One Land, Two People

Jews and Palestinians have long been fighting to claim the land called Israel as their own. Here's the background on their centuries-old struggle.

By J.J. Goldberg and Phil Sudo

The conflict between Arabs and Israelis has been one of the longest and most complex of the 20th century. It has led to several wars, thousands of deaths, and the deep involvement of the United States and other nations. But at its heart, the dispute is rooted in the strong and ancient claims of two peoples—the Jews and the Palestinians—to a tiny piece of land in the heart of the Middle East. The following primer is designed to answer basic questions about the Arab-Israeli conflict. How did it start?

Why has it lasted so long? And what are the obstacles to a lasting peace?

What are the roots of the conflict?
At the center of the conflict are the powerful competing claims of both Jews and Palestinian Arabs to the land known as Israel—claims that date back thousands of years.

Jewish claims originate in biblical times, when a Jewish kingdom, centered in Jerusalem, dominated the area. But by 70 A.D., despite the guidance of such powerful rulers as David and Solomon, the Jewish nation had fallen to the Romans, who forced its people off the land. The Jews called their period of wandering without a homeland the Diaspora, from the Greek word for dispersed. Although they settled in countries around the world over, Jews prayed for centuries afterward that one day their people would return to Israel.

Meanwhile, Israel—which the Romans called Palestine—came under...
Arab domination. By the 9th century, the majority of the population were Muslims—followers of the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam—who, like the Jews, considered Jerusalem one of their holiest cities. For the next 10 centuries, Palestine would be under Muslim rule.

In the late 19th century, Jews in Europe—who were suffering under horrendous persecution—began to organize efforts to create a homeland in Palestine. They called their movement Zionism, after Zion, a hill in northeastern Jerusalem that was the center of ancient Israel. By 1910, some 25,000 Jews had moved to Palestine. At first, the local Arabs lived in peace with the new Jewish settlers. But as the number of settlers grew, so did Arab anger and nationalism. The two groups frequently clashed. The stage was set for an enduring conflict.

How was the modern state of Israel created?

In November 1917, the British captured Palestine from the Ottoman Empire, which had ruled it since 1517. In 1922, the League of Nations (predecessor of the United Nations) granted Great Britain the job of governing Palestine and helping Zionist settlers build a Jewish national home there.

That same year, Britain cut off the eastern half of Palestine and created a separate country, at first called Transjordan (“Across the Jordan”), and later Jordan. It was ruled by an Arab nobleman from the Arabian peninsula, Abdullah, the grandfather of Jordan’s present-day ruler, King Hussein. Britain ruled the rest of Palestine for 25 years, until hostilities between Jewish settlers and Arabs grew too fierce to handle. In 1947, the British handed the matter over to the United Nations (UN).

Meanwhile, thousands of Jews who had survived the Holocaust—Nazi Germany’s extermination of European Jews during World War II (1939-45)—sought out Palestine as a refuge. As a result of the Holocaust, world British. Fearing vital shipping lanes will be cut, Israel invades Egypt in October. Together with Britain and France, Israel recaptures the canal. Under world pressure, the three nations withdraw in 1957.

1964: The Birth of the PLO. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) is founded with a base in Jordan. It is dedicated to the destruction of Israel, and return of the land to Palestinian Arabs.

1967: The Six Day War. After years of border clashes with Egypt, Israel learns that Egypt and Syria are preparing for war. On June 5, Israel launches a preemptive attack on Egypt and Syria. Jordan joins the Arab side. Over the next six days, Israel wins a sweeping victory, capturing Egypt’s Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula, Syria’s Golan Heights, and Jordan’s West Bank,

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As for the Arab state of Palestine set up by the UN, those parts of it not taken by Israel were absorbed into Egypt and Jordan. Palestinian Arabs have called the war “the Catastrophe.” Nearly 1 million Palestinians, left without farms or homes, fled Israel in its aftermath. Yet most of them were turned away from other Arab nations and wound up in UN-run refugee camps in the Gaza Strip and on the West Bank.

What are the “Occupied Territories”? 

In June 1967, Egypt and Syria suddenly mobilized their armies on Israel’s borders. Fearing an attack, Israel launched a surprise attack of its own. The next day, King Hussein of Jordan joined the war to help his fellow Arabs.

