



Palestine, Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict

A Primer

By Joel Beinin and Lisa Hajjar

Introduction

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.

This is a small area: approximately 10,000 square miles, or about the size of the state of Maryland. The competing claims are not reconcilable if one group exercises exclusive political control over the total territory.

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. 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. They reject the notion that a biblical-era kingdom constitutes the basis for a valid modern claim. If Arabs engage the biblical argument at all, they maintain that since Abraham's son Ishmael is the forefather of the Arabs, then God's promise of the land to the children of Abraham includes Arabs as well. They do not believe that they should forfeit their land to compensate Jews for Europe's crimes against them.

The Land and the People

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. Palestine seemed the logical and optimal

Palestinians do not believe that they should forfeit their land to compensate Jews for Europe's crimes against them.

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.

At that time, the land of Palestine was part of the Ottoman Empire. However, this area did not constitute a single

political unit. The northern districts of Acre and Nablus were part of the province of Beirut. The district of Jerusalem was under the direct authority of the Ottoman capital of Istanbul because of the international significance of the cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem as religious centers for Muslims, Christians and Jews. According to Ottoman records, in 1878 there were 462,465 subject inhabitants of the Jerusalem, Nablus and Acre districts: 403,795 Muslims (including Druze), 43,659 Christians and 15,011 Jews. In addition, there were perhaps 10,000 Jews with foreign citizenship (recent immigrants to the country), and several thousand Muslim Arab nomads (bedouin) who were not counted as Ottoman subjects. The great majority of the Arabs (Muslims and Christians) lived in several hundred rural villages. Jaffa and Nablus were the largest and economically most important Arab towns.

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. Many spent their time studying religious texts and depended on the charity of world Jewry for survival. 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 outbreak of World War I (1914), the population of Jews in Palestine had risen to about 60,000, about 33,000 of whom were recent settlers. The Arab population in 1914 was 683,000.

Zionism

Zionism, or Jewish nationalism, is a modern political movement. Its core beliefs are that all Jews constitute one nation (not simply a religious or ethnic community) and that the only solution to anti-Semitism is the concentration of as many Jews as possible in Palestine/Israel and the establishment of a Jewish state there. The World Zionist Organization, established by Theodor Herzl in 1897, declared that the aim of Zionism was to establish “a national home for the Jewish people secured by public law.”

Zionism drew on Jewish religious attachment to Jerusalem and the Land of Israel (Eretz Israel). But the politics of Zionism was influenced by nationalist ideology, and by colonial ideas about Europeans’ rights to claim and settle other parts of the world.

Zionism gained adherents among Jews and support from the West as a consequence of the murderous anti-Jewish riots (known as pogroms) in the Russian Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Nazi genocide (mass

murder) of European Jews during World War II killed over six million, and this disaster enhanced international support for the creation of a Jewish state.

There are several different forms of Zionism. From the 1920s until the 1970s, the dominant form was Labor Zionism, which sought to link socialism and nationalism. By the 1920s, Labor Zionists in Palestine established the kibbutz movement (a kibbutz is a collective commune, usually with an agricultural economy), the Jewish trade union and cooperative movement, the main Zionist militias (the Haganah and Palmach) and the political parties that ultimately coalesced in the Israeli Labor Party in 1968.

The top leader of Labor Zionism was David Ben-Gurion, who became the first Prime Minister of Israel.



David Ben-Gurion reading the proclamation of Israel's establishment, May 14, 1948, in Tel Aviv. The photo is of Theodor Herzl.

A second form of Zionism was the Revisionist movement led by Vladimir Jabotinsky. They earned the name “Revisionist” because they wanted to revise the boundaries of Jewish territorial aspirations and claims beyond Palestine to include areas east of the Jordan River. In the 1920s and 1930s, they differed from Labor Zionists by declaring openly the objective to establish a Jewish state (rather than the vaguer formula of a “national home”) in Palestine. And they believed that armed force would be required to establish such a state. Their pre-state organizations that included the Betar youth movement and the ETZEL (National Military Organization) formed the core of what became the Herut (Freedom) Party after Israeli independence. This party subsequently became the central component of the Likud Party, the largest right wing Israeli party since the 1970s.

Although many Jews became Zionists by the early 20th century, until the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany and the institution of a “Final Solution” to exterminate world Jewry, most Jews were not Zionists. Most orthodox Jews were anti-Zionist. They believed that only God should reunite Jews in the Promised Land, and regarded Zionism as

a violation of God's will. Some Jews in other parts of the world, including the United States, opposed Zionism out of concern that their own position and rights as citizens in their countries would be at risk if Jews were recognized as a distinct national (rather than religious) group. But the horrors of the Holocaust significantly diminished Jewish opposition or antipathy to Zionism, and following World War II most Jews throughout the world came to support the Zionist movement and demand the creation of an independent Jewish state.

