

The Arab-Israeli Conflict

Directions: Read the following excerpts from *The Middle East for Dummies*.

As you finish each section, add to your **Conflict Timeline**.

Dividing up Palestine

After WWI and the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Palestine became part of the British Mandate. British Foreign Secretary Lord Balfour wrote a statement in 1917, known as the **Balfour Declaration**, in which he voiced the British commitment to establish a Jewish homeland within Palestine. The British rule and apparent commitment to Zionism led to an exponential increase in the number of Jewish arrivals in Palestine. Palestinian Arabs resented the steady stream of newcomers, and throughout the 1920s and 1930s, a series of violent struggles between the two groups erupted. This violence intensified following WWII. Many Jews worldwide agreed that the only way to prevent a future holocaust was to create an independent Jewish state that protected its people. Thousands more Jewish immigrants immigrated to Palestine, and violence erupted once again.

Unable to contain the violence, the British decided to withdraw from Palestine. They turned to the United Nations to create a plan that would **partition** the region into an area for the Arab Muslims and an area for the Jews. Through **Resolution 181**, the newly-formed United Nations created a plan that gave approximately half of the region to the Arabs and half of the region to the Jews, with Jerusalem under UN control. The Jews accepted the plan, but the Arabs rejected the resolution.

With no agreement that was amenable to both sides, the British withdrew from Palestine on May 14, 1948 – and that same day, the Jewish National Council declared Israel an independent state. Today, May 14 is known as “Independence Day” among Israelis, while it is known as *al Nakba*, or “The Catastrophe,” among Palestinians.



The 1st Arab-Israeli War

Immediately upon Israel’s declaration of independence, the First Arab-Israeli War erupted. Jordan, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinians declared war against the fledgling Israeli state. However, the Arab states were only able to muster a force of 35,000 soldiers, while Israel was able to recruit 60,000 soldiers – nearly half of whom had experience serving during WWII. As a result of the war, 18,500 Arabs (including 16,000 Palestinians) died, and 700,000 Arabs fled their homes¹. Israel, on the other hand, lost only 6000 men. Furthermore, Israel captured more than half the land that would have been part of Palestine (had Resolution 181 been accepted). Of the remaining Palestinian land, Jordan took control of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, while Egypt took control of the Gaza Strip.

¹ The “Right of Return” of these refugees and their descendants is still a point of contention today.

Following the war, the Palestinians approached Israel ready to accept Resolution 181. However, Israel essentially said that it was too late, and that the Palestinians had had their chance to accept the proposal. Now, Israel would keep the land it had won in the war.

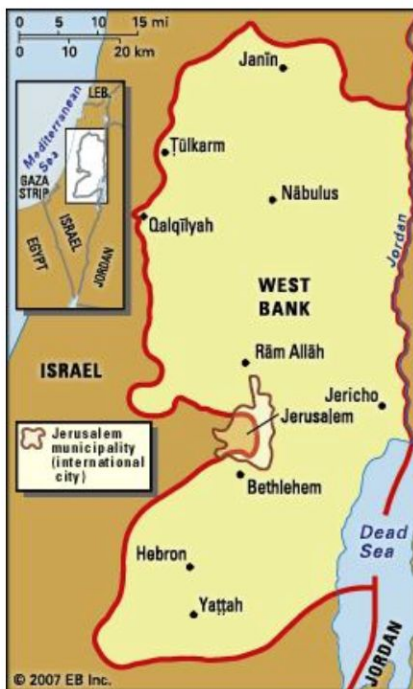
The Second Arab-Israeli War (or, “The Suez Crisis”)

During the 1950s, a man by the name of **Gamal Abdul Nasser** ruled Egypt. Nasser’s regime was extremely repressive. The charismatic Nasser, however, enjoyed support from many Egyptians because he stood up to the West and thus created a nationalist sense of Egyptian pride. Furthermore, Nasser gained popularity by speaking out against Israel, claiming, “There will be no peace on Israel's border because we demand vengeance, and vengeance is Israel's death.”



