

SPOTLIGHT

The ARAB-ISRAELI Conflict

Struggle

A Timeless Struggle

A Timeless

REVISED EDITION

Leanne Piggott



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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		



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.

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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 this book 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 focuses 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 are described and analysed, as well as key forces and ideas that have contributed to change and continuity in the history of the conflict and in attempts to resolve it. Issues concerning historiography are also considered. Questions at the end of each chapter are provided for review and research, and to develop oral and written communication skills.

The purpose of this 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 also highlights 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 whose population consisted of 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 2020, Israel’s population was 9.25 million. 74% of the population was Jewish (6.85 million), 21% Arab (1.95 million), and 5% ‘others’ (460 000). The Jewish population includes about 400 000 settlers living in the West Bank (Israel Bureau of Statistics).

Palestinians: Facts at a glance

At the end of 2020, the Palestinian population in the Palestinian territories was estimated to be 5 million: 2 million in the Gaza Strip and 3 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 22 145 square kilometres. The area of the Palestinian territories is 6013 square kilometres: the West Bank is 5650 square kilometres while the Gaza Strip is 363 square kilometres.



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 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 went 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.

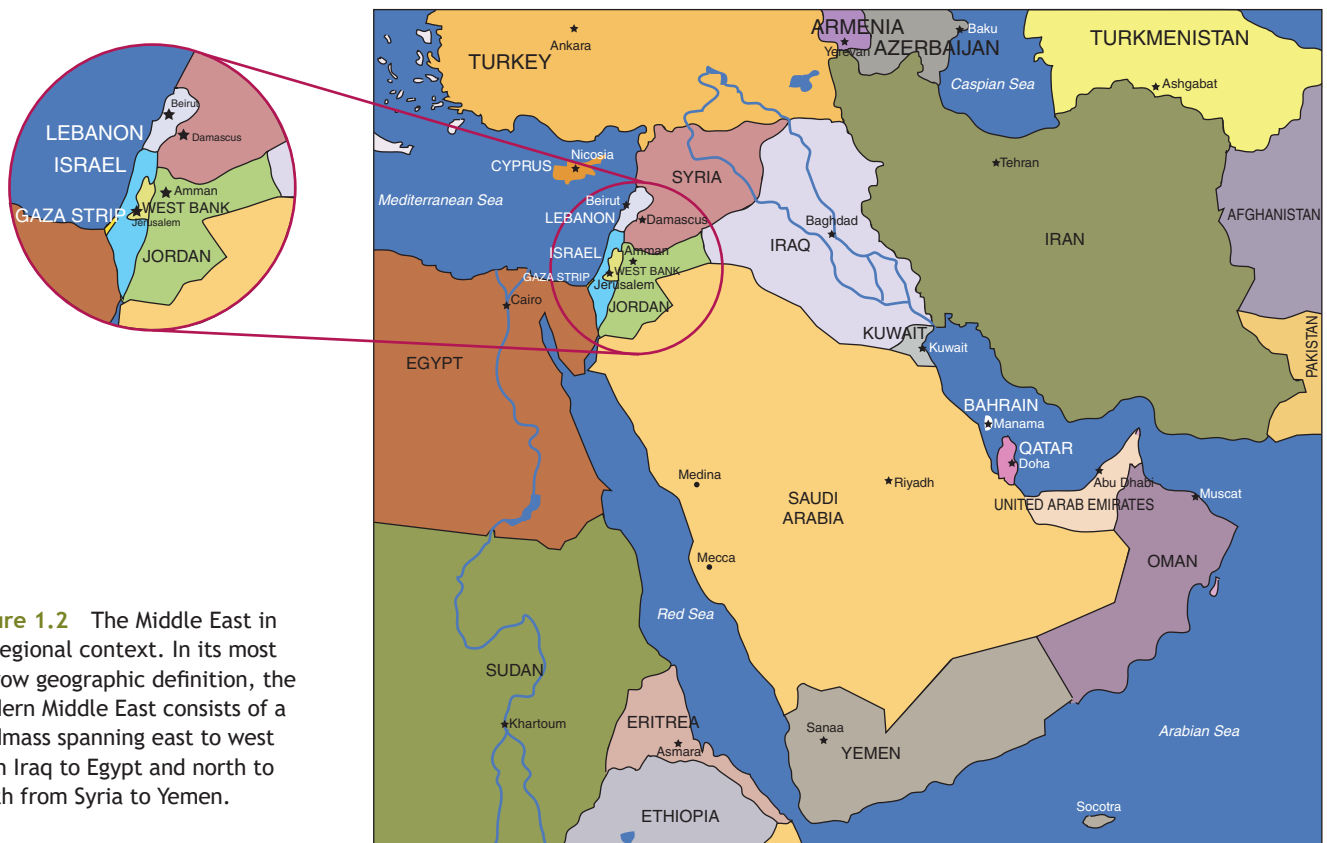


Figure 1.2 The Middle East in its regional context. In its most narrow geographic definition, the modern Middle East consists of a landmass spanning east to west from Iraq to Egypt and north to south from Syria to Yemen.