Although orthodox Jews continued to oppose the creation of a Jewish state for several more decades, they supported mass settlement of Jews in Palestine as a means of strengthening and protecting the community. And following the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, most orthodox Jews who previously had resisted Zionism adopted the belief that Israel's overwhelming victory in the war was a sign of God's support, and a fulfillment of God's promise to bring about the Messianic era. The areas captured and occupied in 1967, especially the West Bank, were important to religious Jews because they are the core of the biblical Land of Israel (Judea and Samaria). Consequently, Israel's victory in 1967 gave rise to a more religious variation of Zionism. Some existing political parties representing orthodox Jews came to embrace religious nationalism, and new parties and movements formed to advocate Israel's permanent control and extensive Jewish settlement in the West Bank and Gaza.

The religious-nationalist parties and groups that constitute the far right of the Israeli political spectrum maintain a hard line on matters relating to territory and the Arab-Israeli conflict. They have allied with the Likud Party. Although the Labor Party also has supported Jewish settlement in the West Bank and Gaza, a key difference is a willingness to consider a territorial compromise with Palestinians as a means of ending the conflict. The Likud and its allies oppose any territorial withdrawal. In 1977, the Likud won the national election, for the first time unseating the Labor Party that had governed Israel since independence. Since then, Likud and Labor have alternated as the governing party, sometimes forming coalition governments when neither could achieve a clear electoral victory.

A minority of Jewish Israelis belongs to left-wing Zionist parties, which formed a political coalition known as Meretz in the 1980s. Meretz often joins Labor-led governments. Leftist Zionists are fully committed to maintaining Israel as a Jewish state, but tend to be more willing than the Labor Party to compromise on territorial issues, and have relatively greater sympathy for Palestinian national aspirations for a state of their own. A tiny minority of ultra-leftist Jewish Israelis identify themselves as non- or anti-Zionists. Some of them aspire to see all of Israel/Palestine transformed into a single state with citizenship

Britain made other promises during the war that conflicted with the Husayn-McMahon understandings.

and equal rights for all inhabitants, and others advocate the creation of a Palestinian state in all of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The British Mandate in Palestine

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. During 1915-16, as World War I was underway, the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, secretly corresponded with Husayn ibn `Ali, the patriarch of the Hashemite family and Ottoman governor of Mecca and Medina. McMahon convinced Husayn to lead an Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire, which was aligned with Germany against Britain and France in the war. McMahon promised that if the Arabs supported Britain in the war, the British government would support the establishment of an independent Arab state under Hashemite rule in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire, including Palestine. The Arab revolt, led by T. E. Lawrence ("Lawrence of Arabia") and Husayn's son Faysal, was successful in defeating the Ottomans, and Britain took control over much of this area during World War I.

But Britain made other promises during the war that conflicted with the Husayn-McMahon understandings. 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." A third promise, in the form of a secret agreement, was a deal that Britain and France struck between themselves to carve up the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire and divide control of the region.

After the war, Britain and France convinced the new League of Nations (precursor to the United Nations), in which they were the dominant powers, to grant them quasi-colonial authority over former Ottoman territories. The British and French regimes were known as mandates. France obtained a mandate over Syria, carving out Lebanon as a separate state with a (slight) Christian majority. 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, to be ruled by Faysal's brother 'Abdullah, and west of the Jordan River became the Palestine Mandate. 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, and many opposed British and French control as a violation of their right to self-determination. 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.

In 1920 and 1921, clashes broke out between Arabs and Jews in which roughly equal numbers of both groups were killed. In the 1920s, when the Jewish National Fund purchased large tracts of land from absentee Arab landowners, the Arabs living in these areas were evicted. These displacements led to increasing tensions and violent confrontations between Jewish settlers and Arab peasant tenants.

In 1928, Muslims and Jews in Jerusalem began to clash over their respective communal religious rights at the Wailing Wall (al-Buraq in the Muslim tradition). The Wailing Wall, the sole remnant of the second Jewish Temple, is one of the holiest sites for the Jewish people. But this site is also holy to Muslims, since the Wailing Wall is adjacent to the Temple Mount (the Noble Sanctuary in the Muslim tradition). On the mount is the site of the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, believed to mark the spot from which the Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven on a winged horse.

On August 15, 1929, members of the Betar youth movement (a pre-state organization of the Revisionist Zionists) demonstrated and raised a Zionist flag over the Wailing Wall. Fearing that the Noble Sanctuary was in danger, Arabs responded by attacking Jews throughout the country. During the clashes, sixty-four Jews were killed in Hebron. Their Muslim neighbors saved others. The Jewish community of Hebron ceased to exist when its surviving members left for Jerusalem. During a week of communal violence, 133 Jews and 115 Arabs were killed and many wounded.

