

The Arab-Israeli Conflict

The Jewish people played an important part in the history of Palestine for many centuries before the birth of Christ. The Jewish version of this period is told in the Bible. It describes how God chose the Jews as his special people and gave them the land of Israel. Under the kings David and Solomon the Jews reached a peak of power in the 10th century before Christ. This is how some modern Israelis want it today. Jews say that the land was 'taken' from them when they got banished from Israel in AD 135 by the Romans, after two earlier rebellions. (AD 66-73 and AD 132-5) By the end of the second century AD Jews were no longer a majority in Palestine.

The Palestinian claim though is that it was theirs first even before the Jewish settlement of what the Jews call 'The Holy Land'. The Jewish took over Palestine in Biblical times and drove them out of Palestine.

In 1948, the new State of Israel was proclaimed. This led to the creation of a refugee problem because the Palestine's feared the fighting and left. They were driven out by Jewish forces and scattered into neighbouring Arab States as refugees. The increase in Jews from mainly America also helped to force the Palestinians out. This was because Jews mainly controlled the Israeli government the Palestinians feared they would be outnumbered and so fled. The government encouraged the Jews to move to Israel and so some Palestinians left in fear of the government striking against them. The flight of the Palestinians also made the neighbouring Arab governments unhappy. They feared that they would have to support them. Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan all tried to persuade people not to become refugees. The Lebanese government blocked their borders during the middle of May 1948. A bigger problem lay in the hands of the Israeli government when they tried to return. They decided not to let them in. They felt the increase in Palestinians would make the Jewish state less secure. Between 9th and 18th of July 1948 a further 100,00 Palestinians left their homes, forcefully by Israeli troops or left because of the fighting. About 350 Arab villages were abandoned during the war. They were soon demolished and the process of setting up new Jewish settlements on the Palestinian land began almost immediately.

The war of 1967 made this worse. The Arab Publicly became defiant and Arab leaders rejected the idea of peace or negotiations with Israel. Despite this, the Arab governments were convinced that they could not defeat Israelis through military force. As a result of the Israeli victories a further million Palestinians had come under Israeli rule. In addition, about 350,000 fled from the conquered territories and became refugees, mostly in Jordan. The defeat of 1967 led to a great change in the thinking of the Palestinian people. They decided that the Arab governments would never defeat Israel. They began to depend less on governments and began to develop their own organisations. This disillusionment led to a great rise in the influence and prestige of Fatah, the Palestinian organisation by Yasser Arafat.

Until 1993, both Palestinians and Israelis seemed incapable of making any peace agreement. The changes that have occurred to make the peace deal possible are:

- The International Solution
- The Palestinians
- The Israeli people

The American Secretary of State, James Baker, was in charge of American foreign policy from 1989 to 1992 and he was keen to achieve peace in the Middle East. Baker worked for President Bush, who was prepared to get tough with the Israeli government. Bush and Baker put pressure on the hardline Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Shamir, to start talking to the PLO. The message from the Americans was that unless progress was made, American financial support might be reduced. Shamir finally agreed to peace talks with Palestinians but not with official members of the PLO leadership. The peace conference took place in Madrid, Spain and began in October 1991. However these talks made little progress.

Shamir later said that he would drag the peace talks out for 10 years. The situation changed dramatically in June 1992 when Shamir lost the Israeli general election. The new Israeli Prime Minister was the Labour Party leader, Yitzhak Rabin. Unlike Shamir, Rabin was prepared to make a deal with the Palestinians. Local Palestinians refused to cut their links with Arafat. Rabin soon decided that he would have to talk to Arafat.

The rise of Hamas encouraged both the PLO and the Israeli government to make peace. There was an upsurge of Hamas attacks on Israeli targets in December 1992. Arafat was afraid that unless he could achieve a peace treaty with Israel, more and more Palestinians would desert the PLO and support Hamas. Rabin did not like Arafat but he was convinced that Hamas were worse than the PLO. Like Arafat, he was concerned at the idea that Hamas might replace the PLO as the main representative of the Palestinian people.

