

How far is religion the main cause of the conflict in the Middle East since 1914?

The conflict in the Middle East has been unsolved for years and since then there has been much violence and suffering. Arabs and Jews both have a claim to the land that we now call Israel. In biblical times God promised Abraham the land of Canaan, now Israel if he and his followers spread the word of God. The Jews settled there. "Then the Lord appeared to Abraham and said 'To your descendants I will give this land'" (Genesis 12:7). Over the next 700 years different societies had control over the land. When the Romans took control, the Emperor Hadrien pushed the Jews out of Israel and they became a scattered people.

In the early Middle Ages, the Arabs controlled a huge empire covering the Middle East, North Africa and parts of Western Europe. Gradually this declined but the Arabs still kept Palestine. An important religious development took place during the 7th Century when most Arabs converted to Islam, after the death of their leader Muhammed. Jerusalem, in the heart of Palestine, became a holy Islamic city as many Arabs believed this is where their great leader Muhammed had ascended to heaven. This made Jerusalem a great religious centre for Arabs.

In 1896 a Jew named Theodor Herzl published the Jewish State which says that the Jewish people needed a homeland. He wanted to call for immediate attention and start the Jews fight for their homeland. It states "Let us Jews be given sovereignty over part of the world big enough to satisfy the needs of a nation." Both Arabs and Israelis believe that Israel is their homeland. "O ye Arabs! You all dwell in one land, you speak in one language, so be also one nation and one land!" (An Arab writer 1914). These statements show that both sides have strong opinions and are prepared to fight for their homeland.

The First World War was a turning point for the Jews and Arabs. During the war, the interests of Turkey and Britain determined the fate of the people in Palestine. Turkey declared war on Britain in 1914, they feared the vital oil supplies would be cut off from Persia. Prior to this Britain and Turkey had been allies against Russia. So Britain led by Sir Henry McMahon decided to enlist the help of the Arabs. To secure the help of the Arabs Britain promised to help them in their struggle for independence from Turkey, as an extract from a letter from McMahon to Sherif Hussein in 1915 shows "...Great Britain towards the aspirations of her friends the Arabs and will result in a firm and lasting alliance, the immediate result of which will be the expulsion of the Turks". Having made one promise to the Arabs Britain openly made a statement supporting the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine called the Balfour Declaration "Favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people". (From the Balfour Declaration 1917). It was during the years of the First World War, 1914- 1918 that events concerning Palestine began to quicken up. There was a great change in the direction of events. The War brought Britain and Turkey into conflict with each other in the Middle East and Palestine. Britain needed the help of both the Arabs living in the Middle East and Jews living in the USA, it was for this reason that Britain made its "double dealings".

When the First World War ended both the Arabs and the Jews were disappointed, as independence was not granted to either side. Palestine became a "mandated territory"

governed by Britain. The Jews did not gain independence from the Arabs either, "Arabs will not be removed from their land nor required to leave the country" (Lord Curzon, British foreign secretary). Britain's dealings with the Middle East were significant because by 1918, the end of the First World War, both sides strongly believed they had the right to live and rule themselves in their own land. They had been encouraged to express their views and take action by Britain. However Britain had to keep control of both sides and stop them fighting while trying to find a solution to the problem. After several unsuccessful attempts Britain announced it was leaving Palestine in 1947, as they were spending too much money in Palestine and its own economy was shattered due to the Second World War.

The United Nations decision in The Peel Commission to split Palestine meant that two states could be created; one Jewish, one Arab. Neither side could accept the idea of their homeland being divided and so violence broke out in December 1947. The worst incident was at Deir Yassin where Jewish forces murdered several hundred Arabs. The division of Palestine angered both sides immensely because they both believed that the whole of Palestine should be theirs.

