistance Movement is an Islamic political and military movement that was established in 1987 during the first Intifada. In 2006 Hamas won the Palestinian parliamentary election, resulting in a short armed conflict with the PLO and the fragmentation of Palestinian politics. Hamas is currently in control of the Gaza Strip while the PLO is in control of the West Bank. Hamas is viewed by Israel as an obstacle for peace because of its refusal to recognise Israel's right to exist and its actions, which Israel deems as terrorism. However, in recent years Hamas leaders have expressed more moderate views, going so far as to suggest a two-state solution under certain conditions.

Israel/Palestine contains sites holy to Islam and Judaism, leading to competing religious claims. The most important of these sites is the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Both sides demand full sovereignty over the site in any future agreement. The Temple Mount complex, located in East Jerusalem, contains the Wailing Wall (*Hakotel Hama'aravi*) – the holiest site for Jews – believed to be part of the ancient Jewish temple built by King Solomon to house the Ark of the Covenant. Jews believe that the temple was built on top of the Foundation Stone – the corner stone from which creation began. For nineteen years, from 1948 to 1967, while under Jordanian rule, Jews were barred from praying at the Wailing Wall. Israel is therefore reluctant to relinquish control over the site.

Muslims believe the same site, which they call *al-Haram al-Sharif* (the Noble Sanctuary), to be the point from which Mohammed ascended the heavens. The *al-Aqsa* (the farthest) mosque, built on the Temple Mount, was Islam's first *Qibla* (direction of prayer) before Mecca. Jerusalem is the third holiest city for Muslims after Mecca and Medina.

In addition to Jerusalem, there are many other important religious sites, most of which are in the West Bank, such as the Tomb of Joseph, the Tomb of Rachel, and the Tomb of the Patriarchs. The latter is situated in the Palestinian city of Hebron (*al-Khalil*) and is believed to contain the burial site of the three patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob).

The Holy Land also contains the most sacred sites to Christianity. These include the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in East Jerusalem (the site of the crucifixion), the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem (Christ's birth site) and the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth.

Jerusalem

The city of Jerusalem is a microcosm of the conflict; it encapsulates some of the security, religious, legal and demographic issues facing Israelis and Palestinians. Jerusalem serves as Israel's capital, but Palestinians claim the eastern part of the city as their future capital. In 2000, at Camp David, final status negotiations between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian President Arafat collapsed, leading to a renewed cycle of violence (the Second Intifada), partly over the issue of Jerusalem and the sovereignty of the Temple Mount. The Second Intifada resulted in the death of over five thousand Palestinians and over a thousand Israelis; a majority of casualties on both sides were non-combatants.

Under the UN partition plan (Resolution 181) Jerusalem was to become an international city. However, after the 1948 war the city was divided with East Jerusalem, including the Old City and the main religious sites, controlled by Jordan, and West Jerusalem becoming Israel's capital. During the 1967 war Israel conquered and subsequently annexed East Jerusalem, declaring the unified city as its eternal capital. This decision has never been recognised by the international community. The conflict over Jerusalem has led many to argue that because of Israel's ongoing policies, a two-state solution is unachievable. Basing its actions on security, religious and demographic considerations, Israel has, through the construction of settlements, security barriers, land appropriation, house demolitions, and the establishment of natural and archaeological parks, sought to transform the urban space of the city.

Since unifying the city Israel has pursued several aims, among them: acquiring international legitimacy for its actions; creating a Jewish demographic majority in the east part of the city; promoting policies that will make the eastern part of the city Israeli; promoting a unified Jerusalem as a modern successful city; and encircling East Jerusalem with Jewish settlements. By and large Israel has failed to fully achieve any of these aims. The international community has unanimously rejected Israel's actions; Jerusalem is the only capital city in the world with no foreign embassies, which are situated mostly in Tel Aviv. Despite Israel's efforts, Palestinians still constitute a majority of the population in East Jerusalem and are a sizeable minority of the city's inhabitants (slightly under a third). They have mostly rejected the opportunity to become Israeli citizens and have tied their future to the future Palestinian state. Jerusalem, in terms of its socio-economic indicators, has not been a success story. The city has high levels of unemployment and poverty, especially among Palestinians. Conditions for Palestinians living in East Jerusalem are very different from those of Jews in West Jerusalem. The status of most Palestinians in the city is further complicated by their not being citizens of the state of Israel. In short, despite Israel's efforts, the city, though technically united, has remained divided.

