The Israeli/Palestinian Conflict: The Israeli Perspective

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict is one of massive importance to the world. It has at times undoubtedly brought out the worst in its conflicting adversaries, the primarily Jewish state of Israel and the as yet unborn state of “Palestine,” with its Muslim Arab majority. The frustration and hardship produced by this conflict have led world leaders to seek a peaceful solution that is acceptable to both Israelis and Palestinians. This has proven extremely difficult. Historically, anti-Semitism (the common term for anti-Jewish sentiment) has frequently resulted in the persecution of Jews in many world areas, with the German Holocaust serving as the pinnacle of hatred. In the minds of many Israeli leaders, therefore, a peaceful solution must serve the goals and needs of the Israeli population. The state of Israel has had and will likely continue to have difficulty in compromising with the Arab world to end the Middle East conflict because of a constant fear for its survival and security. This fear stems directly from the aftermath of the original creation of the modern state of Israel, and has only intensified as the conflict has spread outside of Israel’s borders and involved neighboring countries as well. Currently, there are several “sticking points” that prevent peace. The historical legacy has drastically impacted the current mindset of the Israeli government.

From its inception, the nation of Israel has feared for its very survival. In 1948, the weakened British Empire turned over control of the geographic region historically known as “Palestine” to the United Nations. The UN “partitioned,” or divided, Palestine into two separate regions that were to organize themselves into “states” (nations). One of the new “states” contained a population dominated by a specific cultural group of Muslim Arabs who called themselves “Palestinians.” Palestinians had lived in the area for centuries under the rule of the Ottoman Empire (which was eliminated by the 1920s) and the British Empire (from 1919 to 1948). The other new “state” contained a majority Jewish population, consisting largely of 20th century settlers from Europe hoping to establish a Jewish
homeland that had not existed since biblical times (a belief known as Zionism). This ancient history of Jews (ancient Hebrews) in the region, coupled with the world’s legacy of anti-Semitism, led to a desire on the part of Jews in the region to create a permanent Jewish homeland called Israel. When Israel was created as an independent nation in 1948, its Arab neighbors—Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Iraq, furious at the perceived intrusion of a large Jewish population, immediately declared war on the infant nation. Israel defeated the invading nations, and for security purposes, annexed significant parts of the area that was to have become the Arab Palestinian state. The remaining areas wound up “in limbo,” and no Arab state was ever created. Jordan occupied an area that has come to be known as the “West Bank.” Egypt occupied an area that came to be known as the “Gaza Strip.” The 1948 partition and the resulting military conflict played a major role in creating Israel’s perceived need for security. Its policies have thus been driven by a desire to protect itself, both from internal and external threats.

A second historical example of Israel’s security goals in action is an event known as the “Six Day War.” In 1967, fearing an impending attack by its Arab neighbors, Israel launched a “preemptive” attack against Egypt, Jordan and Syria. This short but very successful conflict resulted in Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights (a hilly region on the Syrian border). Israel currently refers to the areas as the “administered territories.” Defying a UN Resolution (Number 242) calling for Israel’s withdrawal from these areas, the Israeli government insists that it must maintain control over significant portions of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Without control over these areas, Israel claims it will be unable to adequately defend itself, both from its potentially hostile neighbors and Palestinian militants who coordinate violent attacks from towns and camps in the regions. Once again, from its perspective, the Israeli government was forced to take drastic action, even defying world opinion, to ensure its survival and provide its citizenry with security. However, far from ensuring a peaceful existence, Israel’s actions have contributed to problems that have lingered until the present day.
Israel’s desire for security has led to one of today’s most contentious issues. In the late 1970s, the Israeli government began to establish “settlements,” or colonies, of Jewish residents in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. World opinion, as displayed in the Fourth Geneva Convention, forbids building on occupied land. The Israeli government has taken the stance that since there was no permanent sovereign Palestinian state at the time, there is no reason why these should not be built. Additionally, Israelis on the “right,” who wish to take a hard line with the Palestinians, have claimed that the land rightfully belongs to Israel anyway, thus nullifying any Palestinian claims of “illegal occupation.” Since the earliest settlements began, over 300,000 Israelis have moved into the West Bank and Gaza. They are strategically placed to provide security to Israel as well as to prevent a contiguous Palestinian state. Critics of current Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon accuse him of intentionally placing Israelis in key areas, including rural lands which cut Palestinian territory in two, and suburban areas which surround and isolate key Palestinian cities. Defying the criticism, Sharon and other Israeli leaders insist that their only motive is the safety and security of the Israeli population. This massive stumbling block to peace has arisen, from the Israeli perspective, only because of a demonstrated need for self-preservation.