European Jewish immigration to Palestine increased dramatically after Hitler's rise to power in 1933, leading to new land purchases and Jewish settlements. Palestin-

ian resistance to British control and Zionist settlement climaxed with the Arab revolt of 1936-39, which Britain suppressed with the help of Zionist militias and the complicity of neighboring Arab regimes. After crushing the Arab revolt, the British reconsidered their governing policies in an effort to maintain order in an increasingly tense environment. They issued a White Paper (a statement of political policy) limiting future Jewish immigration and land purchases. The Zionists regarded this as a betrayal of the Balfour Declaration and a particularly egregious act in light of the desperate situation of the Jews in Europe, who were facing extermination. The 1939 White Paper marked the end of the British-Zionist alliance. At the same time, the defeat of the Arab revolt and the exile of the Palestinian political leadership meant that the Palestinian Arabs were politically disorganized during the crucial decade in which the future of Palestine was decided.

The United Nations Partition Plan

Following World War II, escalating hostilities between Arabs and Jews over the fate of Palestine and between the Zionist militias and the British army compelled Britain to relinquish its mandate over Palestine. The British requested that the recently established United Nations determine the future of Palestine. But the British government's hope was that the UN would be unable to arrive at a workable solution, and would turn Palestine back to them as a UN trusteeship. A UN-appointed committee of representatives from various countries went to Palestine to investigate the situation. Although members of this committee disagreed on the form that a political resolution should take, there was general agreement that the country would have to be divided in order to satisfy the needs and demands of both Jews and Palestinian Arabs. At the end of 1946, 1,269,000 Arabs and 608,000 Jews resided within the borders of Mandate Palestine. 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.

On November 29, 1947, the UN General Assembly voted to partition Palestine into two states, one Jewish and the other Arab. 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 territory designated to the Jewish state would be slightly larger than the Palestinian state (56 percent and 43 percent of Palestine, respectively) on the assumption that increasing numbers of Jews would immigrate there. According to the UN partition plan, the area of Jerusalem and Bethlehem was to become an international zone.

Publicly, the Zionist leadership accepted the UN partition plan, although they hoped somehow to expand the

borders allotted to the Jewish state. The Palestinian Arabs and the surrounding Arab states rejected the UN plan and regarded the General Assembly vote as an international betrayal. Some argued that the UN plan allotted too much territory to the Jews. Most Arabs regarded the proposed Jewish state as a settler colony and argued that it was only because the British had permitted extensive Zionist settlement in Palestine against the wishes of the Arab majority that the question of Jewish statehood was on the international agenda at all.

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. By the spring of 1948, the Zionist forces had secured control over most of the territory allotted to the Jewish state in the UN plan.

On May 15, 1948, the British evacuated Palestine, and 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. In fact, the Arab rulers had territorial designs on Palestine and were no more anxious to see a Palestinian Arab state emerge than the Zionists. During May and June 1948, when the fighting was most intense, the outcome of this first Arab-Israeli War was in doubt. But after arms shipments from Czechoslovakia reached Israel, its armed forces established superiority and conquered territories beyond the UN partition plan borders of the Jewish state.

In 1949, the war between Israel and the Arab states ended with the signing of armistice agreements. The country once known as Palestine was now divided into three parts, each under separate political control. The State of Israel encompassed over 77 percent of the territory. Jordan occupied East Jerusalem and the hill country of central Palestine (the West Bank). Egypt took control of the coastal plain around the city of Gaza (the Gaza Strip). The Palestinian Arab state envisioned by the UN partition plan was never established.

The Palestinian Arab Refugees

As a consequence of the fighting in Palestine/Israel between 1947 and 1949, over 700,000 Palestinian Arabs became refugees. The precise number of refugees, and questions of responsibility for their exodus are sharply disputed. Many Palestinians have claimed that most were expelled in accordance with a Zionist plan to rid the country of its non-Jewish inhabitants. The official Israeli position holds that the refugees fled on orders from Arab political and military leaders. One Israeli military intelligence document indicates that at least 75 percent of the refugees left



Girls at school in a refugee camp.

due to Zionist or Israeli military actions, psychological campaigns aimed at frightening Arabs into leaving, and direct expulsions. Only about 5 percent left on orders from Arab authorities. There are several well-documented cases of mass expulsions during and after the military operations of 1948-49 and massacres and atrocities that led to large-scale Arab flight. The best-known instance of mass expulsion is that of the 50,000 Arabs of the towns of Lydda and Ramle. The most infamous atrocity occurred at Deir Yasin, a village near Jerusalem, where estimates of the number of Arab residents killed in cold blood by Israeli fighters range from about 125 to over 250.

