**Introduction to Arab-Israeli Conflict: Contemporary Issues Companion**

*Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 2004

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On May 14, 1948, David Ben-Gurion officially announced the Israeli Declaration of Independence, establishing the nation of Israel in territory that until then had been part of the British-controlled region of Palestine. Ben-Gurion, who would become the first prime minister of the new state, proclaimed that "the land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and national identity was formed. Here they achieved independence and created a culture of national and universal significance. Here they wrote and gave the Bible to the world." The Jewish people's historic association with the land of Palestine gave all Jews from around the world the right to return and revive Israel as their national homeland, he maintained. Further, Ben-Gurion declared, the right of the Jewish people to form the state of Israel was supported by the United Nations.

In fact, UN Security Council Resolution 181, adopted on November 29, 1947, had explicitly mandated the partition of Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states, with the city of Jerusalem to be administered internationally. However, while the Jews had accepted the UN partition plan, the Arabs had rejected it. Sporadic violence had already occurred as a result of this disagreement. But when Ben-Gurion declared Israel's independence, it sparked an all-out war. The day after the declaration, the fledgling state was attacked by a coalition of five Arab nations. By the end of 1948, the Israelis had gained the upper hand in the war, occupying far more territory than had been allotted to Israel under the original UN partition plan. More than half a million Arab Palestinians lost their homes; some fled the fighting, while others were forcibly driven out by Israeli soldiers.

In 1949, the United Nations implemented an armistice proposal that was intended to end the hostilities and secure a lasting peace between Israel and the neighboring Arab states. This plan included establishing permanent borders for the new nation of Israel. However, Israel's Arab neighbors refused to officially recognize the new country. Ever since the Israeli War of Independence—referred to as the *Nakba*, or disaster, by Palestinians—Israel has been continually plagued by violence and conflict. Peace between Israelis and Palestinians remains an elusive goal to this day.

Why has peace between Arabs and Israelis been so difficult to achieve? According to many observers, the Arab-Israeli conflict revolves around several key controversies, including the validity of the Jewish claim of a historic right to a homeland in the region, the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, the establishment of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories, the Palestinian demand for an independent state, the predicament of the Palestinian refugees, acts of terrorism by Palestinians against Israelis, Israeli violence toward and repression of Palestinians, the upholding of Israel's national security, tensions over water rights, and the debate over the administration of the city of Jerusalem, which is holy to Jews and Muslims alike. While all of these divisive issues contribute to continued unrest, the refugee question, Israeli occupation and settlement, Palestinian terrorism, and Israeli repression are among the most difficult to resolve.

The refugee issue has been at the heart of peace negotiations since the end of the 1948 war. On December 11, 1948, the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 194, declaring that "refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date." Nevertheless, the Israeli government did not allow many Palestinian refugees to return. Instead, the Palestinian refugee problem was exacerbated in 1967 with the onset of the Six-Day War between Israel and the coalition of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. In spite of the fact that the combined Arab forces were far superior to those of the Israeli military, by the end of the war Israel had scored a decisive victory, dramatically expanding its borders by annexing the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Desert, and the Golan Heights. The war created hundreds of thousands of new refugees and introduced a new controversy into the peace process: the continuous occupation of Palestinian territories by Israel.

According to the MidEast Web for Coexistence, there are currently 4.6 million Palestinian refugees, 3.9 million of whom are registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA). Over a million refugees live in camps administered by the UNRWA, often in conditions of dire poverty and overcrowding. Many of the Palestinian refugees—both those who were born in Palestine and those who were born in the camps—still want to return to the land and houses that their families used to own, regardless of the number of years or decades that have passed. The United Nations has continued to support the Palestinian refugees' desire to return to their original homes; in 1967, it reinforced Resolution 194 by the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 242, which called for a fair solution to the problem. Palestinians believe that these UN resolutions embody their "right of return," making it illegal for Israel to keep them from reclaiming their ancestral lands and properties.

But this situation is complicated by the fact that over the years, the land that used to belong to Palestinian refugees has been occupied by Israelis. The Israeli government does not relish the prospect of evicting Jewish families from homes they have lived in for as long as thirty, forty, or fifty years. Another Israeli objection to accepting the return of millions of Palestinian refugees is that Arabs would then outnumber Jews in Israel. Many Israelis fear that such an outcome would spell the end to Israel's self-determination and its existence as a Jewish state—which, they argue, is exactly what surrounding Arab nations want to see happen.

