Conflict in Israel and Palestine: Crash Course World History 223

Crash Course: World History
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=====Introduction=====

John: Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course world history, and today, we're going to talk about Israel and Palestine, hopefully, without a flame war.

John from the past: Yeah, yeah big ask, Mr. Green, I mean, that fight goes back thousands and thousands of years.

John: Except, thousands of years ago... there wasn't an Islam yet, so, yeah, no. Also, let me submit that very little of this conflict between Israel and Palestine over the last several decades has been about, like, theological differences between Islam and Judaism. No one's arguing about whether the most important prophets descended from Abraham's son Isaac, or his son Ishmael, right? It's not about whether to fast during Yom Kippur or Ramadan. It's about land. Portraying the conflict as eternal or as religious makes it feel intractable in a way that frankly, it isn't. So instead, let's begin as most historians do in the late 19th century. And instead of talking about religion, let's follow the lead of historians like James Gelvin and discuss competing nationalisms.

(Intro)

=====Thought Bubble: Zionism (1:03)=====

OK, so in the late 19th century, the Ottoman Empire ruled over what we now know as Palestine. The population there, according to Ottoman records from 1878, was 87% Muslim, 10% Christian and 3% Jewish. Everybody spoke Arabic as the daily language and in Jerusalem the religious populations were roughly equal. To give you a sense of life in Ottoman Palestine, an Arab Orthodox Christian musician named Wasif Jawhariyyeh grew up in Jerusalem in the first decade of the 20th century learning the Quran in school and celebrating both Passover and Eid with his Jewish and Muslim neighbors. Ottoman Palestine was, in short, a place in which people of different religious faiths lived peacefully together.

Alright, let's go to the Thought Bubble. The late 19th century was the Golden Age of nationalism in Europe and no place was crazier than the Hapsburg Austro-Hungarian Empire in which at least 10 different nations all wanted their own state. And in that hyper-nationalistic empire lived a Jewish journalist named Theodor Herzl who had hoped that Jews could assimilate into European nations but soon became convinced that the Jewish people needed to leave Europe and settle in their own state. The concept of Jewish nationalism came to be known as Zionism.

It's important to keep in mind that most Zionists were secular Jews, so they imagined Israel as a state for Jews more than a Jewish state. In 1917, the British government, hoping to gain the support of Jewish people, issued the Balfour Declaration, promising, quote, "The establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people," a bold promise considering that Palestine was still technically Ottoman, as they hadn't yet lost World War One.

Of course, they would soon, but it turned out that the British were overpromisers when it came to Palestine, because a year before the Balfour Declaration, the British had secretly promised the French that they would divide up the Arab territories and the Brits would keep Palestine. Furthermore, in 1915, other British officials had promised the ruler of Mecca, Sharif Hussein, that he would rule over an Arab state including Palestine if he led an Arab revolt against Ottoman rule, which Hussein promptly did, so basically the Brits had promised Palestine to the Meccans, to themselves, and to the Zionists. What could go wrong?

=====The British Mandate (3:06)=====

Thanks, Thought Bubble. So shortly after the end of the war, the British established a colony in Palestine with the idea that they'd rule until the Palestinians were ready to govern themselves, at which point the people living in Palestine were like, "Well, now seems good," and the British were like, "Yeah, but maybe not *just* yet."

Meanwhile, the British established separate institutions for Christians, Jews, and Muslims, making it difficult for Palestinian Christians and Muslims to cooperate and easier for the British to, quote, "divide and rule" the inhabitants of Palestine. Again, what could go wrong? Meanwhile, the British did attempt to honor the Balfour Declaration's promise to, quote, "facilitate Jewish immigration under suitable conditions." Between 1920 and 1939, the Jewish population of Palestine increased by over 320,000 people.

In fact, by 1938, Jews were just under 30% of the population of Palestine. And the growing Jewish population focused on purchasing land from absentee non-Palestinian Arab landowners and then evicting Palestinian farmers who were living and working there.

