



The **ARAB-ISRAELI** Conflict

A Timeless Struggle

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Contents

Abbreviations	vi	4 World War I and the Conflict in Palestine	47
1 Introduction	1	World War I and the end of the Ottoman Empire:	
The study of peace and conflict	3	British plans for the postwar Middle East	48
Conflict in the modern Middle East	5	The Balfour Declaration	54
The Arab-Israeli conflict: The role of history and narrative	7	Responses to the Balfour Declaration	56
Review and research questions	9	Postwar events: Palestine becomes a British Mandate	57
		A distinctive Palestinian Arab nationalism begins to emerge	62
		Summary	64
		Review and research questions	65
PART 1 The Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1880s-1947	12	5 Palestine under British Mandatory Rule 1922 to 1947	67
2 Setting the Scene	13	British Mandatory rule 1922 to 1939	67
Israel/Palestine: Land, peoples and religions	14	Institution building within the Arab community	72
Summary	24	Institution building within the Jewish community	73
Review and research questions	25	The 1929 riots	73
3 The Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict	26	The Arab Higher Committee and the Arab Revolt 1936 to 1939	75
The origins and aspirations of Zionism	28	British Mandatory rule 1939 to 1945	77
Early Zionist activity	30	The Final Solution: The Nazis' attempt to eradicate Europe's Jews	79
Palestine in the 19th century	35	British Mandatory rule 1945 to November 1947	83
Early Zionist immigration to Palestine	37	United Nations Resolution 181	85
Early Arab opposition to Zionism	40	Summary	88
The rise of pan-Arab nationalism	43	Review and research questions	89
Summary	45		
Review and research questions	46		

PART 2 The Arab-Israeli Conflict 1947-1999

6 The First Arab-Israeli War 1947 to 1949 91

The final phase of the Palestine Mandate:	
The 'unofficial war' begins	93
Arab political goals and military strategy	93
The Yishuv's political goals and military strategy	97
The State of Israel is proclaimed and the First Arab-Israeli War begins	100
The competition for Arab Palestine: King Abdullah versus Hajj Amin al-Husseini and the All-Palestine Government	104
The end of the war and the 1949 armistice agreements	106
Consequences of the First Arab-Israeli War	107
The Palestinian refugees	110
The Jewish refugees	113
Summary	114
Review and research questions	115

7 Arab-Israeli Wars 1950 to 1970 116

Underlying dynamics of the conflict 1949-1956:	
The regional context	116
Underlying dynamics of the conflict 1949-1956:	
The international context	120
The convergence of regional and international politics	121
The 1956 Suez War	121
Results of the 1956 Suez War	123
The 1967 War	124
Countdown to war	125
The course of the war	127
Immediate consequences of the 1967 War	128
Further consequences of the 1967 War	132
The War of Attrition 1969-70	133
Summary	134
Review and research questions	135

8 From Hot War to Cold Peace 1973 to 1979 136

The October 1973 ('Ramadan' or 'Yom Kippur') War	137
The course of the war	138
The impact and consequences of the 1973 War	142
The road to peace	142
Biography of Golda Meir	144
The Egyptian-Israeli peace process	147
Likud policy concerning the occupied territories	151
The Arab response to the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty	153
Summary	155
Review and research questions	156

9 The PLO, the Arab States and Israel 1967 to 1987 157

The revival of Palestinian nationalism	158
The impact of the 1967 War on Palestinian nationalism and the PLO: A change in aims and methods	160
Civil war in Jordan	163
Terrorism as a PLO tactic	168
A shift in PLO strategy	170
The PLO in Lebanon	171
Israel's invasions of Lebanon	173
Impact of the 1982 invasion of Lebanon on Israelis and Palestinians	176
Israel and Jordan pursue peace: The 1987 'London Agreement'	178
Summary	178
Review and research questions	179