Another facet of this problem is Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The 1993 Oslo Peace Accords outlined a plan in which Israel would withdraw from the occupied territories in exchange for peace. However, the peace process stalled in 1996; in the meantime, the founding of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories has continued apace. Even if Israel were to return the West Bank and Gaza to Palestinian rule, more than half a million Israeli Jews now live in these areas. As reported in the Canadian newsmagazine *Maclean's* in 1998, for example, Jews who have established settlements in Hebron—which is located in the West Bank, outside Israel's official borders—contend that they have a right to reinstate a Jewish presence in places that are sacred to Jewish faith and history. Arabs, on the other hand, maintain that the Israeli government is allowing continued Jewish settlement in order to undermine the viability of a potential Palestinian state.

The Palestinian reaction to Israeli policies, including those regarding refugees and occupation, has frequently led to violent conflict in the streets of Israel. Those who sympathize with the Palestinian cause often argue that Palestinian terrorist acts stem from the built-up frustrations of more than fifty years of subjugation by Israel and the seemingly endless struggle to reclaim their historic homeland. These commentators insist that the continuation of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, a string of right-wing Israeli prime ministers, and the ineffectiveness of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in brokering an acceptable peace have all led many Palestinians to feel that violence is their only option. However, supporters of Israel typically maintain that Palestinian terrorism is the direct result of policies implemented by Arafat. They contend that Arafat encourages terrorist attacks because his ultimate goal is not simply the founding of an independent Palestine but the complete eradication of Israel. According to these critics, Israeli measures against terrorism—such as sending tanks into the occupied territories or destroying the homes of suspected terrorists—are a justifiable reaction to Palestinian violence.

Despite the complex difficulties presented by the contentious issues that fuel the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Israelis and the Palestinians have more than once come close to achieving peace. Most recently, Israelis and Palestinians appeared to be making steady progress toward a permanent peace agreement during the late 1990s. In January 1997, officials from both sides signed the Hebron agreement, in which Israel agreed to reduce its military presence in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In October 1998, Israeli and Arab leaders signed the Wye Memorandum (named for the Maryland conference center where the negotiations took place), which gave Palestinians more authority in the West Bank in exchange for an increased effort to stop terrorist attacks against Israel. Even more tellingly, in December 1998, the Palestinian National Council revoked the clauses in its charter that explicitly called for the destruction of Israel. By the summer of 2000, concessions by both sides seemed to indicate that a lasting peace was imminent. During August 2000, Arafat and the Israeli prime minister, Ehud Barak, met with U.S. president Bill Clinton at Camp David, Maryland, in order to negotiate a new peace settlement. However, the negotiations failed, and no peace agreement was reached.

On September 28, 2000, shortly after the failed Camp David negotiations, Ariel Sharon, a member of the Israeli Parliament, paid a visit to the al-Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount, a place sacred to both Muslims and Jews. Sharon was accompanied by an armed guard that was one thousand members strong. Many Muslims perceived Sharon's visit to the mosque and the presence of the armed guard as a major insult to their faith. Enraged Palestinians embarked on a wave of violence that has become known as the al-Aqsa intifada.

In February 2001, Sharon was elected prime minister of Israel. Over the next year, Palestinian suicide attacks increased dramatically, leaving numerous Israelis dead or wounded. In response to the violence, Sharon ordered tanks into the West Bank and barricaded Arafat in his government compound for weeks. Ultimately, Sharon directed the tanks to leave and let Arafat go free. But hopes for the continuance of peace negotiations were shattered by these events and by the escalating violence in the region. It was not until May 2003 that both sides again started to make tentative steps toward a new peace agreement, the so-called "road map to peace" based on the Mitchell Report. As of this writing, however, terrorist attacks by Palestinians and retaliatory strikes by the Israeli military continue unabated. Clearly, the obstacles to peace between Israel and the Palestinians have yet to be overcome.

Achieving a lasting peace in the Middle East is one of the most vital challenges in the world today. The*Arab-Israeli Conflict: Contemporary Issues Companion* presents a wide variety of viewpoints and opinions concerning this persistent problem. Authors discuss the history of Israel and Palestine in order to give context to the current state of affairs. Subsequent chapters cover the controversial tactics employed by each side in the conflict and examine various proposals for achieving peace. Rounding out the anthology are personal accounts of what life is like for individuals on both sides of the conflict. The articles included in this timely and relevant volume provide readers with helpful insights concerning the ongoing tensions between the Arabs and the Israelis, as well as the potential for peace.

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