Over the next six days, Israel defeated all three armies and captured large stretches of their land. From Egypt, Israel won the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip. From Syria, it captured the Golan Heights, a plateau overlooking Israel’s northern valleys. From Jordan, Israel took the West Bank, a hilly region of farming villages that formed the heart of ancient Israel and was to have been the center of the Palestinian state in 1948. (See Map/Databank, page 4, and maps.) In winning the West Bank, Israel acquired most of historic Israel, including such emotionally charged places as Bethlehem, Hebron, and the Old City of Jerusalem.

After the war, Israel announced that

**1967: After the Six Day War**

- **Israel Occupied by Israel**
- **LEBANON**
- **SYRIA**
- **GOLAN HEIGHTS**
- **WAHABIS**
- **JORDAN**
- **SAUDI ARABIA**
- **EGYPT**

**1977-78: The Camp David Accords.** On November 19, 1977, Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat shocks the world by making the first overture of peace. With the aid of U.S. President Jimmy Carter, he and Israeli President Menachem Begin hammer out a peace agreement at Camp David, the Presidential retreat in Maryland. Israel agrees to return the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt in exchange for peace and recognition, and the two sides establish a framework for Palestinian self-rule. But the PLO rejects the accords.

**1982-85: Flawed Peace.** The Camp David agreement proves to be flawed, as Arabs and Israelis cannot agree on the meaning of “self-government.” Arabs believe it means the creation of a Palestinian state, while Israelis say it means local self-rule under Israeli control.
all territories except Jerusalem would be returned as part of an overall peace agreement. The Arabs, however, refused to negotiate. That November, the UN passed Security Council Resolution 242. It called on Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories in return for “secure and recognized boundaries.” The resolution was rejected by the Arabs. But as time went on, most Arab nations came to accept 242 as the basis for today’s peace agreements.

**Why is Jerusalem such a crucial piece of land?**

Jerusalem is the most prized territory in the dispute because it is so steeped in religious history. Jews, Christians, and Muslims all consider the city sacred, and the Old City contains some of the holiest sites in all three religions.

Jewish attachment to Jerusalem dates from 1000 B.C., when King David established the city as the capital of the Israelite tribes. Later, David’s son Solomon built the first Temple of the Jews there. Today, the last remnant of Solomon’s temple, the Western Wall, stands as Judaism’s holiest shrine.

For Christians, Jerusalem is the city where Christ was crucified and buried. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher stands on what is believed to be the hill where Christ carried His cross.

Muslims consider Jerusalem sacred because, in the Islamic faith, it is the site from which Muhammad is believed to have risen to heaven to speak with God. That spot is marked by the golden Dome of the Rock, next to the Western Wall.

The present conflict over Jerusalem dates from the UN partition plan in 1947. The plan called for Jerusalem to be an international city under UN control. But in the 1948 war that followed, Israel captured West Jerusalem, and Jordan held East Jerusalem, including the Old City.

The city stood divided until the Six Day War in 1967, when Israel captured East Jerusalem from Jordan. Since then, Israel has considered the entire city to be its capital, although other nations have refused to recognize Israel’s control of the eastern half.

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Any hope for a lasting peace, experts say, rides on solving the issue of Jerusalem. Israeli leaders say that an undivided Jerusalem must forever be the capital of Israel, while Palestinians insist that Jerusalem must be the capital of an eventual homeland.

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1967: **The Intifada Is Born.** Palestinians, frustrated with Israeli occupation, riot in December 1967. The riots grow into a steady protest movement called the intifada—Arabic for “a shaking off.” Israel responds to the intifada harshly, drawing sharp criticism from abroad and causing dissent at home.

1980-91: **The Gulf War.** In August 1990, Iraq invades the neighboring nation of Kuwait. Many of Iraq’s Arab neighbors condemn the action, shattering Arab unity. The PLO sides with Iraq. Iraq fires missiles at Israel, hoping to draw it into the war. But Israel refrains, and a U.S.-led coalition defeats Iraq.

At war’s end, the U.S. convenes a Middle East peace conference with leaders of Israel and its Arab neighbors. For the first time, leaders of Israel and its Arab neighbors sit down together publicly at a bargaining table.

1993-94: **Breakthrough.** On September 13, 1993, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO chairman Yasir Arafat sign a historic peace accord. The PLO agrees to recognize Israel’s right to exist; in exchange, Israel grants Palestinian self-rule in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank town of Jericho. In July, Arafat arrives to cheering throngs in Gaza.

1994: **Jordan Joins In.** On July 25, Israel and Jordan formally end their state of war and initiate economic ties. Rabin becomes the first Israeli leader to set foot on Jordanian soil after he and Jordan’s King Hussein open a border crossing at Arava, and phone links between the two nations are established.