

Essay 8 - The Arab-Israeli Conflict

- **Peaceful Zionist immigration to Palestine both preceded and followed the Balfour Declaration.**
- **The first major unrest was the Arab riots of 1921.**
- **In 1948 the new State of Israel survived Arab attempts to destroy it.**
- **In 1967 and 1973 Israel faced further threats to its existence.**

Peaceful Zionist immigration to Palestine both preceded and followed the Balfour Declaration.

The First Aliyah (a Hebrew word referring to immigration to Israel) began in 1882. It was part of the large-scale emigration of Jews from Eastern Europe, which is also the origin of much of the Jewish population of Britain, the US and other Western countries. This wave of emigration was triggered by an increase in persecution following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in Russia. About 25,000 Jews arrived in Palestine between 1881 and 1903, and a further 40,000 between 1903 and 1914. The first group of Jewish immigrants from Yemen also arrived during this period.

In 1917 Britain declared its support for the creation of a Jewish national home in Palestine, shortly before capturing the territory from the Ottoman Empire. Following the end of the First World War and the establishment of the British Mandate, further waves of Jewish immigrants arrived in Palestine.

The first major unrest was the Arab riots of 1921.

As Jewish immigration increased, so to did Arab opposition to Zionism, and the Arab leadership became extremist. Its dominant figure was Haj Amin al-Husseini, subsequently appointed Grand Mufti of Jerusalem.

The riots, encouraged by the Arab leadership, took place in Jaffa, Jerusalem and elsewhere. In Jaffa, Arab mobs attacked rival May Day demonstrations organised by the Jewish communists and socialists. Jewish organisations and homes were broken into and their inhabitants attacked, with 47 murdered. One of the key effects of this violence was to encourage the spread of Jewish self-defence organisations.

There were further outbreaks of violence in 1929 and 1936.

In 1929 a series of riots took place in which 133 Jews were killed by Arabs and 339 others injured. Some 110 Arabs were killed and 232 were injured, many by British police trying to suppress the riots.

The riots started in Jerusalem but spread elsewhere. On 24 August 1929 in Hebron, Arab mobs attacked the Jewish quarter killing men, women and children and looting Jewish property. They killed 68 and wounded 58 more, with some of the victims being tortured, or mutilated.

Ironically, the Hebron Jewish community (mainly Orthodox Jews who had lived in the city for many generations) had declined the offer of protection by the Haganah (the Jewish self-defence organisation), insisting that they trusted the Arab leaders to protect them.

1936 saw the biggest outbreak of violence yet, in what became known as the Arab revolt. This was a rebellion against the British mandate authorities, but again featured attacks on Jews.

Following the suppression of the revolt, Amin al-Husseini was deposed by the British and fled Palestine. He spent the Second World War in Nazi Germany, where he was an enthusiastic proponent of the Holocaust.

In 1948 the new State of Israel survived Arab attempts to destroy it.

In 1947 Britain, losing control of the growing violence, announced its intention to relinquish the mandate. The UN voted for partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states. The Jews accepted the partition plan but the Arabs rejected it.

The UN partition vote in November 1947 was the trigger for a concerted attack on the Jews by the Palestinian Arab militias. These militias were supplemented by the infiltration of paramilitary forces known as the Arab Liberation Army from Egypt and other Arab countries.

By March 1948 the Jews' situation appeared desperate and their military commanders but their chances of survival at fifty fifty. However, they gradually turned the tide and by the time the Mandate formally ended in May 1948, were able to declare independence.

This however was the trigger for the second phase of the war, an invasion by the armies of five Arab countries – three of which (Syria, Lebanon and Iraq) maintain their formal state of war with Israel to this day. Again, the situation appeared desperate, and again the new state managed to turn the tide.

The war was brutal, with atrocities on both sides. The massacre of Arab civilians Deir Yassin, perpetrated by Jewish Irgun militia, is well known. Less well known are the massacres on the other side, such as at Kfar Etzion, where in May 1948 the victorious Arab forces massacred the Jewish community's surviving defenders after they had laid down their arms. The Jewish population of East Jerusalem and the Old City was expelled by the British-officered Jordanian Arab Legion.

The war ended with an independent Israel, and the remaining Palestinian territory occupied by the invading Arab states – the Gaza Strip by Egypt and the West Bank by Jordan, so-called to distinguish it from the original Jordanian territories east of the river Jordan. The Jordanians forbade the use of the term Palestine in official documents. Jordan's subsequent annexation of the West Bank was recognised by no other country except Britain and Pakistan.