10 The First Palestinian Intifada and the Madrid Peace Process 1987 to 1992	180	12 Epilogue: Into the 21st Century	227
Factors leading to the first Palestinian intifada	181	The July 2000 Camp David talks and their aftermath	229
The outbreak of the first intifada December 1987	185	The end of the peace process	232
Key features of the first Palestinian intifada	187	Conclusion	235
King Hussein relinquishes Jordan's claim to the West Bank	193	Biography of Yasser Arafat	236
The impact of the first Palestinian intifada	193	Review and research questions	261
The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War: Impact and effects on the Arab-Israeli conflict	194	Glossary	262
The 1990-1991 Gulf War	195	References	265
The impact of the 1990-91 Gulf War on the Arab-Israeli conflict	197	Further Reading	268
The Madrid Peace Conference and historic negotiations	198	Index	271
Summary	200		
Review and research questions	201		
11 The Peace Process 1993-1999	202		
Labor-led coalition returns to government in Israel	203		
Secret talks in Norway	204		
The Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Agreements (DOP/Oslo Accords)	204		
The peace process unfolds	207		
The Israel-Syria Track	208		
The Jordan-Israel Peace Treaty 26 October 1994	208		
Israeli and Palestinian responses to the peace process	210		
The first Palestinian national elections 20 January 1996	215		
Conflict in southern Lebanon: Operation 'Grapes of Wrath'	216		
1996 Israeli elections	216		
The peace process under Arafat and Netanyahu 1996-1999	217		
Peace talks resume	217		
US initiatives to revive the peace process May 1997 to October 1998	219		
Summary	220		
Review and research questions	223		



Abbreviations

AH	After the Hijra	PLF	Palestine Liberation Front
ALA	Arab Liberation Army	PLO	Palestine Liberation Organisation
ALF	Arab Liberation Front	PNC	Palestine National Council
APG	All Palestine Government	SLA	South Lebanese Army
BCE	Before the Common Era	UN	United Nations
CE	Common Era	UNEF	United Nations Emergency Force
DP	Displaced Person/s	UNIFIL	United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon
DOP	Oslo Declaration of Principles	UNLU	Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (al-Qiyada al-Wataniyya al-Muwahhida li'l-Intifada)
IJ	Islamic Jihad	UNSCOP	United Nations Special Committee on Palestine
IDF	Israel Defence Forces	UNWRA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine
PA	Palestinian National Authority	US	United States of America
DFLP	The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine	USSR	Union of Socialist Soviet Republics
PFLP	The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine	WZO	World Zionist Organisation
PFLP-GC	The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command		
PLA	Palestinian Liberation Army		



1 Introduction

The Arab-Israeli conflict is more than just a dispute over boundaries. It involves identity, aspirations, legitimacy, and history.

From ancient times to the present day, there has been a seemingly timeless struggle for control of the small strip of land located between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea and in the Negev Desert to the south. The most recent chapter in this history is the Arab-Israeli conflict. At the heart of this conflict lie the competing claims of two peoples, Israelis and Palestinians, over the land that Palestinians call *Filastin* (Palestine) and Israelis call *Yisra'el* (Israel). Their political rivalry has continued unabated since the early 1880s.

Since 1948, the local conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has been exacerbated by a regional conflict between the State of Israel and its neighbouring Arab states. This interstate conflict has led to six major wars: the 1947-9 War that was fought over the establishment of Israel; the Suez War of 1956; the Six-Day War of 1967; the Israel-Egypt War of Attrition of 1969-70; the October War of 1973; and Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Between these major outbreaks, the conflict between Israel and the Arab states has also been played out in the diplomatic and economic arenas and in continual low-level violence through border clashes and

armed incursions. To date, two Arab states have signed peace treaties with Israel: Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994. However, tensions remain high due to the unresolved conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

The aim of *A Timeless Struggle* is to examine the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict at these two principal levels: the local and the regional. A third level of analysis will focus on the role of international powers in the modern Middle East generally and on the Arab-Israeli conflict in particular. Key features, issues, individuals, groups, and events will be described and analysed, as will key forces and ideas that have contributed to change and continuity in the history of the conflict and in attempts to resolve it. More detailed personality studies of Golda Meir and Yasser Arafat are provided. Issues concerning historiography are also considered. Questions at the end of each chapter provide further opportunity to analyse and synthesise information from different types of sources, and to develop the skills of oral and written communication.