Setting the Scene

By the end of this chapter you will be familiar with the:

- central players in the Arab-Israeli conflict at the local and regional levels
- key historical and religious events as understood by individuals and groups involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict
- historical origin of the names *Filastin* (Palestine) and *Yisra'el* (Israel).

Although most historians date the origins of the Arab-Israeli conflict to the rise of Jewish and Arab nationalisms in the second half of the 19th century, some look for more ancient roots. One reason is to help explain why it was that during the 20th century, the Jewish people sought to establish a sovereign state in Palestine, a land where they were the minority and the Arabs were a majority, at a time when the majority of Jews lived in other parts of the world. Whilst the intensity of the historical and religious connection felt by the Jewish people to the land of Israel is seldom understood by other people, without it, the tenacity with which the Jews struggled to establish their state can not be fully explained. Similarly, the depth of Arab opposition to Jewish aspirations in Palestine cannot be understood without an appreciation of why Arabs regard this land as an integral part of a wider domain of Arab (and Islamic) sovereignty.

Although the Arab-Israeli conflict is not solely or even principally about religion, religious feelings help to explain why some Jews and Arabs see the conflict as the continuation of a struggle that dates back to ancient times. Some religious Jews, for example, trace the origins of the conflict to the biblical story concerning Abraham over 3000 years ago and the rival claims of his two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, to be his legitimate heir. Ishmael and Isaac are identified as the patriarchs of the Arab and Jewish peoples respectively. Some Muslims view the contemporary conflict as the most recent chapter in an ongoing dispute between Jews and Muslims that began around 1300 years ago, as recorded in the Muslim holy book, the Koran.

In view of the role that history and religion play in the claims and counterclaims of both sides, the purpose of this chapter is to 'set the scene' by introducing the key peoples, their beliefs and some of the historical events that continue to inform their contemporary narratives. As will become evident, struggles for control of the land have been a feature of the region for millennia.



4

World War I and the Conflict In Palestine

By the end of this chapter you will be familiar with the:

- British domestic and imperial interest in Palestine before, during and after World War I
- key documents concerning Britain's wartime commitments regarding Palestine including the Sykes-Picot Agreement, McMahon-Hussein correspondence and the Balfour Declaration
- conflicting Arab and Jewish responses to the Balfour Declaration
- origins of Palestinian nationalism
- establishment of the Palestine mandate and initial Arab and Jewish responses.

By the end of the 19th century, the last of the great Muslim imperial powers, the Ottoman caliphate, was financially bankrupt and on the verge of political collapse. Corruption and economic decay over preceding centuries had left the Ottoman Empire unable to compete with the newly industrialised imperial powers of Europe – Austria-Hungary, Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Russia. By the mid 19th century, the 'Sick Man' of Europe, as the Ottoman Empire was known, became the focus of attention of European powers vying to fill the power vacuum left by its decline.

When the Ottoman Empire entered World War I on Germany's side, its fate was sealed. Following its defeat, the Ottoman Empire was dissolved and much of its former territory was lost. The Arab lands came within the responsibility of the newly established international body, the League of Nations, which, at the instigation of Britain and France, redrew the map of the Middle East.

New borders were drawn creating Palestine (and later Transjordan), Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. The league granted Britain mandates (legal authority) to administer Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq. France was granted mandates over Lebanon and Syria.

The mandate of Palestine specifically incorporated the terms of Britain's wartime promise to the Zionist movement, set out in the 1917 Balfour Declaration. This required Britain to facilitate the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in the same territory in which the Arab population was also to gain self-rule, a policy which the Arabs rejected outright and viewed as a betrayal of Britain's wartime promises to the Arabs.



Figure 4.1 The decline of the Ottoman Empire over the 19th century and the expansion of the European powers into the Middle East.