In May 1948 the Jews took over the city of Haifa, which was part of the designated new Arab State in the new UN partition plan. Five Arab countries then invaded Israel-Lebanon, Transjordan, Syria, Egypt and Iraq. Surprisingly the Israelis managed to defeat the Palestinians and gain more land than had been originally allocated to them. This first Arab- Israeli War, known as The War of Independence was really a series of disorganised clashes between small units, because of this most fighting only lasted a few days. By the end of the hostilities more than 700,000 Palestinian Arabs had fled their homeland to live in neighbouring Arab countries. These refugees were angry at losing their homelands

The mass refugee camps of the Palestinians became bases for those Palestinian Arabs who wished to expel the Jews from their homeland. The Egyptian President, Gamal Abdul Nasser who had close links with the USSR, encouraged these fighters. So when war broke out between Egypt and Israel, the USSR provided Egypt with weapons. The situation was worsened when Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal Company. Britain and France combined with Israel, then invaded Egypt. Israel hoped to destroy the Arab Palestinian fighters. However world opinion was against them and UN troops intervened. The Suez Sinai War then took the conflict to international levels, gaining the interests of many other countries.

The United Nations were unable to keep the peace for long, eleven years after the Suez Sinai War came the Six Day War. Despite the presence of the UN there were border skirmishes between the Israelis and Palestinian guerrilla groups. By 1967 Nasser felt that Arab forces from Egypt, Jordan and Syria were strong enough to defeat Israel and get their land back. However without waiting to be attacked the Israelis launched an attack on their enemies on the 5th June 1967. The fighting was over in six days, after which Israel had maintained and greatly expanded its borders. Israel captured Golan Heights from the Syrians, Gaza Strip and Sinai from the Egyptians, The Bank of the River Jordan, but most importantly Jerusalem, the Holy City. There was a great surge of 1.5 million refugees. However the Palestinian Arabs refused to admit defeat and made them hungry for revenge.

There was an uneasy peace in the years after 1967. It was a time when the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organisation) emerged and attracted attention by activities such as hijacking planes and terrorist attacks. Syria and Egypt were determined to avenge the defeats of the three previous wars and in 1973 the two countries attacked and invaded Israel on the sacred festival of Yom Kippur. The Israelis made a daring counter attack. It was at this stage that the Arab states used oil as a weapon. The oil producing countries decided to use oil as an economic weapon against Israel and its Western allies by raising the price of oil by 70% and decreasing production. The economies of Western Europe and the USA would be severely disrupted if the war continued. The USA, USSR and UN each put pressure on the combatants and a cease-fire was reached on 24th October.

Since 1973 the USA changed their position in the conflict. They still wanted to support the Israelis but could not afford to offend the Arabs, due to their oil interests. Therefore peace in the Middle East soon became the goal of successive American presidents, encouraged by the pressure groups of millions of Jews who lived in the USA.

Religion was the cause of the conflict in the Middle East as the Jew's claim to the land is from Genesis "To your descendants I give this land" in the bible, and this is why they are fighting to get their homeland Israel, promised to them by God. However they did not actually do anything about this claim until 1896 with Theodor Herzl. Previous to this the Arabs had lived there and built their homes and religion. Jerusalem is their Holy City, where Muhammad ascended to heaven. So their original reason for fighting is religion.

However since 1914 I do not think that religion has been the main cause of the conflict. Violence and conflict has occurred due to other factors such as international involvement. For example Britain and The Balfour Declaration, which was a ploy to involve the USA and keep Russia in the war. Also America's involvement was mainly due to the highly important factor of oil, and keeping the economy intact. The involvement of other countries encouraged both the Israelis and Arabs to come into conflict more, especially when the UN split Israel in two, and made both sides even more outraged, and hungry for more land, which they believed was theirs by right.

Wars such as The Yom Kippur War were backlash from a previous war, and was Palestine trying to seek revenge from previous damage done and so other Arab nations became involved in invading land as by means of not being defeated. Terrorist groups such as the PLO were also just seeking revenge and responding to backlash, and the greed for more land.

What had begun as a religious claim for the land from the Israelis "This is our homeland. Our ancestors lived here in ancient times" and the counter claim of the Arabs that they had always been there ("The Arab case is based on the principle that only people who can claim ownership of their country are those who are born there" David Humphries) has developed into a conflict which now includes factors such as foreign interests, world oil resources and the position of Palestine itself.