By controlling both the land and the labor, they hoped to establish a more secure community within Palestine, but of course, these practices heightened tensions between Jewish people and Arab Palestinians between the 1920s and the 1930s. Along the way, Palestinian Arabs began to think of themselves as the Palestinian nation, and that growing sense of nationalism erupted in 1936, when the Palestinians revolted against the British.

With the help of Jewish militias, the British brutally suppressed the Palestinian revolt, but in the aftermath, the British issued a white paper limiting Jewish immigration to Palestine and calling for the establishment of a joint Arab and Jewish state *in* Palestine within ten years.

This managed to leave no one happy. The Zionists were angry at Britain for limiting Jewish immigration at a time when Jews particularly needed to leave Europe, and the Arab Palestinians were unhappy about the prospect of waiting *ten years* for a state.

=====Independence and Arab-Israeli Wars (4:55)=====
And then came World War II, which was actually quite a peaceful time in Palestine. But then it ended, and tensions resumed, and the British realized that colonies like Palestine were far more trouble than they were wroth, so they handed the issue of Palestine over to the newly created United Nations. They were like, "Oh hey there, United Nations! For your first problem..."

So in November of 1947, the United Nations voted to partition Palestine into separate Palestinian and Jewish states. The Partition Plan called for two states roughly equal in size, but the borders looked like a jigsaw puzzle. I mean, you do not look at this map and think, "Yeah, that's gonna work!"

Sure enough, it didn't, and soon after the plan was announced, the cleverly named 1948 Arab-Israeli War broke out, with Israel on the one side and the Palestinians and many Arab states on the other. The Israelis won, and when an armistice was signed in 1949, Israel occupied a third more land tan they would have had under the UN proposal. Meanwhile, Jordan controlled and later annexed the West Bank and the old city of Jerusalem, and Egypt controlled the Gaza strip.

Over 700,000 Palestinians fled their homes and became refugees in the surrounding Arab counties. To Israelis, this was was the

beginning of their nation; to the Palestinians, it was the *nakba*, the catastrophe, as they became stateless.

Over the next 18 years, nothing changed territorially, and then, in 1967, Israel and several Arab states went to war again. It was called the Six-Days War because -- get this -- it lasted six days. Israel won, and then gained control over the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights. So the 1947 proposal looked like this; by 1967, things looked like this.

Then the UN passed Resolution 242 - man, they are good at naming resolutions! - which outlined a basic framework for achieving peace, including Israel withdrawing from the territory acquired in the war, and all participants recognizing the rights of both a Palestinian and an Israeli state to exist. This of course did not happen.

=====Occupation and Resistance (6:47)=====

After the war, the broader Israeli-Arab conflict morphed into a more specific Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and this is a nice moment to note that not all Muslims are Arabs, not all Arabs are Palestinians, and not all Palestinians are Muslims. Like, there's a significant Christian minority of Palestinians, for instance. Palestinian is a word used to describe the ethnic identity of those who have historically lived in Palestine.

There were, for instance, lots of Christians in the Palestinian Liberation Organization, or PLO, formed in 1964 and led by Yasser Arafat. The PLO oversaw guerrilla groups that attacked civilians, but also used nonviolent approaches to try to achieve a Palestinian state, and meanwhile, the Israeli government began to establish Jewish settlements in what had been Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip.

There are now over 350,000 Jewish settlers in the West Bank, and over 200,000 in East Jerusalem, and these settlements are illegal, according to international law, but Israel counters by saying that they aren't really illegal because Palestine isn't really a state.

By the late 1980s, Palestinians launched the first intifada, which literally means "shaking off." And this began with, like, boycotts of Israeli products and services and refusing to pay Israeli taxes, but when the Israeli armed forces cracked down on protesters, violence ensued. And the first intifada also saw the founding of Hamas, which launched the first suicide bombing against Israel in 1993. Hamas gained support partly because of its militancy, but mostly because of its social welfare projects in Gaza. It built and staffed schools, mosques, and clinics.