The purpose of this present chapter is to provide an introduction to the study of peace and conflict, and to the issues that have caused conflict in the modern Middle East generally, and between Arabs and Israelis in particular. The chapter will also highlight the importance of understanding the historical roots of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the light of the role that history plays in the contemporary narratives of each side.

Israel/Palestine: Land and people

Following World War I, the Arab lands that had been a part of the Ottoman Empire were divided by the League of Nations into 'Mandates', newly created territorial units placed under the administrative rule of Britain and France. Britain was given a Mandate over the territory of Palestine where there lived an Arab majority and a Jewish minority. Under the terms of the Mandate, Britain was required 'to establish a Jewish national home in Palestine', while respecting 'the civil and religious rights' of the Arab population. The Arabs rejected the Mandate as an injustice and a betrayal, and during the decades of British rule over Palestine, conflict between the Arabs and the Jews intensified. In 1947, the British Government turned the problem over to the newly established United Nations (UN). In November of that year, the UN General Assembly voted to partition the territory into two separate states, an Arab state and a Jewish state. For reasons detailed in Chapters 5 and 6, the Jewish State of Israel was established while the Arab State of Palestine was not. Today, the Palestinian Arabs remain a stateless people, the majority of whom live in the territories of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

Israelis: Facts at a glance

At the end of 2005, Israel's population was 6.95 million. 76% of the population was Jewish (5.3 million), 20% Arab (1.4 million), and 4% 'others' (250 000). The Jewish population includes about 238 000 settlers living in the West Bank (Israel Bureau of Statistics).

Palestinians: Facts at a glance

At the end of 2005, the Palestinian population in the Palestinian territories was estimated to be 3.8 million: 1.45 million in the Gaza Strip and 2.35 million in the occupied West Bank (Palestine Bureau of Statistics).

The land that forms the focus of the Arab-Israeli conflict can be divided into four geographic regions:

- the Coastal Plain
- the Central Hills
- the Rift (or Jordan) Valley
- the Negev Desert.

The area of Israel is 20 770 sq km. The area of the Palestinian territories is 6220 sq km: the West Bank is 5860 sq km while the Gaza Strip is 360 sq km.



Figure 1.1 Aerial photograph of the land of Israel/Palestine.

The study of peace and conflict

What is **peace**? Peace means different things in different contexts. Peace at home might mean quiet and tranquillity. Peace within a country might mean freedom from civil disorder. International peace, or peace within a particular geographical region, might mean freedom from, or the cessation of, war. In each case, peace would appear to be the opposite of conflict. Not surprisingly, therefore, the study of peace often includes the study of how conflict is resolved.

What, then, is **conflict**? Conflict occurs when there is antagonism between two or more parties producing mutual hostility. It may be expressed in a variety of non-violent ways or through violence which in the worst cases can take the form of all-out war between states.

The Irish academic John Darby has argued that ‘conflict is neither good nor bad, but intrinsic in every social relationship from marriage to international diplomacy. Whenever two or more people are gathered, there is conflict or potential conflict’.¹ This is because social life involves groups with different norms, values, attitudes, interests and levels of power. Various groups struggle for power and resources and this can generate opposition, exclusion and hostility from other groups. Darby goes on to argue that if conflict is an inevitable part of society, the real issue is not the existence of conflict, ‘but how it is handled’. In cases where conflict resolution is not possible in the short or medium term, what is important is how the conflict is managed.

In the international context, the idea of **conflict management** emphasises, first and foremost, the need to bring about a reduction in violence, particularly its worst manifestations. Once the positive effects of successful conflict management have taken root, and there has been a significant reduction in violence over a sustained period of time, prospects for the parties to resolve the conflict through negotiations are greatly improved.