Many Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories oppose the deal Arafat has struck with Israel. These groups are:

- Hamas
- Some factions within the PLO
- Palestinian People

They believed that the agreement did not remove the Jewish settlements from the west bank and that Israeli settlers were not placed under the authority of the new Palestinian administration. They also didn't like the idea of there not being an Arab East Jerusalem in the agreement and that Israeli armed troops remained present in the Palestinian territories. It also offered nothing to Palestinians living in refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan or Syria.

From the late 1970s, Islamic activists connected with the pan-Arab Muslim Brotherhood established a network of charities, clinics, and schools in Gaza and were active in many mosques; their activities in the West Bank generally were limited to the universities. The Muslim Brotherhood's activities in the West Bank and Gaza were generally nonviolent, but a number of small groups in the occupied territories began to call for jihad, or holy war, against Israel. In December 1987, at the beginning of the Palestinian intifada against Israeli occupation, Hamas was established by members of the Muslim Brotherhood and religious factions of the PLO, and the new organization quickly acquired a broad following. In its 1988 charter, Hamas maintained that Palestine is an Islamic homeland that can never be surrendered to non-Muslims and that waging jihad to liberate Palestine is the duty of Palestinians. This position brought it into conflict with the PLO, which in 1988 recognized Israel's right to exist. Hamas' armed wing, the 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam Forces, began a campaign of terrorism against Israel. Israel imprisoned the founder of Hamas, Sheikh Ahmad Yasin, in 1991 and arrested hundreds of Hamas activists. Hamas denounced the 1993 peace agreement between Israel and the PLO and, along with the Islamic Jihad group, subsequently intensified its terror campaign by the use of suicide bombers. The PLO and Israel responded with harsh security and punitive measures, although PLO chairman Yasser Arafat sought to include Hamas in the political process, appointing Hamas members to leadership positions in the Palestinian Authority.

The PLO were an umbrella political organization claiming to represent the world's estimated 4,450,000 Palestinians those Arabs who lived in mandated Palestine before the creation there of the state of Israel in 1948, as well as their descendants. It was formed in 1964 to centralize the leadership of various Palestinian groups that previously had operated as clandestine resistance movements, but it

came into prominence only after the Arab-Israeli war of June 1967. The movement is dedicated to the creation of a “democratic and secular” Palestinian state. After the Arab-Israeli war of 1948 the Arab states, notably Egypt, took the lead in the struggle against Israel. The Palestinians themselves had been dispersed among a number of countries, and they lacked organized leadership; as a result their political activity was limited. After the defeat of the Arab states by Israel in the Six-Day War of June 1967, the PLO came to be recognized as the representative of the Palestinians and the promoter of a distinctively Palestinian ideology. Major factions within or associated with the PLO include Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Terrorist organizations connected with the PLO have included the Black September group of Fatah and the Popular Front for the Liberation General Command. Membership within the PLO has varied with the reorganizations and internal disagreements of its constituent bodies. Moderate factions within the PLO have proved willing to accept a negotiated settlement with Israel that would yield a Palestinian state. Other, more radical factions are steadfast in their goals of the destruction of Israel and its replacement with a secular state in which Muslims, Jews, and Christians would participate as equals. Funding for the PLO has been received from sympathetic nations and from taxes levied on the salaries of Palestinian workers. In 1969 Yasser Arafat, leader of Fatah, the largest Palestinian group, was named chairman of the PLO. From the late 1960s, the PLO organized and launched terrorist attacks against Israel from its bases in Jordan. The PLO came into growing conflict with the government of King Hussein of Jordan in 1970, however, and in 1971 was forcibly expelled from Jordan by the Jordanian army. It shifted its bases to Lebanon. From 1974 'Arafat advocated the PLO's withdrawal from international terrorism outside of Israel and the world community's acceptance of the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. In 1974 the Arab heads of state recognized the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of all Palestinians. The PLO was admitted to full membership in the Arab League in 1976. The PLO was excluded from the negotiations between Egypt and Israel that resulted in 1979 in a peace treaty; the treaty returned the Israeli-occupied Sinai Peninsula to Egypt, but the negotiations failed to win Israel's agreement to the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Continuing PLO attacks on Israeli territory from Lebanon led Israel to invade Lebanon on June 6, 1982. After several weeks of fighting, Israeli troops surrounded the Lebanese capital of Beirut, which for several years had been the PLO's headquarters. As a result of negotiations, most Palestinians evacuated Beirut for transportation to sympathetic Arab nations. Increasing dissatisfaction with 'Arafat's leadership arose in the PLO after his withdrawal from Beirut to Tunis, Tunisia, and in 1983 Syrian-backed PLO rebels supported by Syrian troops forced 'Arafat's remaining troops out of Lebanon. 'Arafat retained the support of some Arab leaders and eventually was able to reassert his leadership of the PLO. On Nov. 15, 1988, the PLO proclaimed the “State of Palestine,” a kind of government-in-exile; and on April 2, 1989, the PLO's governing body, the Palestine National Council, elected 'Arafat president of the new quasi-state. The PLO during this period also recognized United Nations resolutions 242 and 338, thereby acknowledging Israel's right to exist. It thus abandoned its long-standing goal of eliminating Israel in favour of a policy accepting separate Israeli and Palestinian states, with the latter occupying the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In April 1993 the PLO under 'Arafat's leadership entered secret negotiations with Israel on a possible peace settlement between the two sides. The resulting Israel-PLO accords, signed on Sept. 13, 1993, by 'Arafat and the leaders of the Israeli government, included mutual recognition and outlined a gradual transfer of governing authority to the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza Strip over a five-year period. After a further agreement between 'Arafat and the Israeli government in 1995 that provided for the expansion of Palestinian self-rule, the election of a right-wing government in Israel in 1996 served to slow down the peace process.

