

GCSE History Coursework- The Arab- Israeli Conflict

AO1: "What are the main differences between the beliefs and attitudes of the Jews/Israelis and the Arabs/ Palestinians towards the land now called Israel with the Gaza Strip and the West Bank?"

The Arab- Israeli conflict is one of the most interesting conflicts that have strained relations between the Muslims and the Jews which involves a small but significant piece of land known as Palestine (Israel today). This conflict is not rooted in modern times though, as this section of my coursework will explain.

Both groups have extremely strong views on this topic, both historically and religiously important, which has led to this stalemate between them.

Some Historians have said that the Jewish claim to Palestine (the old name for the combined Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza strip) is stronger historically than the Arabs. We need to remember that the Jews first settled in the area of Palestine in groups of Hebrews around 4000 years ago and set up their own kingdom and a beautiful capital city – Jerusalem, but it was cruelly taken away by the Roman Invaders around 63 AD. Despite the Jews rebelling against their new overlords around 64AD they were defeated cruelly by 70AD. Their last stand was made at the ancient fortress built by King Herod – Masada. It shows that the Jewish believe they would rather kill themselves than be slaves to a new nation of rulers. All the main Jewish synagogues were destroyed, including the Temple of Solomon, reduced to rubble with only one wall (the Wailing Wall) remaining. This act of destroying all the evidence of Jewish occupation – and dispelling them to the far ends of the empire is now known as the *Diaspora*. So, one of the reasons why the Jews believe this is their homeland, - they had it taken away from them to start off with by foreign invaders.

Another reason why the Jews believe they needed their homeland back was the way in which they were treated in the European countries. Western people generally hated the Jewish people- they were obviously different in terms of customs, diet and dress. Many Catholics blamed the Jews for the death of Christ on the cross, and resented the fact that the Jews were good moneylenders, rich and much more influential than the working class Europeans. This all led to a belief now known as **Anti – Semitism**, which made the Jews feel intimidated and unwanted – but they didn't have another place to go. The biggest example of this was that many Europeans blamed the Jews for the Black Death or "Bubonic Plague" outbreak in the middle of the 13th century, as a punishment from God for harbouring them. In Strasbourg for example, 2000 people were burnt on a massive scaffold erected in a Jewish cemetery in 1349. Many countries started to evict the Jews from Europe as they were seen as "evil and rash men, enemies of God and Christianity". Over the next 100 years hundreds of thousands of Jews were made homeless and had to seek a safe land in the Eastern countries, which already had steady amounts of Jewish population within them.

However, Anti- Semitism hadn't died away by the 19th century, when the Jews started to realise they needed a homeland away from the European nations. People in Germany and France were still jealous of the money the Jews had made from the industrial revolution. It was even worse in the East of Europe, where the Russians would hold pogroms to destroy the 221 Jewish Settlements in response of the murder of Tsar Alexander II. As the times became more and more violent, this new way of Jewish thinking became a desperate hope for the Jews. In 1882, **Zionism** was created by the Jewish doctor- Leon Pinsker. The Zionists were radical thinkers who believed that the holy land of Israel (Zion) was stolen from them 2000 years ago and that they should regain the land- by force if necessary. They made their radical views heard throughout Europe - Theodor Herzl was a famous Zionist whom promoted the cause at the meetings of European leaders during 1894- "***we declare that we shall fight the invaders to regain our homeland – we shall train our kinsmen into the act of the sword***". By 1900, many Jews were convinced that this was the time in which to regain their homeland, and they travelled to Palestine to begin a new life there- around 30,000 had left by the time of the First World War.

The Jews also have a very good religious claim to Palestine, and the evidence for this can be found in the Torah - our first Five Books of the Bible. The Jews have always believed that they are "God's Special People" and that he had helped them through the hardships of life. The Bible provides us of a record which promises the land of "Canaan" to the Jewish People after a life of hardship in the desert and tests of obedience to God. In fact, when the Romans came to Palestine to take the land away from them the Jews were reluctant to swear obedience to the Roman religion – "I Josephus (Jewish Historian) fully believe that these Romans have a barbaric religion - worshipping more than one god is shameful", yet the *Arabs were totally aware that they had to follow the Roman way of life so they weren't forced to leave as well*. The main reason why the Jews today feel that this was a religious centre for them is because of Jerusalem. This capital city was where the Jewish religion was nurtured and grew into a big worldwide religion. They are anxious to keep control of The Temple of Solomon, as it is a relic to the power they once had in this region- even though only one wall (the Wailing Wall) remains today.