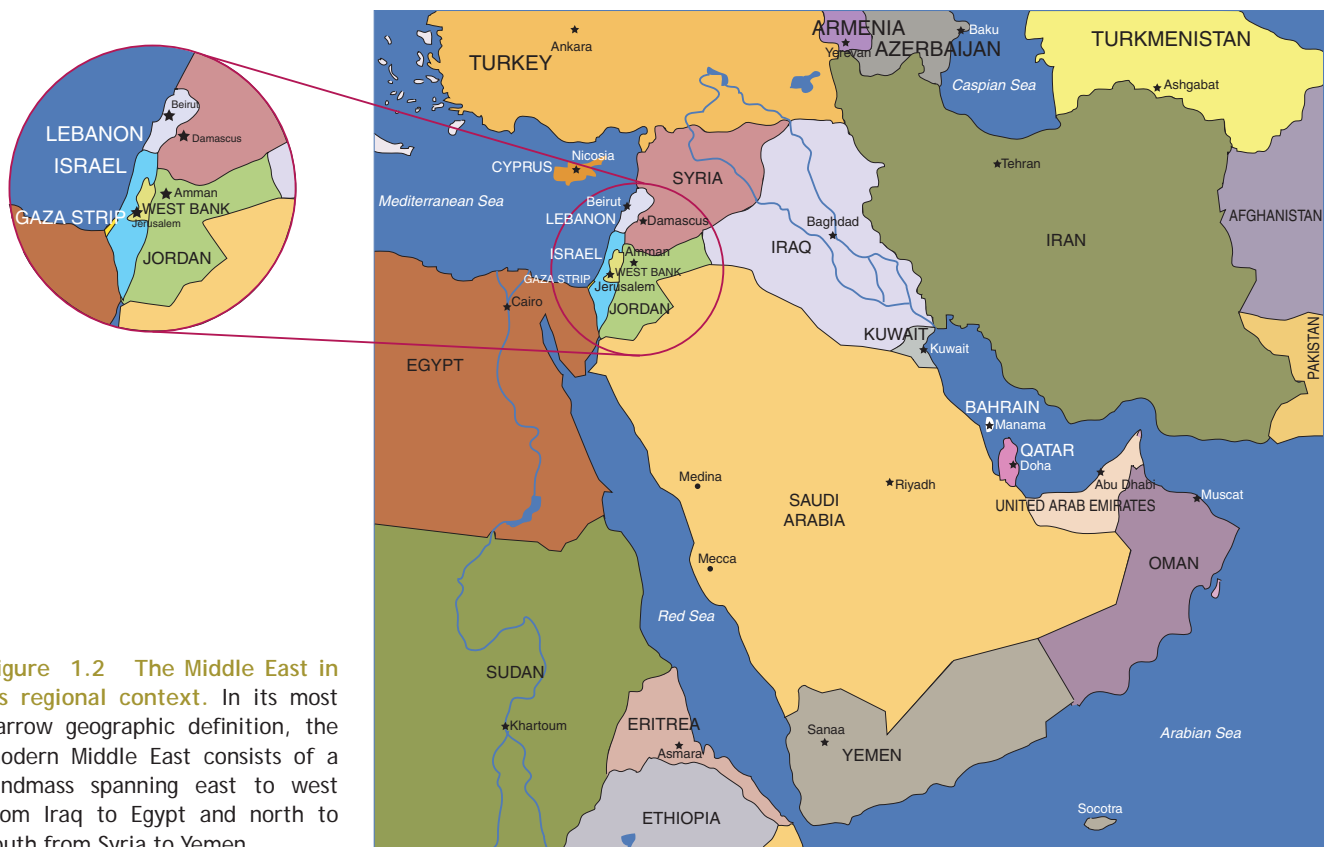


Figure 1.2 The Middle East in its regional context. In its most narrow geographic definition, the modern Middle East consists of a landmass spanning east to west from Iraq to Egypt and north to south from Syria to Yemen.

Conflict resolution means, in essence, an end to all hostilities between the parties. Often this will require a compromise on the underlying issues and a mutual relinquishment of the right to make further demands against each other – hence the formula: ‘End of Claims, End of Conflict’. This means that each side, having agreed to a once-and-for-all-compromise to settle the issues driving the conflict, will have no outstanding claims against the other beyond the terms of settlement. Usually, neither party will regard the compromise as ideal, but rather one that they can each live with. They see the compromise as preferable to continuing the conflict. The resulting ‘peace’ may not necessarily produce warm and friendly relations between the former antagonists. It may mean nothing more than a mutual, legally binding commitment to ‘live and let live’.