Palestinians

Today this term refers to the Arabs — Christian, Muslim and Druze — whose historical roots can be traced to the territory of Palestine as defined by the British mandate borders. About 3 million Palestinians now live within this area, which is divided between the state of Israel, and the West Bank and Gaza; these latter areas were captured and occupied by Israel in 1967. Today, over 700,000 Palestinians are citizens of Israel, living inside the country’s 1949 armistice borders. About 1.2 million live in the West Bank (including 200,000 in East Jerusalem) and about one million in the Gaza Strip. The remainder of the Palestinian people, perhaps another 3 million, lives in diaspora, outside the country they claim as their national homeland.

The largest Palestinian diaspora community, approximately 1.3 million, is in Jordan. Many of them still live in the refugee camps that were established in 1949, although others live in cities and towns. Lebanon and Syria also have large Palestinian populations, many of whom still live in refugee camps. Many Palestinians have moved to Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf countries to work, and some have moved to other parts of the Middle East or other parts of the world. Jordan is the only Arab state to grant citizenship to the Palestinians

who live there. Palestinians in Arab states generally do not enjoy the same rights as the citizens of those states. The situation of the refugees in Lebanon is especially dire; many Lebanese blame Palestinians for the civil war that wracked that country from 1975-91, and demand that they be resettled elsewhere in order for the Lebanese to maintain peace in their country. The Christian population of Lebanon is particularly anxious to rid the country of the mainly Muslim Palestinians because of a fear that they threaten the delicate balance among the country's religious groups.

Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel have had a difficult struggle to maintain their cultural and political identity in a state that officially regards expression of Palestinian or Arab national sentiment as subversive.

Although many Palestinians still live in refugee camps and slums, others have become economically successful. Palestinians now have the highest per capita rate of university graduates in the Arab world. Their diaspora experience has contributed to a high level of politicization of all sectors of the Palestinian people.

The Palestinian Arab Citizens of Israel

In 1948, only about 150,000 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, since Israel defines itself as the state of the Jewish people and Palestinians are non-Jews. Until 1966 most of them were subject to a military government that restricted their movement and other rights (to speech, association and so on). Arabs were not permitted to become full members of the Israeli trade union federation, the Histadrut, until 1965. About 40 percent of their lands were confiscated by the state and used for development projects that benefited Jews primarily or exclusively. All of Israel's governments have discriminated against the Arab population by allocating far fewer resources for education, health care, public works, municipal government and economic development to the Arab sector.

Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel have had a difficult struggle to maintain their cultural and political identity

in a state that officially regards expression of Palestinian or Arab national sentiment as subversive. Until 1967, they were entirely isolated from the Arab world and were often regarded by other Arabs as traitors for living in Israel. Since 1967, many have become more aware of their identity as Palestinians. One important expression of this identity was the organization of a general strike on March 30, 1976, designated as Land Day, to protest the continuing confiscation of Arab lands. The Israeli security forces killed six Arab citizens on that day. All Palestinians now commemorate it as a national day.

Many Palestinian Arabs have also come to understand that their political status as Israeli citizens and their protracted contact with Israeli society has differentiated them from other Palestinians. Although most of them support the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, few would pursue the possibility of relocating there if such a state comes into existence.

The June 1967 War

After 1949, although there was an armistice between Israel and the Arab states, the conflict continued and the region remained imperiled by the prospect of another war. This was fueled by an escalating arms race as countries built up their military caches and prepared their forces (and their populations) for a future showdown. In 1956, Israel joined with Britain and France to attack Egypt, ostensibly to reverse the Egyptian government's nationalization of the Suez Canal (then under French and British control). Israeli forces captured Gaza and the Sinai Peninsula, but were forced to evacuate back to the armistice lines as a result of UN pressure led by the US and the Soviet Union (in an uncharacteristic show of cooperation to avert further conflict in the Middle East). By the early 1960s, however, the region was becoming a hot spot of Cold War rivalry as the US and the Soviet Union were competing with one another for global power and influence.

In the spring of 1967, the Soviet Union misinformed the Syrian government that Israeli forces were massing in northern Israel to attack Syria. There was no such Israeli mobilization. But clashes between Israel and Syria had been escalating for about a year, and Israeli leaders had publicly declared that it might be necessary to bring down the Syrian regime if it failed to end Palestinian commando attacks against Israel from Syrian territory.

Responding to a Syrian request for assistance, in May 1967 Egyptian troops entered the Sinai Peninsula bordering Israel. A few days later, Egyptian president Gamal Abdel-Nasser asked the UN observer forces stationed between Israel and Egypt to evacuate their positions. The Egyptians then occupied Sharm al-Shaykh at the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula and proclaimed a blockade of the Israeli port of Eilat on the Gulf of Aqaba, arguing that access



Jewish settlement on a hill top in the West Bank.

to Eilat was through Egyptian territorial waters. These measures shocked and frightened the Israeli public, which believed it was in danger of annihilation.

