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Ancient bond, *common conflict in Holy Land*

It is hard to think of another national conflict that arouses so many emotions and causes so much hostility on a worldwide basis than the one between Israel and the Palestinians. At first glance, it is not immediately obvious why this should be true. The size of the territory in dispute is relatively small. Israel plus the Palestinian Territories, i.e. the West Bank and Gaza Strip, (8,017 square miles) are not much larger than Washoe County (6,551 square miles). The distance between Jerusalem and the shores of the Dead Sea is about the same as the distance between the University campus and Minden/Gardnerville, about 50 miles. In the Old City of Jerusalem it takes

about the same time to walk from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to the Temple Mount as it does to stroll from campus' Clark Administration Building to downtown Reno, roughly 15-20 minutes.

Nor, are the sizes of the respective populations exceptionally large. Israel's population currently is a little below 6.5 million. The population

of the West Bank and Gaza Strip taken together approaches 4 million.

High population density is not a contributing factor to tensions. Belgium and the Netherlands have higher population densities without being remotely comparable in terms of violent conflict.

Two general causes for the protracted conflict between Israelis and Palestinians stand out: religion and history.

RELIGION

The territory involved in the conflict contains sites that are regarded as holy by the followers of the world's three major monotheistic religions. For Muslims the area is often defined as part of the House of Islam and, within that

territory, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem the place where the Prophet ascended to heaven. For Jews (the term itself refers to people from Judea and Jerusalem), the territory is the Promised Land, a place granted by the Holy One to the people with whom God formed an eternal covenant. For Christians, Bethlehem, Nazareth, the Sea of Galilee and Jerusalem are all places inextricably linked, through the New Testament, to the life of the Savior.

The fact that the territory itself has been assigned such meaning by Jews, Christians and Muslims leads to certain consequences. Instead of some millions of Israelis and Palestinians immediately caught up in the conflict, we are dealing with the worldwide followers of religions who collectively represent a substantial share of mankind. In other words, not millions but billions of people have an interest in the outcome of the struggle.

In addition, the religious meaning of the territory makes compromise difficult. Compromise, give-and-take, is a normal part of political life, at least in democracies. But when religious beliefs become part of the equation, people find it difficult to compromise because ultimate values and absolute ends are often involved.

HISTORY

The historical record does not make the problem any easier to resolve. In fact, Israelis and Palestinians have different and competing views of this record.

Despite a succession of conquerors, Jews lived in the land in dispute since Biblical times. (In fact, the Bible is a record of their presence.) Judea and its surroundings were conquered by the Romans during the first century B.C. Jews rebelled against Roman rule from 66 to 70 A.D. and again from 132 to 135. The effects of these uprisings were devastating from the Jewish point of view. The Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans (a remnant of which, known as the "Wailing Wall," still stands). Following the second rebellion, the Romans virtually destroyed the city and killed

thousands of Jews. Survivors of these rebellions were forced into exile, known in Jewish history as the Diaspora or dispersion. Although small communities survived in a few places, Jewish history was one of exile until the last decades of the 19th century. Because of persecutions European Jews suffered in Czarist Russia and in France, a Zionist movement emerged seeking a homeland. The obvious place for such a homeland was the place from which Jews had come in the first place.

For more than three centuries before the outbreak of World War I in 1914, what was then a thinly-populated land had been ruled as part of the Ottoman Empire. It was governed neither as Israel nor Palestine, but as Turkish provinces of Beirut and Syria. The Turks had no interest in the establishment of a Jewish state in this area, but did permit some immigration during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. World War I produced a radical change of direction. Britain was at war with the Ottomans and did what it could to weaken Turkish rule in the Middle East. The British encouraged an Arab uprising, holding out hope for independent state for Arabs. In addition, in 1917 the British government under King George V issued the Balfour Declaration, which promised the establishment of a homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine.

In fact, in the two decades between the end of World War I and the outbreak of World War II, the British (and the French) ruled in much of the Middle East. The British ruled Palestine under a mandate from the League of Nations. During the interwar period Jewish immigration from Europe increased substantially, especially with the onset of the Great Depression and the rise of the Nazis and other European anti-Semitic movements. As more and more Jews sought refuge in Palestine, opposition to their presence by an emerging Palestinian leadership mounted with the growing fear that Palestinians would be displaced in their own homeland. The result was an armed uprising against British rule and the Jewish presence lasting from 1936 to 1939.