The ‘Middle East’: Origin of the term

The term ‘Middle East’ came into prominence in 1902 when it was used by an American naval historian, Admiral Mahan, to describe a region around the Persian (Arabian) Gulf that, as seen from Europe, was neither ‘Near East’ nor ‘Far East’. However, it was during World War II that the ‘Middle East’ became a familiar term in Europe and the United States. Allied headquarters in Cairo became known as ‘H.Q. Middle East’. It was responsible for large parts of northern and eastern Africa, Turkey, and the region east of the Suez Canal up to and including Iran. Following the war, the ‘Middle East’ became the preferred term for the region. The term ‘Near East’ still survives, but usually only in American or French usage. In more recent times, the less-Eurocentric term ‘West Asia’ has been used.



Figure I.3 1990-91 Gulf War. A damaged Iraqi tank sits abandoned in the Kuwaiti desert at the end of the 1990-91 Gulf War. In the distance Kuwaiti oil wells burn, ignited by Iraq’s retreating forces.

Conflict in the modern Middle East



Figure 1.4 The Middle East in its global context.

There has been conflict in the Middle East from time immemorial. The causes have been numerous. So, too, have the forms that the conflicts have assumed, ranging from purely verbal ‘slanging matches’ to full-scale military combat. The players in these conflicts have also varied through the ages, although in some cases, contemporary conflicts in the Middle East are the result of age-old disputes that have simply been given a modern appearance.

In the modern history of the region, wars have been fought over issues such as natural resources (oil and water), territory and borders, navigation rights through waterways, nationalism, and religion. The first Gulf War, which was between Iraq and Iran (1980-88), involved most of these factors, and cost more than a million lives. It was followed by the second major war in the Gulf (1990-91) which began as a dispute between Iraq and Kuwait over natural resources and territory.

