

# THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

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## PART II, LESSON THREE: FOUR TURNING POINTS

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There are turning points in history when we must go one direction or another, and cannot turn back. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, up to the present time four major turning points have changed the very nature of the conflict.

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### TURNING POINT I: 1947 - THE PARTITION OF PALESTINE

In 1936 Palestinians began what is called the Arab Uprising against British colonial authority. By 1939, 2,287 Arabs, 520 Jews, and 140 Britons had been killed. In 1937, a British government study (the Peel Report) concluded that Jews and Arabs could not live peacefully together in one state and suggested that Britain partition Palestine into two states, one Jewish, one Arab, with Jerusalem a separate city under international control. The report suggested that up to 250,000 Palestinians be removed from the proposed Jewish area. The report was controversial and before anything could be done World War II intervened. As the war ended, Jewish leaders in Palestine began a military campaign to expel Britain. Britain sent nearly 80,000 soldiers to Palestine to control the situation but was not successful.

The Jews were determined to have a Jewish state. They felt this had been promised to them by European leaders, that they were a national people who deserved the right to recreate their nation in their ancient homeland, and that the Holocaust had shown that without their own state, Jews could be killed anywhere. They vowed that such a thing would never happen again and that only a Jewish state with a Jewish army on a Jewish territory could prevent it. Some Jews wanted to offer citizenship to Muslim and Christian Palestinians but in the end most became refugees and few were allowed to remain. Arabs offered to let Jews live in Palestine as a protected minority but felt they should not have to pay for wrongs done to Jews in Europe by the Nazi government.

In 1947 Britain gave up and turned the question of Palestine over to the newly-created United Nations. In November 1947 the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 181, partitioning Palestine into two states, one Jewish (Israel), one Arab (Palestine) with an international enclave in the Jerusalem area, including Bethlehem. Arabs opposed this decision for four reasons: First, 66% of the population was Arab, and Jews held only 6% of the land. Second, Palestinians questioned the legality of Resolution 181 since the British Mandate specified that the opinions of the inhabitants must be taken into account in any decisions. Since 2/3 of the people in Palestine were Arabs, they maintained that the creation of a "Jewish" state against the will of the Arab majority could not be legal. Third, neighboring independent Arab states feared that Israel would be an agent of powerful Western nations that would use it to dominate the region. Finally, Muslims and many Christians (the Catholic Church most prominently) felt that the significance of Palestine and Jerusalem to all three faiths--Judaism, Christianity, and Islam--should be respected.

When the dust settled in January 1949 a Jewish state was in place but the Palestinian Arab state had

been stillborn. The declaration of a Jewish state in May 1948 sparked a war. This war was made worse by the determination of Arab leaders to keep Palestine united and to resist a Jewish state, and by the determination of Israelis to expand the size of their state to include part of the proposed Palestinian state.

Three things happened to the Palestinian state. 1) During the fighting Israel captured much of the territory assigned to the Arab state by the UN. The part captured by Israel is today considered part of Israel by most of the world community. 2) Jordan took control of that section of the Arab state called the West Bank. In 1949, Jordan annexed the West Bank and granted full citizenship to the Palestinians therein. While some Palestinians agreed to this arrangement, others were so offended that they became bitter enemies of the Jordanian ruling family. One militant Palestinian assassinated King Abdullah in 1951 and militant Palestinian groups conducted an uprising against King Hussein in 1970. (We will see soon that the West Bank was captured by Israel in 1967 and is today called the Occupied Territories or Occupied Palestine). 3) A small part of Palestinian territory (the Gaza Strip) was held by Egypt. Egypt never annexed Gaza. Israel captured it in 1967. Today it is part of the Occupied Territories.

## **Jewish Population Shifts**

In the next few years, 880,000 Jews came to Israel. Some were refugees from World War II but most were from Arab lands. Some from the Arab world were pious Jews who simply wanted to live in the Holy Land, some were forced to leave by Arab leaders who blamed them for Israeli actions against Palestinians, and some were escaping oppressive governments that abused both Jews and non-Jews. Few Jews from America or Western Europe moved to Israel. The arrival of so many Jews from Arab lands contributed to ethnic tensions in Israel between the Israeli leaders who were mostly from East Europe and the new Jewish majority who were from the Arab world. Even today, Jews from the Arab world are mostly in the working and lower middle classes.