5

Palestine Under British Mandatory Rule 1922 To 1947

By the end of this chapter you will be familiar with the:

- development of the conflict during the period of the British mandate
- impact of the Holocaust on the conflict in Palestine
- Arab and Jewish responses to the question of Jewish statehood in Palestine following World War II
- concept of terrorism
- implications of United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181 to partition Palestine.

From the commencement of its mandate, Britain had to govern two peoples with irreconcilable nationalist aspirations in the same land. The Arab and Jewish communities in Palestine had different views about virtually every aspect of religious, economic, social and political life. It took until April 1947 for the British government to admit failure and hand the 'Palestine Question' to the international community.

The conflict in Palestine during Britain's mandatory rule falls into three phases: from the mandate's ratification in 1922 until publication of the British white paper in 1939, marking a significant change in British policy towards Jewish aspirations in Palestine; World War II including the Holocaust, which impacted significantly on Jewish efforts to establish a state in Palestine; and from 1945 to 29 November 1947, when the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 181 to partition Palestine. These events provide the framework of analysis for this chapter.

British mandatory rule 1922 to 1939

The first 17 years of the mandate saw significant changes in both Arab and Jewish communities. As both grew in number, they invested their energies in developing strategies and institutions which they believed would help realise their aspirations for statehood.

Population growth during the mandate period

In 1900, Palestine's population was just over half a million. By 1948, it was 1.8 million. The transformation was not merely in its size but also in its composition. In 1900, 80 per cent of the population were Muslim Arabs; about 10 per cent Christian Arabs; and another 10 per cent Jewish.

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A photograph of two men in suits shaking hands, with a blue overlay at the bottom.

REVIEW AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Review the events that led to the signing of the Declaration of Principles in September 1993. How would you account for the success of this process?
2. Compare and contrast the policies of the Israeli Labor and Likud parties in regard to the Palestinians and the occupied territories between 1967 and 2000. Account for the similarities and differences. What impact did these policies have on the peace process?
3. Compare and contrast the policies of the PLO and Hamas in regard to Israel and the peace process between 1988 and 2000. Account for the similarities and differences. What impact did these policies have on the peace process?
4. Evaluate the events that led to the signing of the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty in 1994. Do you think that the timing of this event was important? Give reasons for your answer.
5. Investigate the negotiations between Israel and Syria from 1991 to 2000. Analyse the demands made by each side. How do these reflect the different perspectives on 'peace' held by the two countries' leadership?
6. What impact did Yitzhak Rabin's assassination have on the peace process?
7. Evaluate the successes and setbacks of the peace process from 1991 to 1996.
8. How do you explain the fluctuations in attitudes of Israelis and Palestinians towards the peace process from 1991 to 1996?
9. Account for and assess the different perspectives and interpretations of the conflict among and between Israelis and Palestinians.
10. Research the personal background of Benjamin Netanyahu. What were his values and attitudes influencing his relations with the Palestinians and wider Arab world?
11. In the Preamble to the 'Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip' (Oslo II), signed in Washington on 28 September 1995, it is recorded:

The Government of the State of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation, the representative of the Palestinian people; ... [Recognise] that the peace process and the new era that it created, as well as the new relationship established between the two Parties above, are irreversible, and the determination of the two Parties to maintain, sustain and continue the peace process ...

In the light of this claim, assess the impact that Arafat and Netanyahu (and his coalition government) had on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process from 1996 to 2000.
12. Assess the role that the US played in the peace process from 1993 to 2000.
13. Investigate the personal accounts of Israelis and Palestinians who were involved in the peace process from 1991 to 2000. In the light of these accounts, assess the following quote from Dennis Ross, chief US negotiator during the 1991 to 2000 Arab-Israeli peace process:

Over time, the negotiations that emerged from the Madrid and Oslo processes were very detailed on all issues. But the points of departure were very different. The Arabs and Palestinians always sought acceptance of their principles while the Israelis always sought recognition of the practicalities. The gaps on the issues bore not just disagreements but very different attitudes about the negotiations, their purpose, and the tactics that should be employed.³
14. Evaluate the impact that terrorism had on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process from 1993 to 2000.
15. Evaluate efforts to resolve the Israeli-Syrian conflict from 1999 to 2000.

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12

The 21st Century

By the end of this chapter you will be familiar with the:

- the second Palestinian intifada and Israel's response
- Israel's unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip
- the Fatah-Hamas conflict
- the 2006 Israel-Lebanon War
- the 2008-9 Gaza War (Operation Cast Lead)
- the 2010 'Freedom Flotilla' incident
- US-brokered Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations
- an overview of social and political upheaval in the wider Middle East and its impact on the Arab-Israeli conflict
- normalisation of relations between Israel and Arab states.