A Jew that opposed the peace deal murdered Yitzhak Rabin, his name was Yigal Amir he was a keen supporter of the settler movement and saw Rabin as an enemy of the Jewish people. The assassination of Rabin was a terrible event for most Israelis. It revealed the divided nature of Israeli society. The murder of Rabin was a real turning point in Israeli history. If Rabin had remained alive, Labour would almost certainly won the 1996 general election. Another Jew, Baruch Goldstein was also against the peace deal. He shot dead and killed 29 Palestinians at the historic mosque of Hebron in February 1994. He was overpowered and beaten to death by survivors. To some Jewish extremists, Goldstein was a martyr and his grave at Kiryat Arba, near Hebron, became a place of pilgrimage.

In May 1996 the Labour government of Shimon Peres lost power in the Israeli general election to Likud, led by Binyamin Netanyahu. For the first time ever Israelis voted directly for their prime minister. Netanyahu was the winner but only just, Shimon Peres got 1.47 million votes while Netanyahu got 1.50 million votes. To many outsiders the election seemed to threaten peace between Jews and Palestinians. Peres had intended to give Palestinians greater powers and, possibly, an independent state on the West Bank and Gaza. Netanyahu opposed the idea of a separate Palestinian state. His government included hardliners such as Ariel Sharon, the man behind the 1982 Lebanon invasion.

The new Likud government immediately expanded settlements in the West Bank, closed down Palestinian offices in Jerusalem and announced that there would be no concessions to Syria over the Golan Heights. For months Netanyahu blocked the plan, agreed at Oslo II, for the Israeli forces to pull out of most of Hebron. The Palestinians were angered by these developments. In September 1996 tension reached new heights when Israelis opened a tourist tunnel near the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. They deeply offended Palestinians because they saw it as a threat to their holy places. Violence soon broke out in the town of Ramallah near Jerusalem, and soon spread across the West Bank and Gaza. In March 1997 Netanyahu announced plans for a massive expansion of Jewish settlements in east Jerusalem. Hamas responded with a suicide bomb in July 1997 that killed 14 people.

I believe that because of people like Binyamin Netanyahu there can never be peace achieved between Palestinians and Israelis. This is because when finally there are peace deals struck someone always opposes the idea of it. People get assassinated and new powers come in with new ideas to make the country their own way. Often not how all the people want it to be. Even though new peace deals maybe achieved they will never be able to stick with two nations histories dominated by war.