These tensions came to a head when Nasser nationalized the **Suez Canal**, which had been built by the French and British and was under British control. Nasser then created a blockade, preventing Israel from accessing key water routes. The British and French were angry at Egypt, and they plotted with Israel to retake the canal. In 1956, the British and French bombed Egyptian military targets and took control of the Canal, while Israel seized the Gaza strip. In a rare spirit of cooperation, the USA and USSR condemned the attacks and put pressure on the British, French, and Israelis to withdraw. The pressure worked. Israel withdrew from Gaza, and the UN Peacekeepers entered the Sinai Peninsula to keep the peace.

The War of 1967 (or, “The Six-Day War”)



In May of 1967, Nasser expelled UN peacekeeping forces in the Sinai Peninsula (a region of Egypt bordering Israel). Nasser then proceeded to mobilize thousands of Egyptian troops into the Sinai Peninsula, heading toward Israel. Meanwhile, the Jordanian King signed a pact with Egypt, placing his troops under Egypt’s command.

Believing that war was imminent, Israel launched a **pre-emptive attack** against Egypt on June 6, 1967. Within three days, the Israelis had destroyed Egypt’s air force, captured the Sinai Peninsula, and reached the Suez Canal. The Israelis spent the next three days seizing Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan Heights.

The Israelis maintained that the war demonstrated that the Arabs couldn’t be trusted and, for reasons of self-defense, Israel must maintain a military presence in these areas. On the other hand, Arabs referred to these lands as **Occupied Territories**. From the Arab perspective, peace talks from this point forward would focus on the return to **Pre-1967 borders**.

The War of 1973 (or, “The Yom Kippur War”)

Egypt’s performance in the last three showings against Israel had been a source of embarrassment. The new Egyptian president wanted the Sinai back and decided to attack Israel. On the eve of the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur, Egypt attacked Israeli forces across the canal and pushed them back across the Sinai. At the same time, hoping to recover Golan Heights, Syria attacked from the north. Caught off guard, Israel pleaded with the United States for immediate help. The Americans thus began a massive airlift of weapons to Israel – which was countered by the USSR with an airlift of weapons to Egypt and Syria. By the end of the month, the United Nations Security Council negotiated a ceasefire.

Hope for Peace, but Conflicts Endure

Camp David Accords: In 1978, the US President brought the Egyptian President and the Israeli Prime Minister to Maryland. Egypt agreed to maintain peaceful relations with Israel, and Israel agreed to return Sinai to Egypt. This exchange of “**land for peace**” (the idea that Israel will return land to the Palestinians in exchange for peace) has become the basis for modern peace talks.

Oslo Accords: In 1993, the Israeli Prime Minister met with **Yasser Arafat**, the head of the **Palestinian Liberation Organization** in Oslo, Norway. Together, they negotiated the following terms:

- Israel recognizes the legitimacy of the PLO
- The PLO recognizes Israel’s right to exist
- Israel extends a degree of autonomy to the West Bank
- Israel would withdraw from Gaza within five years
- Israel and the PLO would continue to talk about
- Jerusalem and other issues



The Intifadas: The intifadas refer to political uprisings in Palestine in 1987 and 2000. The first intifada began when an Israeli was stabbed to death in Gaza while shopping. The next day, four Palestinians died in an automobile accident in Gaza. Rumor spread that the accident was caused by Israel in retaliation for the murder. Rioting erupted in Gaza and soon spread to the West Bank. Many Palestinians threw rocks and Molotov cocktails, burned tires, and blocked roads. Israeli soldiers responded with rubber bullets, live ammunition, and tear gas. In 2000, tensions erupted into a second intifada. Rock throwing and tire burning escalated into violent struggles as Palestinian militants stepped up armed attacks. The Israeli military tried to crack down on the revolts with live ammunition.

Gaza Strip: In 2005, Israel returned the Gaza strip to the Palestinians. However, in the elections that followed, the Palestinians elected leaders from **Hamas**, a terrorist organization, rather than from the Palestinian Liberation Organization. This has led to increased tension on both sides, including further terrorist attacks and armed responses.