

Israel at War: Charting the Contours of a Developing Crisis

Week 1: Why 1948 Matters

January 10, 2024

Israel is at war. Though the current events are without much modern precedent, Israel is no stranger to military conflict. To a large degree, their existence has been one of persecution, dispersion, captivity and war. To interpret the events of our time, we must know Israel's history. What key events led to Israel's statehood, and how do such points shape their context today?

A Brief History of Biblical Israel

God promised Abraham a land and a people (Gen. 12:1; Acts 7:2-6). The people would be enslaved in Egypt, released to wander in the wilderness, only to then conquer the land of Canaan under Joshua's leadership. The land would be divided among the twelve tribes (according to Jacob's children). King David would be appointed to rule the people and establish a kingdom with Jerusalem as its capital city where his son Solomon would build the temple.

At Solomon's death (931 BC) the kingdom divided into Israel (north) and Judah (south). In 722 BC Israel was invaded by the Assyrians, who were then overthrown by Babylonians in 612 BC. Babylon conquered Judah in 586 BC, and then demolished the temple (first) and deported the Jews to Babylon. In 538 BC Babylon fell to the Persian Empire where Cyrus the Great declared freedom to subjugated nations allowing the Jews began a return to homeland in Judah. The second temple was built in 516 BC.

Israel After Jesus

At the time of Jesus' birth, the people of Israel were under Roman rule. In AD 66 the Jews revolted against Roman occupation which led to a great Jewish defeat, dispersion and destruction of the second temple in AD 70. All that remains now is the western wall, referred to as the "wailing wall." As a shrine for Muslim pilgrims (a potential replacement for Mecca), the "Dome of the Rock" was built in 691 on the Temple Mount—the place of both the first and second temple. Jerusalem is a "holy city" to three different religions: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

For the next two-thousand years, the Jews were largely without a homeland. Many relocated to western Europe and northern Africa. Over this period, the land of modern-day Israel would be ruled by various empires: Roman (63 BC-313 AD); Byzantines (313-636); Arabs (636-1099); Crusaders (1099-1291); Mamluks (1291-1516). The Ottoman Empire (Turks), who built the current wall around Jerusalem, ruled the city from 1517 to the end of WWI.

Key Terms

The middle eastern land where Muslims, Jews and Christians have historically lived together is known as "**Palestine**." It was the Roman emperor Hadrian (AD 134) who first named the area "Syria Palaestina" after the ancient enemies of the Jews, the Philistines (who were from the area of the modern Gaza Strip). During the time of the Ottoman Empire (1299-1922), the word "Palestine" was used a general geographical term referring to the land south of Syria. The area fell into the hands of the British at the end of WWI (1918), and thus they too referred to the land as "Palestine." While there is no "state of Palestine" there are two Palestinian territories: The West Bank, governed by the IDF; and the Gaza Strip, governed by Hamas.

The ideology that sought to establish a home for the Jewish people in Palestine, returning them to their native homeland, is known as “**Zionism.**” Theodor Herzl is understood to be the father of the movement. In 1897 Herzl convened the first Zionist Congress in Basel to consider the formation of a Jewish state. It is important to distinguish Zionism as a political movement and Judaism as a historical religion. Though they share common interests they should not be equated.

The Balfour Declaration – November 2, 1917

During the throes of WWI the allies were in trouble. In an attempt to gain Jewish support against the Ottomans, British Minister of Foreign Affairs Arthur Balfour wrote an open letter to British Zionist leader Lord Walter Rothschild promising a Jewish homeland in Palestine.¹ The news of the letter spread quickly, and thus seeded within the mind of the international community the idea for a nation state. As a point of reference, the Ottomans (who sided with the Germans) were defeated, ending both the war (1918) and their Empire (1922).

The allied powers then formed The League of Nations in 1920 (predecessor to the UN formed in 1945) carving up the Ottoman territories giving Britain a mandate to rule Palestine (set to expire in 1947). In 1936, the Arabs who had been living in Palestine revolted, while WWII began soon thereafter. In 1947 the British handed over their responsibility of Palestine to the United Nations who proposed the “Partition Plan” whereby land would be divided among Jews and Palestinians.

On May 14, 1948, Israel declared its independence. At their announcement, surrounding Arab countries invaded thus launching the Arab-Israeli War (May 15, 1948-March 10, 1949). Israel maintained their independence, while Egypt gained the Gaza Strip, and Jordan the West Bank.

The Struggle of the Israeli State

Though the Jewish population has doubled since the establishment of Israel, it has known much strife over the the 20th and 21st centuries. In 1967, for example, Israel fought the “Six-Day War” where it took the Golan Heights, the West Bank, the Gaza strip, and the Sinai Peninsula (which was returned to Egypt in 1979). Israel left the Gaza Strip in 2005. They took everything with them, even their graves. Perhaps the most notable conflict was the Yom Kippur War of 1973. Only these tragic seasons of Israel’s modern existence rival the atrocities of Oct. 7, 2023. We as Christians trust that while men can make things better, God will make things right. (Rev. 22:1-5)

Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways does Israel’s biblical conquest of the land inform their current occupation?
2. How might the Holocaust have affected the Jewish political conscience? Why could the Jewish people have been uniquely primed national for sovereignty after WWII?
3. There is much talk today in support of a “free Palestine.” Are Palestinians in captivity? In your view, is Palestine occupied by Israel, or is Israel occupied by Palestine?

¹ A week after its writing the Balfour Declaration was published in The Times of London. The letter reads: Dear Lord Rothschild, “I have much pleasure in conveying to you. on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet: His Majesty's Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non- Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country. I should be grateful if you would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.” Yours, Arthur James Balfour