The most important legacy of the First Intifada was the emergence of peace talks between Palestinians and Israelis. This led to the Oslo Accords, and the peace process, based on our old friend, United Nations Security Council Resolution 242. But there were a lot of issues to resolve - I mean, putting aside the question of, like, how to make two states that don't look like a jigsaw puzzle, there was the question of the Jewish settlement, and the right for Palestinian refugees and their descendants to return to Palestine. Water rights, which are a big deal in that part of the world, and so on. It's very complicated!

=====An Open Letter to Bill Clinton (8:45)=====

So then came the Clinton talks. Oh, it's time for the Open Letter!

But first, let's see what's inside of the globe. Oh, look! It's a collection of philandering American presidents. An Open Letter to Bill Clinton:

Hey, Bill, so your talks probably came closer than any other time in recent history to an actual peace deal between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak was willing to give up more land currently claimed by Israel than at any other time in the past; even Yasser Arafat was surprised.

Although not all the questions got addressed, you were definitely closing in on something. But in the end, it didn't happen, and since then, not to criticize you, things have gotten kind of worse and worse and worse. Worst of all, that was your big legacy moment. Now all you've got is the conflict in Northern Ireland getting resolved while you were president.

In short, it could have been amazing, but instead it was kind of... meh. Kind of like your presidency, actually! At least you always have those vodkas-soaked hugs with Boris Yeltsin to look back on.

Best Wishes,
John Green.

=====21st-Century Developments (9:40)=====
So the Clinton talks failed; Ehud Barak's government was undermined, and then, in September of 2000, Prime Minister candidate Ariel Sharon led a group of 1,000 armed guards to the Temple Mount in the Old City of Jerusalem. To Muslims, this is known as the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and it's the third-holiest site in Islam, behind only the Kaaba in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. And it's the holiest site in Judaism, so in short, it's a pretty touchy place to march to with a thousand armed guards.

So the events sparked a massive protest, which eventually led to the much more violent Second Intifada, in which more than three thousand Palestinians and one thousand Israelis were eventually killed. In 2002, the Israelis, claiming to act in defense of civilians, began construction of a wall around the West Bank, but instead of following the borders established after the 1967 War, the barrier was built to include many Israeli settlements on the Israeli side. To Israelis, that was about self-defense; to Palestinians, it was an illegal land grab.

Then, in 2005, Yasser Arafat died, and in an election shortly thereafter, Hamas won a majority of the parliamentary seats. Since then, Hamas and the Palestinian Authority have sort of divided how to govern Palestine, and it's also sort of been poorly governed.

In the past ten years, Hamas has frequently launched rocket attacks into Israel; Israel has responded with extended and extremely violent invasions of Palestinian territory that have seen thousands of Palestinians killed, many of them militants but also many not.

Both parties claim to be responding to the provocations of the other, but much of the conflict reflects the consistent failure on all sides to understand the legitimacy of the other's narrative. To Palestine, the Palestinian people have been denied a state not just since the formation of Israel, but also for decades before that, and now they live under what amounts to a military occupation. And that's all true.

To Israel, the Jewish people clearly need a homeland, which the United Nations established. And they certainly aren't the first nation-state to consolidate and increase their territory via military victory. And they need to protect their nation against the many active threats made against them by their neighbors. That's also true!

It's important to understand the internal logic of these competing

nationalist visions. For both Zionists and Palestinian national visions to eventually work, it's necessary to understand the right of each to exist and the legitimacy of each's historical narrative. But these problems aren't thousands of years old, and they aren't intractable. They emerged in the British Mandatory Period. But let's hope that by understanding this isn't an endless religious war, that we might be closer to seeing its end.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

=====Credits (12:10)=====

Crash Course is filmed here in the Chad and Stacy Emigholz studio in Indianapolis, and it's made possible by our subscribers on Subbable, so thanks to you all. By the way, if you want to learn more about Israel and Palestine, our friends at Thought Café have made a series of videos; you can also find a link to them in the video info below. Thanks again to all our Subbable subscribers; thanks to the educators who share these videos with their students and to the students who share them with their teachers. As we say in my hometown, don't forget to be awesome.