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The British reacted to this increasingly volatile situation in 1937 by proposing a partition of Palestine into Jewish and Palestinian states. Leaders of the Jewish community accepted this proposal but their Palestinian counterparts did not. In 1939, with World War II looming, the British unilaterally issued a White Paper that severely restricted Jewish immigration to Palestine and promised the country national independence within 10 years.

In the immediate postwar period, the British continued to enforce their rules during a time when thousands of Holocaust survivors (housed in European refugee camps) wanted to resettle in Palestine. A violent revolt broke out, this time against the British presence by extremist Jewish groups. In 1947, the British threw up their hands and turned the problem over to the United Nations, which passed a resolution calling for the division of Palestine into separate Arab and Jewish states with the city of Jerusalem to be administered under international auspices.

Once again the Palestinian leaders rejected this proposal – on the grounds that the Arab population in Palestine was nearly twice that of the Jews. Beyond this, the newly formed Arab League (composed of independent Arab states) threatened an armed invasion if a separate Jewish state attempted to come into existence. The Jewish community, on the other hand, not only accepted but rejoiced in the U.N. resolution.

In the six months following passage of the resolution, bitter fighting occurred in much of Palestine between Arabs and Jews. Then in May 1948, following the departure of the British, Jewish leaders proclaimed the formation of an independent state of Israel. As promised, this gesture was followed almost immediately by an invasion from the Arab countries surrounding the new state. The war, known as the War of Independence by Israelis, lasted on and off for more than a year.

It ended in July 1949 with an armistice agreement, brokered by the United Nations. Israel sustained its claim to national independence, and had captured much of Palestine, with the exceptions of the West Bank, East

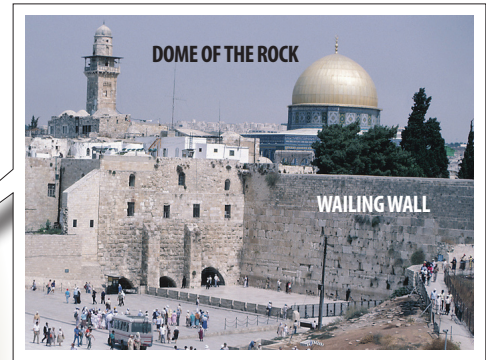


Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip. From 1949 to 1967 these areas were administered by Jordan and Egypt, respectively.

The fact that the small Jewish state was able to defend itself effectively against Arab armies shocked many in the Arab world and left them with a deep and long-lasting sense of humiliation. Within a few years of the armistice, governments in Egypt and Syria were overthrown and replaced by radical regimes committed to erasing the results of the war. King Abdullah of Jordan was assassinated by Palestinian nationalists because of his interest in reaching a peace agreement with the Israelis.

The other major outcome of the Arab-Israeli War was the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem. The United Nations estimated that 726,000 Palestinians were displaced during the fighting. Many settled in refugee camps in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Others wound up in similar United Nations-administered camps in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan.

Spokespersons for the Palestinian cause claim that most refugees were forced to flee as a matter of deliberate Israeli government policy. For their part, Israeli leaders have



claimed that the refugee problem was set off by a wave of panic caused by Arab radio appeals and rumors spread to the effect that the Israeli military was committing atrocities against Palestinian civilians.

The existence of a large number of Palestinian refugees and their descendants is one of the root causes of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, still unresolved almost 60 years later.

In June 1967 the Arabs and Israelis fought the appropriately named Six-Day War. Once again the Arabs suffered another humiliating defeat. The Israelis captured additional territory including all of the West Bank (Gaza), East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip.

The Israelis withdrew unilaterally from the Gaza Strip in 2005. Despite sporadic negotiations during the 1990s over the West Bank and Jerusalem, little headway has been made to date. The West Bank now has numerous Jewish settlements that Israeli governments have been reluctant to dismantle. The issue of Jerusalem, in particular, seems especially difficult to resolve. Neither side seems likely to accept a solution that would jeopardize its control over their respective holy sites.

Another factor weighing against a long-term Israeli/Palestinian settlement: the role of outside powers. Governments in Syria and Iran are especially interested in keeping the conflict unresolved and, sadly, support extremist Palestinian groups committed to sabotaging peace initiatives. The same logic applies to elements in the Israeli population who believe that any concession to the Palestinian authorities is really the first step toward the destruction of the Jewish state. ■