The Arab claim to Palestine could be seen to be based more on ownership of land than an actual religious claim. Their history goes back to the dawn of recorded history. When the Hebrews invaded and conquered parts of the Middle East they already found the indigenous tribes of Canaanites, the Edomites and the Philistines, who are the ancestors of the modern Palestinians. They were still a minority group when the Hebrews ruled the land when it was known as Judea, and were allowed to remain after the Jews had been dispelled to other parts of the empire. It is wrong to call them "Arabs" at this stage though, as they didn't see themselves as one true nation until around the

7th century when the new religion of Islam was brought to them. By the time they were part of the Islamic empire, the tribe's people had intermarried and developed a common identity, and a common language - "Arabic". The Religious claim to the land comes from the fact that on Temple Mount, Mohammed ascended to heaven, at a time when Jerusalem was controlled by the Byzantines who were Christians. Today the Dome of the Rock stands on the site of Temple Mount- built in 711 AD, and is an important pilgrimage place for all Muslims. By the time the Ottoman Turks took over Palestine around 1500 AD, 90% of all the inhabitants were Arabs - 10% were Christians and since the Turks were Arabs too, there seemed there would be no need for any rebellion. Over the next 300 years though, the Arabs became angry at this arrangement, and sought to escape Turkish rule and create a new independent nation. As a result, a new Palestinian identity emerged after hundreds of years of mixed emotions. However, a new threat emerged after thousands of years of absence, Jewish Zionists came back to claim what they thought was naturally theirs from the start.

The main catalyst which restarted the conflict and created opportunities for both the Jews and the Arabs was the First World War. Britain is mainly to blame due to its double-crossing tactics which did end the war but defiantly created enemies among the Arab nations. In 1915, Britain signed a deal with the Arabs - persuaded by Lawrence of Arabia, known as the *McMahon Letters*. This said that the Arabs would have their own independent state in Palestine, provided that they rebelled against their Turkish leaders in June 1916, but was incredibly vague so the British could sign a treaty with the Jews in November 1917 - known as the **Balfour Declaration**. This promised an independent Jewish state in Palestine, as long as America and all its technology joined the war. This made the Jews optimistic, and the Arabs feel betrayed, yet still allowed overall control of Palestine to the British in the Sykes - Picot plan with the French in 1916. Initially the reaction was of betrayal and more years of oppression, yet the British were so lenient in immigration laws that millions of Jews poured into the country as the Zionists had predicted.

The lives of the Jews had got better for them - they built schools and hospitals and were very popular with the British government. For the Arabs it got much worse, despite still holding larger areas of land than the Jews. They felt more threatened and more intimidated by the large-scale immigration, and wanted a voice to speak out against this. In 1921, the British appointed an Arab to be the senior judge or Mufti of Jerusalem. He was a vicious Anti Semite who wanted an end to the large-scale immigration and the expulsion of all Jews from Palestine. He organised killings of moderate Arabs as well as Jews, and even organised a strike to protest to show his beliefs, yet the British refused to end Jewish immigration. The Arabs have become increasingly hostile to Christians because of these events, and this exists till this day, despite the fact we no longer run Palestine.

It is important to realise the range of attitudes within the Arab and Jewish nations. There are a great number of Extremists within both groups, unprepared to give up this small area of land and would rather destroy their enemies than negotiate between themselves. They are the main terrorists whom we hear about frequently on the news, constantly creating new violence and retaliation which is exactly what they want. The Arabs are particular fans of what we would call "*hit and run terrorists*" - this means that they prefer to strike in a way in which they avoid any military conflict - "*the only solution to the Palestinian problem is to declare Jihad upon them. All peace deals and conferences are a waste of time*". However, there are also Jewish terrorist organisations which the government have tried to disband, including the Irgun and the Stern Gang which took part in the Deir Yassin massacre of 1948, when 250 people were gunned down, in a bid to show Israeli dictatorship of all of Palestine. There seems to be less and less political extremist enemies to a peace deal. Yasser Arafat, a leading member of the P.L.O used to believe that "*the goal of our struggle is the end of Israel, and there cannot be any compromises or mediation*", but by 1993 he had signed a peace deal with the Israeli Prime Minister Rabin. No doubt that there would be anger amongst his own side for signing a deal which he had decided in 1974 not to sign any at all.

Overall it is important to realise that there are a range of attitudes in each side in the conflict, and will never agree which is the best way to gain all the land from the other sides. They both have moderates who are willing to cooperate with each other to create permanent peace between themselves, yet they will risk assassination attempts by their own side - as in the case of President Nassar of Egypt in 1981, and Prime Minister Rabin in 1995. But whatever the attitudes within the group they will all have the same belief - that they are the ones who should own 100% of the land, as they have historical and religious claims in the conflict.