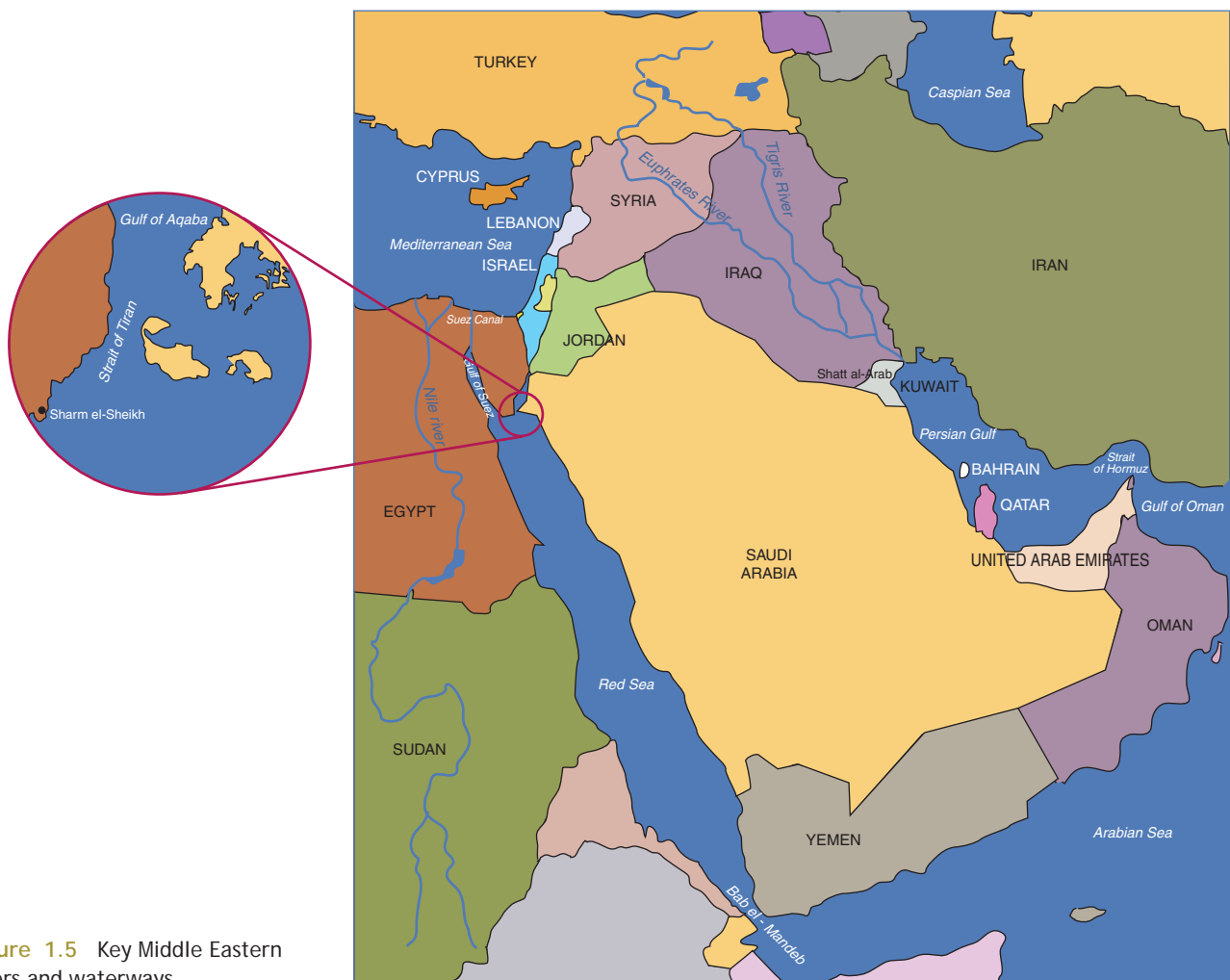


Figure 1.5 Key Middle Eastern rivers and waterways.



It is not surprising that territorial disputes have been a major cause of conflict in the modern Middle East. Most of the countries in the region have only emerged as independent states with defined territories since the end of World War II. In some cases, border disputes between the new states resulted in armed conflict. The border between Saudi Arabia and Yemen, for example, was not agreed upon until 2000, at the end of 65 years of sporadic conflict. In this context, it is important to remember how many wars were fought between European states for the possession of territory, and how many lives were lost in those wars. The European order that came into being with the unification of Germany in 1871 was, as historian Michael Howard puts it, 'like all its predecessors, created by war.'

Territorial disputes that remain unresolved in the Middle East today include the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; the Israeli-Syrian conflict; the dispute between Iran and United Arab Emirates over Abu Musa Island and the Lesser and Greater Tanb Islands; and the disputed border between Iran and Iraq at the mouth of the *Shatt al-Arab* in the Persian Gulf.

The Middle East is one of the most arid regions in the world. In some parts of the region, the demand for water is approaching or surpassing annual supply. It is not surprising, therefore, that conflict has arisen when states need to share water resources from rivers and underground aquifers. Turkey's attempts to control the headwaters of the Euphrates River, for example, has led to conflict with Syria. Sharing the waters of the Jordan River has also been the source of conflict between Israel, Jordan and Syria, and is central to the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

Disputes over the right of free passage through waterways have also, on occasion, led to disputes between states and even to full-scale war. The eight-year war between Iran and Iraq began as a dispute over the use of the *Shatt al-Arab* waterway. The Egyptian blockade of the Straits of Tiran against ships travelling to or from Israel precipitated the 1967 Arab-Israeli War.

Competing ideologies and religions have been a further cause of conflict in the Middle East, both in ancient and modern times. In the modern period, ideologies of European origin, including nationalism and socialism, were introduced to the region with the arrival of western imperialism in the late 18th century. These concepts had a profound impact upon traditional Arab and Muslim society as centuries-old institutions, values and perceptions were undermined by the clash between tradition and modernity, religion and secularism. This friction remains a key feature of the contemporary politics and society of the modern Middle East.

Although conflict is a permanent part of the human condition, it is also important to appreciate that particular conflicts have their own distinctive character. Conflicts in the Middle East are especially complex because of the mixture of historical, religious and political components. All three factors are present in the Arab-Israeli conflict as is evident in the narratives that attempt to explain it, and in attempts to resolve it. The study of the history of this conflict is therefore essential to understanding its causes as well as the prospects for peace in the future.