## **The Palestinian Refugees**

The events of 1947-48 created a serious refugee problem. Based on Resolution 181 the Arab state would have 725,000 Arabs and 20,000 Jews; the Jewish state 498,000 Jews and 407,000 Arabs and the international zone (Jerusalem and environs) 100,000 Jews and 105,000 Arabs. In fact, the result was quite different. Not only did Israel end up with 77% of the land of Mandatory Palestine but by the January 1949 Armistice, there had been a major population shift.

Of the Palestinians living in what is now Israel proper on January 1, 1948, approximately 85% were refugees by December 31. Most ended up in Jordan, Gaza or the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, or Kuwait. (During 1948 the population of Jordan more than doubled to 850,000; Jordan also acquired the West Bank which had 400,000 more Palestinians, many also refugees). The UN quickly set up United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) to support the refugees. UNRWA settled them into temporary refugee camps in which many live even today. They were certain they could return as soon as the fighting stopped, especially since the UN passed Resolution 194 asserting their right either to return or to be compensated for their loss. Once the refugees realized their return was not imminent, many refused to leave the camps since they did not want to be assimilated into other Arab nations. Also leaving might disrupt social ties, since often villages or families moved en masse into a camp.

In Jordan, all Palestinians received full citizenship. This made Jordan the only Arab country to grant across-the-board citizenship to Palestinians. (Lebanon granted it to many 1948 refugees although not to later refugees. Some Palestinians also obtained citizenship in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere.) Palestinians today are very prominent in Jordanian business and government. Because they are among the most educated people in the Arab world, they have achieved prominence and success in many countries. The

Palestinians have been a great economic asset to Jordan.

Today in Jordan perhaps 60% of the 3.5 million citizens are of Palestinian origin (20% of the Palestinians live in refugee camps). In Lebanon, 10% of the population or 400,000 are Palestinian. In the West Bank about 40% are refugees and in tiny Gaza the figure approaches 90%. (A refugee is defined as someone who lived inside Israel before partition and is not allowed by Israel to return. The children and grandchildren of refugees also have refugee status.)

Many Palestinians in the camps are politically militant. They are also very vulnerable to attack. In Jordan in 1970, they led an uprising against King Hussein that came to be known as "Black September" because so many were killed; in Lebanon in 1982 two camps--Sabra and Shatilla--were the scene of brutal massacres that left at least 800 Palestinians dead. (These massacres were carried out by Christian Lebanese forces while the camps were under Israeli army control.) During and after the Gulf War, 90% of those in Kuwait (over 350,000 in 1990) were expelled or forced to leave and were not allowed to return. In the Israeli-occupied territories, over a thousand were killed by Israelis between 1987 and 1992.

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## **TURNING POINT II: 1967 - THE SIX-DAY WAR**

The June War (also called the Six Day War) was a great military victory for Israel but set the stage for increased tensions. There are two interpretations of why this war occurred. One looks to Israeli aggression and the Israeli desire to control Sinai, the West Bank, all of Jerusalem, and the headwaters of the Jordan river in Syria's Golan Province. The second emphasizes Arab aggression, the long-standing refusal to recognize Israel, and repeated attacks conducted across the border by Egyptians, Palestinians, and Syrians. Immediately and specifically it was caused by the Egyptian threat to cut off shipping to Israel through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba, and fears of an Egyptian attack that gave Israel the justification for a "pre-emptive" and devastating air and land attack against Egypt and Syria.

The war began when Israeli airplanes destroyed the Egyptian air force on the ground. Within a week, Israel had defeated the combined armies of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria (plus smaller units from Iraq and Saudi Arabia). Israel was in control of Egypt's Sinai peninsula, about 2/3 of Syria's Golan province (commonly called the Golan Heights by Americans), the Palestinian West Bank, Palestinian East Jerusalem, and the Palestinian Gaza Strip. Over 200,000 additional Palestinian refugees had fled or were forced into Jordan.

In one week, the population under Israeli authority went from 16% Palestinian to 36% Palestinian. There is a big difference between the lives of those who are Israeli citizens and those who live under military rule. Those who live in Israel proper had been kept under strict military rule from 1948 until the mid 1960's; today, while not fully equal and discriminated against in many ways, they can vote, join labor unions and organize political parties (so long as they do not question the Jewish nature of the political and legal system).

The situation in the Occupied Territories is very different. Palestinians live under military rule. They cannot vote, cannot join the powerful Histadrut labor union, cannot organize politically, can be detained without charges, can be deported from their country, and can have their property taken for Jewish settlements. (See documents on page 53 and 54 for a discussion of life under occupation.)