As the military and diplomatic crisis continued, on June 5, 1967 Israel preemptively attacked Egypt and Syria, destroying their air forces on the ground within a few hours. Jordan joined in the fighting belatedly, and consequently was attacked by Israel as well. 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.

The 1967 war, which lasted only six days, established Israel as the dominant regional military power. The speed and thoroughness of Israel's victory discredited the Arab regimes. In contrast, 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).

The Occupied Territories

The West Bank and the Gaza Strip became distinct geographical units as a result of the 1949 armistice that divided the new Jewish state of Israel from other parts of Mandate Palestine. From 1948-67, the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, was ruled by Jordan, which annexed the area in 1950 and extended citizenship to Palestinians living there. During this period, the Gaza Strip was under Egyptian military administration. In the 1967 war, Israel captured and occupied these areas, along with 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, including freedom of expression, freedom of the press and freedom of

political association. Palestinian nationalism was criminalized as a threat to Israeli security, which meant that even displaying the Palestinian national colors was a punishable act. All aspects of Palestinian life were regulated, and often severely restricted by the Israeli military administration. For example, Israel forbade the gathering wild thyme (za`tar), a basic element of Palestinian cuisine.

Israeli policies and practices in the West Bank and Gaza have included extensive use of collective punishments such as curfews, house demolitions and closure of roads, schools and community institutions. Hundreds of Palestinian political activists have been deported to Jordan or Lebanon, tens of thousands of acres of Palestinian land have been confiscated, and thousands of trees have been uprooted. Since 1967, over 300,000 Palestinians have been imprisoned without trial, and over half a million have been tried in the Israeli military court system. Torture of Palestinian prisoners has been a common practice since at least 1971, and dozens of people have died in detention from abuse or neglect. Israeli officials have claimed that harsh measures and high rates of imprisonment are necessary to thwart terrorism. According to Israel, Palestinian terrorism includes all forms of opposition to the occupation (including non-violence).

Israel has built hundreds of settlements and permitted hundreds of thousands of its own Jewish citizens to move to the West Bank and Gaza, despite that this constitutes a breach of international law. Israel has justified the violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention and other international laws governing military occupation of foreign territory on the grounds that the West Bank and the Gaza Strip are not technically "occupied" because they were never part of the sovereign territory of any state. Therefore, according to this interpretation, Israel is not a foreign "occupier" but a legal "administrator" of territory whose status remains to be determined. The international community has rejected the Israeli official position that the West Bank and Gaza are not occupied, and has maintained that international law should apply there. But little effort has been mounted to enforce international law or hold Israel accountable for the numerous violations it has engaged in since 1967.

Jerusalem

The UN partition plan advocated that Jerusalem become an international zone, independent of both the proposed Jewish and Palestinian Arab states. In the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, Israel took control of the western part of Jerusalem, while Jordan took the eastern part, including the old walled city containing important Jewish, Muslim and Christian religious sites. The 1949 armistice line cut the city in two. In June 1967, Israel captured East Jerusalem from Jordan and almost immediately annexed it. It reaffirmed its annexation in 1981.

Israel regards Jerusalem as its “eternal capital.” Arabs consider East Jerusalem part of the occupied West Bank and want it to be the capital of a Palestinian state.

The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)

The Arab League established the PLO in 1964 as an effort to control Palestinian nationalism while appearing to champion the cause. The Arab defeat in the 1967 war enabled younger, more militant Palestinians to take over the PLO and gain some independence from the Arab regimes.

The PLO includes different political and armed groups with varying ideological orientations. Yasser Arafat is the leader of Fatah, the largest group, and has been PLO chairman since 1968. The other major groups are the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and, in the occupied territories, the Palestine Peoples Party (PPP, formerly the Communist Party). Despite factional differences, the majority of Palestinians regard the PLO as their representative.

In the 1960s, the PLO’s primary base of operations was Jordan. In 1970-71, fighting with the Jordanian army drove the PLO leadership out of the country, forcing it to relocate to Lebanon. When the Lebanese civil war started in 1975, the PLO became a party in the conflict. After the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the PLO leadership was expelled from the country, relocating once more to Tunisia.

Until 1993, Israel did not acknowledge Palestinian national rights or recognize the Palestinians as an independent party to the conflict. Israel refused to negotiate with the PLO, arguing that it was nothing but a terrorist organization, and insisted on dealing only with Jordan or other Arab states. It rejected the establishment of a Palestinian state, insisting that Palestinians should be incorporated into the existing Arab states. This intransigence ended when Israeli representatives entered into secret negotiations with the PLO, which led to the Oslo Declaration of Principles (see below).