The 1949 armistice line (the so-called 'Green Line') became the de facto border between Israel and the Arab-held territories. It never became a recognised international border, however, because the Arab countries refused to negotiate a peace treaty.

Both Arab and Jewish refugee problems resulted from the 1948 war.

The violence of the 1948 war resulted in large numbers of Arab refugees fleeing the areas under Israeli control. Pro-Palestinian activists have gone as far as suggesting that this was a pre-planned act of ethnic cleansing, but in reality there was no such plan. There were atrocities on both sides, and this undoubtedly caused some Arabs to flee. Many left to sit out the war in safer places, hoping to return when the Jews had been defeated. In many places (e.g. Haifa), Zionist leaders encouraged the Arabs to stay, promising correctly that no harm would come to them.

What is clear, however, is that since 1948 the refugees and their descendants have been used as a political tool, denied (in most cases) permanent homes or citizenship in their host Arab countries.

The most striking effect of this has been to distort the meaning of the word 'refugee' itself.

In normal parlance, and in international law, a refugee is a person who has had to flee from his or her country and has not yet either returned or been permanently settled in another country. It is thus a temporary status, and certainly not a hereditary one.

Yet the UN organisation charged with dealing with the Arab refugees (UNRWA) has changed this common-sense definition so that it treats not only the original refugees, but all their descendants, as having that status. This means that people born in another Arab country are denied the normal rights of citizens (including often the right to move house or to work) as a result of an indelible hereditary status.

The UN body responsible for all other refugee problems in the world, UNHCR, uses the normal, common sense definition, and seeks the permanent resettlement of those it works with.

Furthermore, the Palestinians were not the only refugees resulting from the 1948 war. Fierce persecution in many Arab countries forced out their Jewish citizens, many of whose families had lived in those countries for generations. Many of these went to Israel.

Unlike the Palestinian refugees, the Jewish refugees from Arab countries were resettled and fully integrated into Israeli society. Today roughly half of the Jewish population of Israel is of Middle Eastern origin.

In 1967 and 1973 Israel faced further threats to its existence.

On 15 May 1967, Israel's Independence Day, Egyptian troops began moving into the Sinai, which had been demilitarised following the Sinai-Suez conflict of 1956, and massing near the Israeli border. The following day, Egypt ordered the UN Emergency Force, stationed in Sinai since 1956, to withdraw.

On the 22 May, Egypt closed the Straits of Tiran to all Israeli shipping and all ships bound for Israel's port of Eilat, an act contrary to international law.

On 30 May, Egypt signed a military pact with Jordan, having already concluded one with Syria. The Egyptian dictator Nasser announced “The armies of Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon are poised on the borders of Israel . . . to face the challenge, while standing behind us are the armies of Iraq, Algeria, Kuwait, Sudan and the whole Arab nation. This act will astound the world. Today they will know that the Arabs are arranged for battle, the critical hour has arrived. We have reached the stage of serious action and not declarations.”

Israeli forces had been mobilised for three weeks to face the threat and could not remain so for much longer without crippling the economy. Furthermore, only the advantage of surprise could compensate for Israel’s disadvantage in having to fight a war on three fronts. On 5 June, Israel launched a pre-emptive strike against Egypt.

Despite Israel’s pleas to Jordan to stay out of the conflict, King Hussein ordered Jordanian forces to shell Israeli West Jerusalem, forcing Israel into the war on three fronts it had sought to avoid.

The result of this defensive war was Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights.

In 1973, Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack on Israel to coincide with the Jewish festival of Yom Kippur. Despite being caught unawares and suffering heavy losses, Israel retrieved the situation and comprehensively defeated the Egyptian army and the Syrians.

Since 1973 the threat to Israel’s existence continues.

Since 1973 the threat has predominantly taken the form of terrorism. This has ranged from plane hijackings (one of which resulted in the Entebbe rescue of 1976) to suicide bombings. The latter reached their height in the Second intifada which began in 2000. Between 2000 and 2004 well over 700 Israeli civilians were murdered in the course of this campaign of terror. Atrocities included a suicide bombing of a Tel Aviv disco (May 2001) which killed 21 and injured over 60 predominantly teenagers, and the bombing of a hotel in Netanya which killed 28 Jews celebrating Passover.

Israeli security measures, including incursions into Palestinian population centres to root out armed groups, the introduction of checkpoints and the construction of a protective security barrier, have largely eliminated this threat. However, while the West Bank has been relatively peaceful, rocket attacks from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip have continued.

Israel continues to face potential threats to its existence. One is the Iranian drive to obtain nuclear weapons, which could place weapons capable of destroying Israel in the hands of a totalitarian, antisemitic regime.

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