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## **TURNING POINT THREE: 1977 - BEGIN BECOMES PRIME**

## **MINISTER**

As a result of the 1977 elections, Menachem Begin, leader the Nationalist Likud Party became Prime Minister of Israel. Begin was committed to holding the Occupied Territories permanently and settling them with Jews. He felt the land belonged to the Jewish people and always referred to it by the Biblical names, Judea and Samaria. He began an aggressive settlement campaign that by 1990 had taken for exclusive Jewish use half the land in the West Bank, and a third of Gaza. Israel placed 120,000 Jews in East Jerusalem in areas traditionally Palestinian, and 100,000 more moved to the West Bank and Gaza.

Earlier settlements started under the Labour government had emphasized security. Labour wanted outposts along the Jordan River and on the strategic high points in the West Bank and the Golan province. They avoided settling in the dense population centers of the West Bank and Gaza. In contrast, Likud placed settlements in the very centers of Palestinian population. Settlements were often positioned near cities or on roads. As one Israeli official said, Palestinians are "like cockroaches in a bottle."

Israel also began to place Jewish settlements in the Old City of Jerusalem in areas that had traditionally been reserved for the use of Christians and Muslims. Historically Jerusalem was divided into four "Quarters," one each for Christians, Muslims, Jews, and Armenians (Armenians are Christian but were given a separate quarter for historical reasons). The quarters were created not to discriminate, but to reassure each group that their rights would be respected. If a Jew wanted to live in the Christian Quarter (for example) that person would petition Christian religious leaders for an exemption, with the understanding that if the Jew ever sold the land the Christian leaders would have the right to repurchase the property. The Israeli decision to violate these understandings created tension with Muslim and Christian leaders.

With so much land taken for Jewish settlements, virtually every Palestinian farmer felt personally threatened. Quiet villages became militantly defiant. Concern also increased among neighboring countries that Israel was planning to expel the Palestinians. Statements by militant Israeli leaders--some of them in the cabinet--suggested that this was a possibility. In places like Iraq (which borders on Jordan) there was a sense of impending confrontation with Israel. Direct clashes between Jews and Palestinians also escalated considerably. Both Jews and Palestinians became afraid to go into the others' neighborhoods.

A few years ago, Yehosephat Harkabi, former head of Israeli military intelligence, spoke in Detroit. Harkabi is concerned about what he considers an unstable political situation based on the population figures noted above. His comments (during the Cold War) are worth reporting. He described the Israeli situation in American terms, saying: "You Americans have the most powerful army in the world. No one can challenge you. But if you had 120 million Russians living in America--all completely loyal to the Soviet Union--your great army would be of no use and you would not be safe. That is our situation. The simple fact is that we must either have a Palestinian state in our neighborhood or we will become a Palestinian state."

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## **TURNING POINT IV: 1987 - THE INTIFADA**

On December 8, 1987, an Israeli vehicle crashed into a crowd of Palestinians in a Gaza refugee camp, killing four. Palestinians were convinced the accident had been intentional. Israeli police concluded it was an accident with no malicious intent.

In a sense the cause is irrelevant. When political tension reaches a high level a small incident can ignite an uprising. Within days, the whole of Gaza and the West Bank were in a state of rebellion. Military efforts to suppress demonstrations made matters worse. The demonstrations had become a national uprising known as the *Intifada* (the word means "shaking off").

Future historians will see the Intifada as a turning point. It produced new Palestinian leaders from among those living inside the occupied Palestinian territories rather than in exile; it brought rival factions together into an organization called the Unified Leadership of the Uprising; it radicalized many people who had previously been quiet: merchants, intellectuals, villagers, middle classes.

It also produced a major shift in the PLO. In November 1988, the Palestinian National Council (the Palestinian parliament) met in Algiers. After lengthy debate they voted overwhelmingly (85-15%) to accept the partition of Palestine based on UN Resolution 181, to accept Israel, to renounce terrorism, and to call for a negotiated settlement based on UN Resolutions 181 and 242. They also declared Palestine to be an independent state. The US quickly opened up dialogue with the PLO, but broke it off some months later when some Palestinian guerrillas not under PLO control tried to land on a beach near Tel Aviv.

Israel came to realize the costs of occupation: the army spent its time patrolling Palestinian towns; financial costs soared, there were serious US-Israeli tensions; scores of Israeli soldiers protested, and human rights groups criticized Israeli policies. Both Israelis and Palestinians noted increases in spouse abuse, substance abuse, and domestic violence. Among Palestinians, factional fighting left hundreds dead. The Intifada showed that while the Palestinians are not powerful enough to expel the Israelis, they themselves cannot be defeated. The occupation has become costly to both Israelis and Palestinians.