UN Security Council Resolution 242

After the 1967 war, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 242, which notes the “inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force,” and 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. The grammatical construction of the French version of Resolution 242 says Israel should withdraw from “the territories,” whereas the English version of the text calls for withdrawal from “territories.”



Palestinians in Ramallah demonstrating against Israeli occupation forces.

(Both English and French are official languages of the UN.) Israel and the United States use the English version to argue that Israeli withdrawal from some, but not all, the territory occupied in the 1967 war satisfies the requirements of this resolution.

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. By calling for recognition of every state in the area, Resolution 242 entailed unilateral Palestinian recognition of Israel without recognition of Palestinian national rights.

The October 1973 War

After coming to power in Egypt in late 1970, President Anwar Sadat indicated to UN envoy Gunnar Jarring that he was willing to sign a peace agreement with Israel in exchange for the return of Egyptian territory lost in 1967 (the Sinai Peninsula). When this overture 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. The surprise attack caught Israel off guard, and the Arabs achieved some early military victories. This prompted American political intervention, along with sharply increased military aid to Israel. After the war, US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger pursued a diplomatic strategy of limited bilateral agreements to secure partial Israeli withdrawals from the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights while

avoiding negotiations on more difficult issues, including the fate of the West Bank and Gaza. By late 1975 these efforts had exhausted their potential, and there was no prospect of achieving a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace settlement.

In late 1977, Sadat decided to initiate a separate overture to Israel. His visit to Jerusalem on November 19, 1977 led to the Camp David accords and the signing of an Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in 1979.

Camp David I

In September 1978, President Jimmy Carter invited Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin to Camp David, a presidential retreat in Maryland. 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.

The first agreement formed the basis of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty signed in 1979. The second agreement proposed to grant autonomy to the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and to install a local administration for a five-year interim period, after which the final status of the territories would be negotiated.

Only the Egyptian-Israeli part of the Camp David accords was implemented. The Palestinians and other Arab states rejected the autonomy concept because it did not guarantee full Israeli withdrawal from areas captured in 1967 or the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. 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.

The Intifada

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 not started or orchestrated by the PLO leadership in Tunis. Rather, it was a popular mobilization that drew on the organizations and institutions that had developed under occupation. The intifada involved hundreds of thousands of people, many with no previous resistance experience, including children, teenagers and women. For the first few years, it involved many forms of civil disobedience, including massive demonstrations, general strikes, refusal to pay taxes, boycotts of Israeli products, political graffiti and the establishment of underground schools (since regular schools were closed by the military as reprisals for the uprising). It also included stone throwing, Molotov cocktails and the erection of barricades to impede the movement of Israeli military forces.

Intifada activism was organized through popular committees under the umbrella of the United National Leadership of the Uprising. The UNLU was a coalition of the four PLO parties active in the occupied territories: Fatah, the PFLP, the DFLP and the PPP. This broad-based resistance drew unprecedented international attention to the situation facing Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, and challenged the occupation as never before.

Under the leadership of Minister of Defense Yitzhak Rabin, Israel tried to smash the intifada with “force, power and blows.” Army commanders instructed troops to break the bones of demonstrators. From 1987 to 1991 Israeli forces killed over 1,000 Palestinians, including over 200 under the age of sixteen. By 1990, most of the UNLU leaders had been arrested and the intifada lost its cohesive force, although it continued for several more years. Political divisions and violence within the Palestinian community escalated, especially the growing rivalry between the various PLO factions and Islamist organizations (HAMAS and Islamic Jihad). Palestinian militants killed over 250 Palestinians suspected of collaborating with the occupation authorities and about 100 Israelis during this period.

Although the intifada did not bring an end to the occupation, it made clear that the status quo was untenable. The intifada shifted the center of gravity of Palestinian political initiative from the PLO leadership in Tunis to the occupied territories. 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 (a Palestinian government-in-exile), convened in Algeria in November 1988, recognized the state of Israel, proclaimed an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and renounced terrorism. The Israeli government did not respond to these gestures, claiming that nothing had changed and that the PLO was a terrorist organization with which it would never negotiate. The US did acknowledge that the PLO’s policies had changed, but did little to encourage Israel to abandon its intransigent stand.

The Madrid Conference

US and Israeli failure to respond meaningfully to PLO moderation resulted in the PLO’s opposition to the US-led attack on Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War. The PLO did not endorse Iraq’s annexation of Kuwait, but it saw Saddam Hussein’s challenge to the US and the Gulf oil-exporting states as a way to alter the regional status quo and focus attention on the question of Palestine. After the war, the PLO was diplomatically isolated. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia cut off financial support they had been providing, bringing the PLO to the brink of crisis.