The end of the peace process

The al-Aqsa intifada continues

Throughout 2001 and 2002, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the PFLP, and Fatah's al-Aqsa Brigades (established at the beginning of the intifada) continued terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians. Their operatives blew themselves up on Israeli buses and in cafes, restaurants and shopping malls. The IDF responded by raiding Palestinian self-rule areas, demolishing property of those involved in the bombings, and sealing off land and sea access to the Palestinian territories. Helicopter gunships were used to assassinate militant leaders, at times resulting in civilian deaths.

Through a series of efforts, notably the 'Mitchell Plan', 'Zinni Plan' and 'Tenet Plan', America tried unsuccessfully to bring the Israelis and Palestinians back to negotiations. Saudi's Crown Prince (later King) Abdullah also proposed a peace initiative which he presented to the 2002 Arab League Summit in Beirut. It was adopted, with some modifications, on 28 March 2002. The initiative proposed security for Israel and normalisation of its relations with Arab states in exchange for its withdrawal from all territories occupied since 1967, creation of an independent Palestinian state with *al-Quds al-Sharif* (East Jerusalem) as its capital, and the right of Palestinian refugees (and their descendants) to return to Israel.

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The Two Yasser Arafats

Leanne Piggott on why the Palestinian leader could not deliver statehood for his people



To Palestinians, Yasser Arafat was 'Mr Palestine', a historical figure who embodied the Palestinian nationalist movement. It was only under his leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organisation that the plight of the Palestinians and their quest for statehood first made an impact on Western public opinion.

Their enduring memory will be of a benign, grandfatherly figure blowing kisses to his people.

Yet for all those who admire Arafat, there are many who revile him. Israelis, Christian Maronites and others who were his victims will remember above all the furtive mendacity of the man who preached peace while his hands dripped with blood.

There have been two main phases in Arafat's career as the Palestinians' recognised leader. The first phase began in 1969, when Arafat assumed the leadership of the PLO.

He tirelessly promoted the Palestinian cause and became a perennial focus of media interest.

Through spectacular acts of terrorism – including the hijacking of aircraft, the massacre of 11 Israeli Olympic athletes at Munich in 1972 and the targeted killing of Israeli school children and other civilians at Ma'alot and Kiryat Shmona in the mid 1970s – Arafat ensured that the Palestinian cause regularly made the headlines.

Under his leadership, the PLO was granted observer status at the UN. It is a mark of Arafat's success that the General Assembly has passed more resolutions against Israel than any other member state. Other stateless nations, such as the Kurds and Tibetans, greatly outnumber the Palestinians. But they have resorted to terrorist tactics less frequently and spectacularly than the Palestinians, and have been far less successful in attracting international financial and political support and media coverage.

