

Arab-Israeli Conflict

During the First World War (1914-1918), Britain met with problems concerning promises made, yet not being kept. Britain, knowing that it needed all the help it could get against the German allies, promised land to people who desperately wanted it. However, as it was revealed Britain had no intention of honouring their word.

The first promise to be made was to the Arabs, in a desperate attempt to overpower one of the countries the British were fighting; the Turks. The Arab leader, Sherif Hussein, agreed to help defeat the Turks, on the condition that at the end of the war, the Arabs would get their freedom. The British accepted the terms, and in 1915 it was written up in a letter to Hussein, more commonly known as the McMahon letter, due to the person who wrote it. The Arabs assisted the British in conquering Syria and Palestine, and were eagerly awaiting the end of the war when they would be able to claim back their lost freedom.

The second promise, however, was a vain attempt at keeping on good terms with the French, as whether or not the French were going to 'stay friendly' with the British was becoming questionable. This promise was to France, promising to share the Middle East with the French after the war. In 1916, the Sykes-Picot agreement was drawn up, dividing the Middle East up into large areas. While some areas would be placed under the direct rule of either the French or the British, the rest of the areas would be changed into Arab, with the 'influence' of either the French or British. Understandably, these details of the agreement were all kept secrets at first, but just before the war ended, all the information came out.

The third and final promise was made to the Jews in 1917, and was called the Balfour Declaration. This was, like the McMahon letter to the Arabs, promising the Jews ownership of Palestine. This was, made at a time when Britain was having many problems fighting the allies, and needed all the help they could find. There are a few reasons why historians believe this letter was issued. It was thought that the Jews in America and Russia had a lot of money and power, and so would therefore encourage their governments to continue in the war. There was sympathy for the Zionists, as the leaders like Balfour knew that the Jews had endured a lot of hardship, and suffered many injustices, and so saw this promise as a chance to right some of the wrongs committed. Britain used the Suez Canal, in Egypt. However, it was right next door to Palestine, and so it would greatly benefit Britain if the people who governed the neighbouring Palestine, were friendly towards Britain and their interests. The new leader of the Zionists, Chaim Weizmann, was a friend of a few leading politicians such as Balfour and the present Prime minister, Lloyd George.

It is quite probable that the British Government had no idea of the changes that this Declaration would cause on the short and long-term effects on the problems between the Arabs and the Jews.

The consequences of these unkept promises were quite terrible for Britain, making their situation in Europe much worse. The Arabs reacted very badly to the final British/French rule and supervision. As they were promised their own country and their freedom, the Arabs weren't pleased with the fact that after they fulfilled their part of the bargain, the British had no intention of fulfilling their part.

The Jews knew that they had the advantage of the sympathy of the British, and so believed that there was a chance that they would receive their promise in the future. This aggravated the Arabs further, increasing their resentment towards the British and the Jews.

By 1947, the British had had enough, and could no longer deal with the ongoing conflict between the Arabs and Jews, and the criticism they were receiving from other countries due to their actions. There was also a lot of pressure coming from the USA, due to the high numbers of Jews living and working there. In defiance, the British handed Palestine over to the UN, and took a step back in the governing of the country. The UN's first major change was to issue the UN Partition, which separated the conflicting Jews and Arabs. The Palestinian Arabs objected to this plan, mainly because the Jews were to acquire the larger part of the division. They would have to give up their land.

The Jews, although generally pleased, objected to the fact that the Holy City of Jerusalem was to be made an international zone, and many Jewish settlements were to be included in the Arab State.

None of the Arab population recognised the State of Israel's right to exist. They believed that it should be destroyed, and so there were four major wars over the next 25 years. The first of these wars was in 1948. The Arabs decided the only solution to their problem was the destruction of Israel. Immediately after the founding of the new State of Israel was announced, armies from the Arab States of Egypt, Transjordan, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq invaded. The UN ordered a cease-fire in June, but the Israelis acquired weapons and war broke out twice more. The consequences were unintended on the Arab part, as Israel won, and ended up with more land than they started with. Around 700,000 Palestinian Arabs fled their homes, which began the Palestinian Refugee problem, still existing today. There are now 2¹/₂ million refugee camps. The second war was the Suez War in 1956, and concerned terrorist attacks on Israel led by a group called the Fatah organisation, founded by Yassir Arafat. Israel, at that time had secure borders as they occupied all Palestine i.e. the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights in Syria and Sinai Desert in Egypt. On the 29th October, the Israeli forces invaded Sinai Peninsula in Egypt. They then advanced towards the Suez Canal. The British and French ordered a cease-fire and threatened to use force if it wasn't achieved. The passage of oil to the Anglo-French States was stopped. War broke out, but on 6th November the UN ordered a cease-fire, forcing the British and French to withdraw. In 1973, there was a surprise attack on Israel. It was called the Yom Kippur war. The Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) was an important Jewish Religious day and also an annual holiday. Once again the Arabs were defeated, and the war was stopped by Superpowers (the United States and the USSR). In 1974, Yassir Arafat spoke at the UN. In 1978, due to the war in Lebanon, the Camp David Agreement was issued. It ensured peace between Egypt and Israel. However, the Palestinians felt betrayed. There were attempts by Israel to destroy the PLO bases there. The PLO (Palestine Liberation Organisation) was an umbrella organisation. It included many organisations with their own agendas and aims, however they all agreed on the destruction of Israel, and using 'terrorist' methods. They claimed to represent the Arab people.

The Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza in the 1980's was called the Intifada, and during the height of this, in December 1988, secret talks were opened by the USA with PLO officials. Yassir Arafat was persuaded to publicly reject terrorism. This led to the USA being able to negotiate openly with the PLO and put more pressure on the Israelis to have the much needed peace talks with the Palestinians.

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Assignment 2, Question “: Understanding the Current Situation

1993 was the start of the peace talks between the Israelis and the Palestinian Arabs. These talks were held in Oslo, Norway, which was neutral. This was the beginning of the Oslo Peace Accord. An agreement may have been reached, but there is still a long way to go before lasting peace is achieved.

In September, after eight months of secret talks between the two conflicting states, the head of the new Israeli Government, Yitzhak Rabin, and the PLO leader, Yassir Arafat, exchanged letters. In Arafat's letter, he rejected the use of terrorism, recognised Israel's right to exist, and also called for an end to the Intifada. The letter written by Rabin included autonomy for *some* Arab lands, and recognised the PLO as representing the Palestinian people.

This satisfying result could not have taken place without the many aspects aiding it. One of these was the gentle persuasion from the USA. At the end of the Cold War, the Soviet help to the Arabs reduced, so the USA no longer needed to support Israel as much. Therefore they could be friendlier with the Arabs. This was exactly what the USA had hoped for, due to the subject of one thing; oil. In 1988, the USA held secret talks with Arafat and persuaded him to publicly reject terrorism. In turn, they would put pressure on the Israelis to open peace talks with the Palestinians. However, the USA was seen to have 'Double Standards', because of the action they took during the Gulf War, in 1990. Claiming that it belonged to them, Iraqi troops invaded Kuwait, which was an Arab state. As the UN ordered Iraq to retreat, the USA led an immense multi-national force, which had driven the Iraqis out of Kuwait by the end of February 1991. Immediately, Palestinian Arabs pointed out that the USA were quick to enforce the UN demand for Iraq to retire from Kuwait, but they had failed to persuade Israel to withdraw its troops from the territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, even after twenty years. The USA depended on the support of the Arabs, so became worried on the criticism that it received. The USA's allies in the West also relied on the oil imports from the Arab states. This was enough to encourage the US government to put more pressure on Israel. Due to the communist government in Russia collapsing, therefore not supporting the Arab states as much, the USA was put this pressure on Israel with more ease, and no fear of a Russian threat in the Middle

East anymore. The USA was able to have the co-operation of both the Arabs and the Israelis in making peace.

Even though there were those, on both the Arab and Israeli sides that saw the positive effects that peace would have on them, there were still those extremists that insisted on the disruption of the discussions, in October 1991, by way of violence. This meant that there was little progress made, until the discussions were started up again in 1993.

An agreement was eventually met on 13th September 1993, between the two states. It was agreed that the Israeli troops were to withdraw from Gaza and the West Bank, that there would be autonomy for the Palestinians, elections for a Palestinian Council, and talks over the next five years to solve the problems and ensure a final settlement. There were still main issues that needed to be solved before there was a lasting peace between the conflicting states. These are the future of Jerusalem- both the Israelis and the Arabs want it as their capital; the Palestinian refugees' right to return; the Jewish settlements in the occupied territories; and the Palestinians having an independent state. Events that have encouraged the peace process have been that in 1994 Jordan signed a treaty with Israel, meaning that their dispute over the borders had been settled. Jordan also became the second Arab State to recognise the state of Israel and *then* to open up trade and other links (Egypt was the first in 1978). Talks have also been held between Israel and Syria; it's most bitter enemy. However, there are quite a few considerable dangers to the peace process. Firstly, the control that the Israeli and Palestinian Arabs have over their extremists and keeping the support of the majority. Secondly, there will always be, on both sides, extremists and those who want to destroy any compromise. Thirdly, there are those, on the Israeli side, who believe that the West Bank must remain in Israeli hands due to the fact that it is the 'Promised Land' that God gave to the Jews. Finally, there are those, on the Palestinian side, who still believe that all of Palestine must be restored to the Palestinians, even if it means the destruction of Israel in the process. Since the land has been in Israel's hands since 1949, and Israel has occupied it since then, it would be difficult to change this, and so some people may object to the alterations. The subject of the Arab refugees is a major problem, as the issue of where exactly these Arabs would stay upon their return to their State due to the mass over-running by Israelis. It would cause total up-heave if Jewish settlers were made to leave their homes in order for the Arab refugees to have somewhere to live. Most of the conflict is centred around one thing; land, who owns it and who controls it.

There will always be those who disagree with the peace accord, although there are those who choose to deal with their anger with the only way they know how; violence. In 1995, Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated, yet not by an Arab. A fellow Israeli, who opposed to any agreement with the Palestinians, assassinated him.

In conclusion, it is apparent that although a peace accord has been signed and efforts have been made, there are still many problems that need to be dealt with before there can be any chance of lasting peace. If both sides can control their extremists, and co-operate in the decisions made, maybe total peace can be achieved, and all this conflict will be a thing of the past.

By Charlotte Grant