After the Gulf War, the US sought to stabilize its position in the Middle East by promoting a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Despite their turn against the PLO, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia were anxious to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict and remove the potential for regional instability it created. The administration of President Bush felt obliged to its Arab allies, and pressed a reluctant 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. Shamir's conditions, which the US accepted, were that the PLO be excluded from the talks and that the Palestinian desires for independence and statehood not be directly addressed.

After the 1991 Gulf War, the PLO was diplomatically isolated and on the brink of crisis.

In subsequent negotiating sessions held in Washington, DC, Palestinians were represented by a delegation from the occupied territories. Participants in this delegation were subject to Israeli approval, and residents of East Jerusalem were barred on the grounds that the city is part of Israel. Although the PLO was formally excluded from these talks, its leaders regularly consulted with and advised the Palestinian delegation. Although Israeli and Palestinian delegations met many times, little progress was achieved. Prime Minister Shamir announced after he left office that his strategy was to drag out the Washington negotiations for ten years, by which time the annexation of the West Bank would be an accomplished fact.

A new Israeli Labor Party government led by Yitzhak Rabin assumed office in June 1992 and promised rapid conclusion of an Israel-Palestinian agreement. Instead, the Washington negotiations became stalemated after December 1992, when Israel expelled over 400 Palestinian residents of the occupied territories who were accused (but not tried or convicted) of being radical Islamist activists. Human rights conditions in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip deteriorated dramatically after Rabin assumed office. This undermined the legitimacy of the Palestinian delegation to the Washington talks and prompted the resignation of several delegates.

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. Ironically, before the intifada, Israeli authorities had enabled the development of Islamist organizations as a way to divide Palestinians in the occupied territories. But as the popularity of Islamists grew and challenged the moderation of the PLO, they came to regret their policy of encouraging political Islam as an alternative to the PLO's secular nationalism. Eventually, Yitzhak Rabin came to believe that HAMAS, Jihad and the broader Islamic movements of which they were a part posed more of a threat to Israel than the PLO.

The Oslo Accords

The weakness of the PLO after the Gulf War, the stalemate in the Washington talks, and fear of radical Islam brought the Rabin government to reverse the long-standing Israeli refusal to negotiate with the PLO. 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, which was signed in Washington in September 1993.

The Declaration of Principles was based on mutual recognition of Israel and the PLO. It established that Israel would withdraw from the Gaza Strip and Jericho, with additional withdrawals from further unspecified areas of the West Bank during a five-year interim period. During this period, the PLO formed a Palestinian Authority (PA) with "self-governing" (i.e. municipal) powers in the areas from which Israeli forces were re-deployed. In January 1996, elections were held for a Palestinian Legislative Council and for the presidency of the PA, which was won handily by Yasir Arafat. The key issues such as the extent of the territories to be ceded by Israel, the nature of the Palestinian entity to be established, the future of the Israeli settlements and settlers, water rights, the resolution of the refugee problem and the status of Jerusalem were set aside to be discussed in final status talks.

The PLO accepted this deeply flawed agreement with Israel because it was weak and had little diplomatic support in the Arab world. Both Islamist radicals and local leaders in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip challenged Arafat's leadership. Yet only Arafat had the prestige and national legitimacy to conclude a negotiated agreement with Israel.

The Oslo accords set up a negotiating process without specifying an outcome. The process was supposed to have been completed by May 1999. There were many delays due to Israel's reluctance to relinquish control

over the occupied territories, unwillingness to make the kinds of concessions necessary to reach a final status agreement, and periodic outbursts of violence by Palestinian opponents of the Oslo process, especially HAMAS and Jihad. During the Likud's return to power in 1996-99, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu avoided engaging seriously in the Oslo process, which he distrusted and fundamentally opposed.

A Labor-led coalition government led by Prime Minister Ehud Barak came to power in 1999. Barak at first concentrated on reaching a peace agreement with Syria. When he failed to convince the Syrians to sign an agreement that would restore to them less than all the area of the Golan Heights occupied by Israel in 1967, Barak turned his attention to the Palestinian track.

During the protracted interim period of the Oslo process, Israel's Labor and Likud governments built new settlements in the occupied territories, expanded existing settlements and constructed a network of bypass roads to enable Israeli settlers to travel from their settlements to Israel proper without passing through Palestinian-inhabited areas. 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 unilateral actions or Israel's violations of Palestinian human and civil rights in areas under its control.

Final status negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians were to have begun in mid-1996, but only got underway in earnest in mid-2000. By then, a series of painfully negotiated Israeli interim withdrawals left the Palestinian Authority with direct or partial control of some 40 percent of the West Bank and 65 percent of the Gaza Strip. The Palestinian areas were surrounded by Israeli-controlled territory with entry and exit controlled by Israel.