In 1988, as the PLO endorsed negotiations, Israeli voters reelected Yitzhak Shamir and the hard-line Likud Party. It was not until 1992 that Israelis abandoned Likud and elected the more moderate Labor party.

In 1991 the Gulf War occurred and Talks began at Madrid. These talks brought together Israelis, Syrians, Jordanians, Palestinians, and Lebanese.

## Human Rights Issues

The following figures report on events in the Occupied Territories from the beginning of the Intifada (December 9, 1987) through 1992.

Palestinians killed by Israelis	1,119
Palestinian injuries requiring hospitalization (estimated)	120,446
Palestinians expelled to foreign countries	483
Administrative detentions without charge	15,320
Curfew days*	11,151
Land confiscated (acres)	87,726
Houses demolished or sealed`	2,065
Trees uprooted	128,364

\* A "Curfew Day" refers to an area with 10,000 or more residents kept under curfew for 24 hours or more. Between January 16 and February 28, 1991 the Occupied Territories were under almost full time curfew. This curfew time is not included.

**Source:** Palestine Human Rights Information Center, Chicago.

According to the Israelis there were also 48 Israelis killed in the Occupied Territories from the beginning of the Intifada-February, 1993: 19 soldiers and 29 civilians. They say 760 Palestinians were killed by other Palestinians through November 1992. Many of these were alleged to be collaborators working for Israeli intelligence.

### **Israelis and Palestinians: Populations Figures**

	Israelis	Palestinians	Total
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Israeli total (including all of Jerusalem)	4,168,700	921,300	5,090,000
Israel less Jerusalem	3,741,700	762,000	4,512,000
Greater Jerusalem	427,000	151,000	578,000
East Jerusalem	135,000	155,000	284,000
West Jerusalem	294,000	----	294,000
West Bank	97,000	1,150,000	1,247,000
Gaza	3,600	796,000	799,600

**Source:** Israeli and US Governments

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## **QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES FOR LESSON THREE**

1. Discuss these and why they are important: the Arab Revolt, Peel Report, UN Resolution 181, UN Resolution 194, UNRWA, Palestinian Occupied Territories, Likud.
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  1. Why did Jews want a Jewish state?
  2. Why did Palestinians oppose a Jewish state?
  3. Instead of a Jewish state, what did Palestinians propose?
  4. In 1948 was there an alternative to war? What?
3.
  1. After 1947 there were significant Jewish population movements. What movements occurred? Did these movements make Jews more secure or less secure?
  2. After 1947 there were significant Palestinian population movements. What movements occurred? Did these movements make Palestinians more secure or less?
  3. Where do Palestinians live today? Find the five largest concentrations.
4. Discuss the June War of 1967 (The Six Day War). What would you say were the two most significant results of this war? Do you think this war reduced tension or increased it?
5. What were the Sabra and Shatila Massacres? The Black September Uprising?

6. What is the Intifada? What caused it? What do you think would end it?
7. Can you make a "time line" that shows major events for Britain, Jews, Palestinians, and other Arabs?
8. The writer says that "when political tension reaches a high level a small incident can ignite an uprising." Do you think this is true? Can you think of any examples?
9. Extra Credit Assignment: Go to your city library and see how newspapers and newsmagazines covered major events at the time. Look particularly at the creation of Israel, the Palestinian refugees of 1948, Black September, Sabra and Shatilla. Do you think coverage was fair?
10. Thought Question: In 1948 there was talk of sending American troops into Palestine to restore order. What arguments would people have made for this proposal? Against it? Would most Jews have supported or opposed this proposal? Most Palestinians?
11. Thought Question: Recent presidents (Carter, Reagan, Bush) have had disagreements with Israel over Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Why do you think these disagreements occurred?
12. Thought Question: Palestinians who were driven from their homes or who fled during the hostilities of 1948 were not allowed by the government of Israel to return. Why do you think the government of Israel took this position?
13. Thought Question: In 1987 Palestinians, through the Intifada, got the world's attention. Was there any alternative method that could have captured the world's attention? If so, what was it?
14. Thought Question: The UN has passed many resolutions urging a two-state solution, repatriation or compensation for refugees, and Israeli withdrawal from the Occupied Territories. Why do you think these resolutions have not been enforced? At a time when the world community was insistent that the UN resolutions on Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait be enforced, why do you think the Israeli/Palestinian resolutions have not been enforced?

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Go on to [Lesson 4](#).

Go back to [Lesson 2](#).

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[cmenas@umich.edu](mailto:cmenas@umich.edu)