Jewish settlements in the occupied territories

Since 1967 Israel has constructed Jewish settlements in the West Bank. These settlements are considered illegal under international law and are prohibited by the Geneva Convention; a number of settlements are even illegal under Israeli law. In many circumstances, private Palestinian land has been appropriated for the construction of Israeli settlements. However, the settlers, as well as many Israelis, consider the West Bank to be part of the ancient land of Israel. They therefore view the settlements as legal and as integral parts of the state. Nonetheless, the issue of the settlements is controversial in Israel; some Israelis, in particular those supporting the peace movement, have campaigned against the settlements. The overwhelming majority of settlements and settlers are located near the Green Line. There are more than half a million Jewish settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem (2012). The Jewish settlements created in and around East Jerusalem have been characterised by Palestinians as major obstacles for resolving the conflict. Israel has made it clear that these settlements are part of the urban space of Jerusalem and has refused to negotiate over them. The Palestinians accuse Israel of trying to encircle East Jerusalem with settlements, thus severing it from the West Bank.

Security and terrorism

In negotiations with the Palestinians Israel has demanded specific security provisions, which include, among other things, the demilitarisation of the future Palestinian state and continued control over strategic areas, such as the Jordan River Valley. Israel has questioned whether peace with the Palestinians would indeed provide it with security. It takes into account the fragmented nature of Palestinian politics and the actions of Palestinian groups, principally Hamas, which Israel categorises as terrorism. Palestinians retort that they are the party in need of security provisions as Israel is the more powerful side and has one of the most advanced armies in the world. They also point out that Israel has used the excuse of security provisions to further its occupation, for example the Separation Wall. Both sides accuse each other of breaking international law, targeting civilians, and using violence to achieve political aims.

There is a big difference in the way each side defines the issue of security and characterises the use of violence. For Israel, security is defined in terms of personal security, freedom from Palestinian violence, and the protection of the state's Jewish majority and identity. On the other side, Palestinians associate security with freedom of movement, economic development and sovereignty.

Israel has repeatedly accused Palestinian groups, in particular Hamas, of being terrorist organisations. It points to the refusal of these groups to recognise Israel's right to exist and their calls for its destruction through violent means. Israel typically defines Palestinian violence as terrorism, but very rarely applies the same standards to actions taken by Israeli settlers: these are typically referred to as *price tagging*. Actions taken by Hamas and other Palestinian groups against Israel have included the targeting of civilians through the use of suicide bombing and indiscriminate rocket attacks.

Palestinian groups have used a wide range of terms, from martyrdom operations to resistance, to refer to the use of attacks directed at Israeli civilians. Hamas has defended its tactics, claiming they are justified in light of Israel's continued occupation and oppression, and has contextualised them as acts of legitimate resistance. Hamas has advocated the use of these methods (suicide bombing and rocket attacks) as necessary due to its weaker military position and Israel's attacks on Palestinian civilians. It is important to note, however, that Hamas has moderated its stance in recent years.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, providing a brief history of the conflict and examining some of the main issues, which have been linked to some of the key concepts discussed in the core chapters. For Palestinians this conflict is about their expulsion and dispossession, as well as their continued subjugation and the denial of their rights. They therefore discuss the conflict in terms of historic injustice, as well as their rights to self-determination and resistance to occupation. For Israelis the conflict is about recognising their right to live in a Jewish state in their historic homeland, free from external threat, and it is therefore framed in relation to personal security and Jewish history.

At its core the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is about land; initially a struggle over the entire land of Israel/Palestine, the current conflict has focused on the Occupied Territories, namely the West Bank – including East Jerusalem – and the Gaza Strip.

Recommended reading

Caplan, N. *The Israel-Palestine Conflict: Contested Histories (Contesting the Past)*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Harms, G. and Ferry, T.M. *The Palestine-Israel Conflict: A Basic Introduction*, 2nd Edition, London: Pluto Press, 2012.

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