The Palestinians' expectations were not accommodated by the Oslo accords. The Oslo process required the Palestinians to make their principal compromises at the beginning, whereas Israel's principal compromises beyond recognition of the PLO were to be made in the final status talks.

Camp David II

In July 2000, President Clinton invited Prime Minister Barak and President Arafat to Camp David to conclude negotiations on the long-overdue final status agreement. Barak proclaimed his "red lines": Israel would not return to its pre-1967 borders; East Jerusalem with its 175,000 Jewish settlers would remain under Israeli sovereignty; Israel would annex settlement blocs in the West Bank containing some 80 percent of the 180,000 Jewish settlers; and Israel would accept no legal or moral responsi-

bility for the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem. The Palestinians, in accord with UN Security Council resolution 242 and their understanding of the spirit of the Oslo Declaration of Principles, sought Israeli withdrawal from the vast majority of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, including East Jerusalem, and recognition of an independent state in those territories.

The distance between the two parties, especially on the issues of Jerusalem and refugees, made it impossible to reach an agreement at the Camp David summit meeting in July 2000. 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. Arafat left Camp David with enhanced stature among his constituents because he did not yield to American and Israeli pressure. Barak returned home to face political crisis within his own government, including the abandonment of coalition partners who felt he had offered the Palestinians too much. However, the Israeli taboo on discussing the future of Jerusalem was broken. Many Israelis began to realize for the first time that they might never achieve peace if they insisted on imposing their terms on the Palestinians.

The Fall 2000 Uprising

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. On September 28, Likud leader Ariel Sharon visited the Noble Sanctuary (Temple Mount) in the company of 1000 armed guards; in the context of July's tense negotiations over Jerusalem's holy places, and Sharon's well-known call for Israeli annexation of East Jerusalem, this move provoked large Palestinian protests in Jerusalem. Israeli soldiers killed six unarmed protesters. These killings inaugurated over a month of demonstrations and clashes across the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. For a brief period, these demonstrations spread into Palestinian towns inside Israel.

In relative terms, the second intifada is already bloodier than the first. As in the previous intifada, Palestinians threw stones and Molotov cocktails at Israeli soldiers, who responded with rubber-coated steel bullets and live ammunition. But both sides have employed greater force than in 1987-1991. The militant wing of Fatah, which has coordinated many street actions, now has a substantial cache of small arms and has fired often on Israeli troops. The Israeli military response escalated

dramatically after two soldiers, allegedly “lost” in the PA-controlled West Bank town of Ramallah, were killed October 12 by a Palestinian mob returning from the funeral of an unarmed young man whom soldiers had shot dead the day before. The IDF attacked PA installations in Ramallah, Gaza and elsewhere with helicopter gunships and missiles. Subsequently, the IDF has not always waited for Israelis to die before answering Palestinian small arms fire with tank shells and artillery, including the shelling of civilian neighborhoods in the West Bank and Gaza.

For these actions and the use of live ammunition to control demonstrations of unarmed Palestinians, several international human rights organizations have condemned Israel for use of excessive force. The UN Security Council passed a similar condemnation, from which the US abstained, and on October 20, the UN General Assembly approved a resolution condemning

Israel. Israel, the US and four Polynesian island nations voted no, and a third of the assembly abstained. Despite a truce agreement at Sharm al-Sheikh, a later agreement to quell violence between Arafat and Shimon Peres and Bill Clinton’s attempts to restart negotiations in January 2001, the second intifada did not look like it would end soon. In December 2000, Barak called early elections for prime minister to forestall a likely vote of no confidence in the Knesset. He will face Ariel Sharon in the February 6 election. To date over 350 people, about 90 percent of them Palestinian, have been killed in the violence. While the outcome of the uprising is very unclear, it is probably impossible to resume the Oslo peace process without major modifications to its basic framework. The Palestinian street has definitively rejected Oslo, and top officials of the PA now say that UN resolutions must form the basis of future final status talks. ■

Your donation can help offset the cost of this primer!

Check/money order enclosed (Payable to MERIP; donations are tax-deductible) ___\$25 ___\$50 ___\$100 ___\$200 ___\$500 ___\$1,000

Please charge my: MasterCard VISA

Card Number

Expiration Date

Signature

Date

Name

Address

City

State/Province/Country

ZIP/Postal Code

Email Address

Telephone

In addition to my donation:

Start my subscription to Middle East Report (\$37) Send a gift subscription(s) to the friend(s) whose address I am enclosing below (\$37 each)

Contact me about remembering MERIP in my will

Donation \$ _____ Subscription(s) \$ _____ Total Amount \$ _____

Friend's Name

Address

City

State/Province/Country

ZIP/Postal Code

MERIP 1500 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Suite 119 Washington, DC 20005 (202) 223-3677 www.merip.org