Yet another issue fundamental to the problem is the issue of Palestinian refugees and prisoners. As a result of the 1948 war, millions of Palestinian Arabs were displaced from their homes. Additionally, thousands of Palestinian “militants” are currently incarcerated by Israeli authorities as a result of Israeli crackdowns on terrorism and protest. Israel’s stance on these issues is clear. If it were to allow all Palestinian refugees (as well as their extended families) to return to the West Bank, Gaza Strip and even modern Israel, a Jewish Israel may no longer exist. Such a large population shift would, from Israel’s perspective, threaten the security and very survival of Israel. If prisoners (some of whom are indeed terrorists) were released in large numbers, there is a very realistic fear that terror attacks would not merely continue, but intensify. While Israel recently freed 334 prisoners, it is assumed that few, if any, of the several thousand remaining will be released. For security purposes, Israel feels that
its stance must follow a hard line. Granting Palestinian refugees the “right of return,” as it is called, threatens the Jewish identity of Israel; freeing prisoners threatens the safety of the populace. Once again, Israel’s policy decisions are based on its desire to ensure the security of its people.

Perhaps the most ideologically contentious issue of all is that of Jerusalem, the capital of Israel as well as Palestine. The city of Jerusalem is holy to both Jews and Muslims. Israel believes that the survival of its identity as a Jewish homeland is threatened unless it can fully possess and control the holy city. Currently, the western portion of the city is completely under the control of Israel, while East Jerusalem (which holds many holy sites) is traditionally the Arab area. Few Israelis venture into the eastern half of the city, which is poorly maintained by the Israeli government. After the Six Day War of 1967, Israel seized East Jerusalem from Jordan, and despite UN resolutions instructing Israel to withdraw, Israel insists that Jerusalem is its “eternal, undivided capital.” Driven by a need for survival and security, Israel has cut East Jerusalem off from the rest of the West Bank. It has encouraged settlements that surround the city and it has annexed lands around the city, causing confusion regarding the real boundaries of Jerusalem, making it nearly impossible for Jerusalem to ever become the capital of a Palestinian state. Rather than compromising on this issue, the Israeli government has made self-preservation its primary goal.

The final, and in many ways the most frustrating issue that complicates the Israeli/Palestinian conflict is the problem of extremism. While there are many Israelis who strive for peace and desire an end to the conflict with the Arab world, there are others who consistently oppose peace efforts. In the modern world, images of terrorists perpetuate stereotypes regarding Arabs and the religion of Islam. Seldom, however, are the victors of conflict portrayed as extremists. In Israel, there are many who oppose compromise with Palestinians, as well as the rest of the Arab world, on the grounds that any compromise threatens the existence and security of Israel. Whether the issue is settlements, refugees, Jerusalem or a controversial 310-mile “separation wall” currently being built along the West Bank, Israeli extremists threaten the peace process due to their beliefs and fears. One strikingly tragic
example is the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Itzak Rabin in 1995. Rabin was the architect of peace agreements with Palestinian leaders. Conservative Israelis, fearing changes and compromise with those they viewed as terrorists, opposed Rabin’s policies. Finally, an Israeli radical (not a Palestinian terrorist) murdered the Israeli Prime Minister. Events such as these demonstrate the profound difficulty in achieving peace in Israel/Palestine. Acting on what they believe is best for Israel’s future, extremists have done their best to derail the peace process. Recently, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon led a removal of the entire Israeli presence from the Gaza Strip, while permanently solidifying its position in West Bank settlements. Despite the fact that this move may have protected Israeli civilians and soldiers alike, extremists, including those from Sharon’s own party, have opposed this action, feeling that Israel must not give in to Palestinians at all.

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict is clearly one of great complexity and frustration. While numerous peace efforts have been made, the conflict drags on and on. What makes this conflict so frustrating is that compromise has become quite difficult. As long as the state of Israel feels that its security and even survival are threatened, it will continue to act in ways that anger Palestinians. From its first armed conflict in 1948, to the Six Day War of 1967, to the modern settlements, refugees and Jerusalem problem, Israel has constantly faced what it perceives as a noble uphill struggle. While it seems as though the entire world yearns for Middle East peace, it has remained an elusive goal.
References


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