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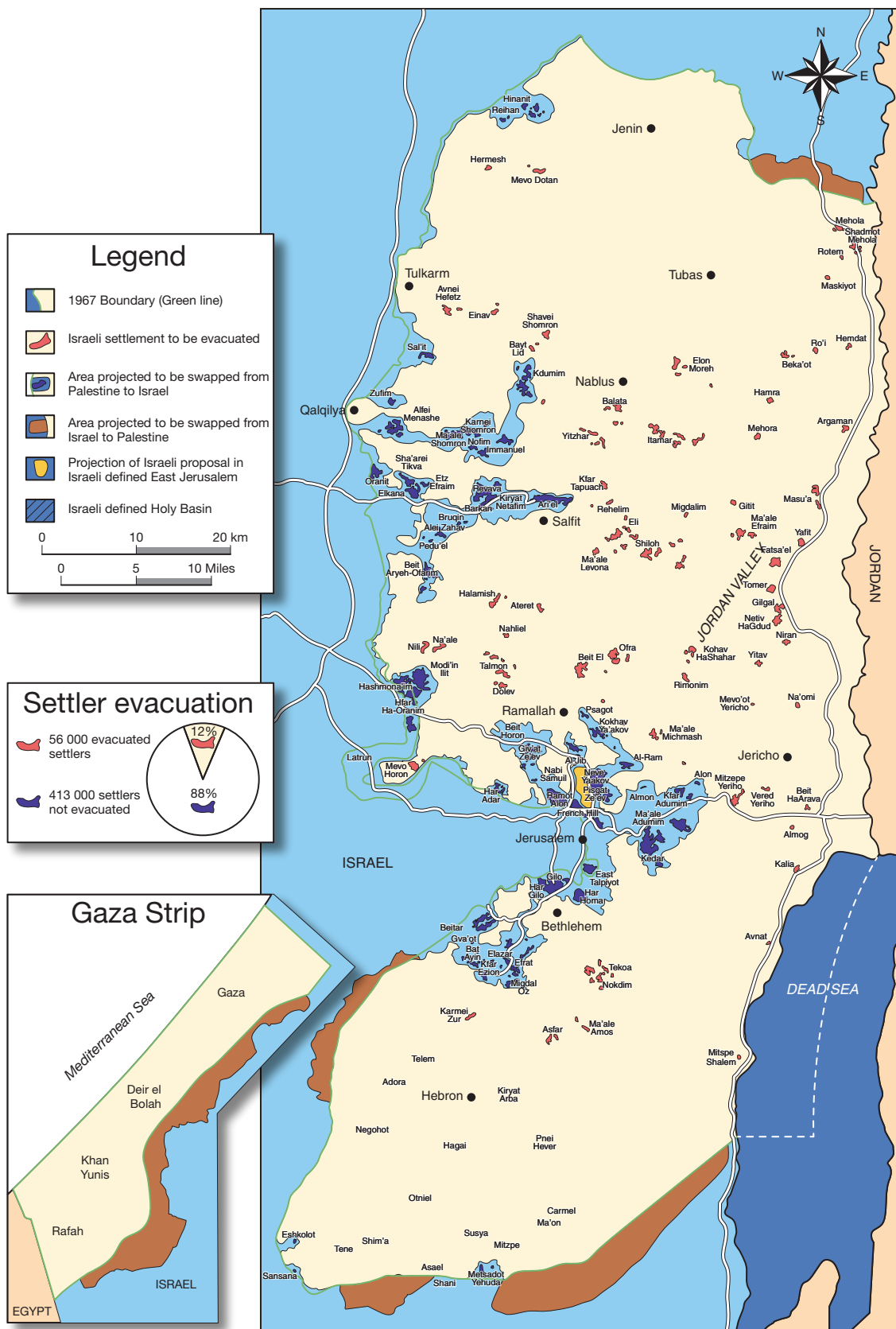


Figure 12.6 Map of the territory included in Olmert's peace proposal to Abbas.

On 1 January 2009, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1860 that accused Israel of having used 'disproportionate' force in defending itself (UN Security Council resolution 1860, 1 January 2009). In response, the Israeli government argued that heavy Palestinian losses in lives and property resulted from Hamas's use of its own civilian population and civilian buildings to provide cover for its operations. Israel produced evidence that Hamas used doctors, nurses and patients in hospitals for cover, and that they had stored weapons in mosques, tunnels, in the homes of activists, and in citrus groves. The Israelis also located rocket-launchers or look-outs on rooftops of tall buildings that were hit by Israeli bombs, including a UN building, and showed Hamas's Al-Aqsa TV broadcasts calling on children to form a human shield at various structures in Gaza.

As a result of the war, Hamas and other groups as well as the general Gazan population suffered heavy losses and damage. Some 14 000 homes, 68 government buildings, 31 non-governmental organisation offices, and 15 hospitals in Gaza were either totally or partially destroyed. There was extensive damage to water sources, greenhouses, and farmland. An estimated 50 800 Gazans were left homeless with nearly 1200 killed. According to Hamas interior minister Fathi Hamad, 600 to 700 of those killed were Hamas fighters.⁹

Palestinian groups fired an estimated 571 rockets and 205 mortar shells from Gaza into Israel during the 22 days of fighting. More than 1500 homes and buildings in Israel were damaged or destroyed along with 327 vehicles. 28 Israeli families lost their homes. Among the buildings hit were nine educational facilities and three synagogues. Three Israeli civilians and six soldiers were killed by the attacks. A further four Israeli soldiers were killed by friendly fire.

Ultimately, the war changed very little. Rocket and mortar attacks from Gaza into Israel continued, albeit at a reduced rate. The Israeli and Egyptian blockade of Gaza was eased somewhat in 2010, but most of the blockade's impact on the economy and daily life in Gaza continued.



Figure 12.7 Katyusha rockets fired by Hezbollah forces from southern Lebanon into Israel.

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A new era of peace?

Israel normalises relations with Arab states

On 13 August 2020 Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), in a joint statement with the United States, announced the full normalisation of relations between the two countries, and the end of decades of formal enmity, making the UAE the third Arab country to establish normal peaceful relations with Israel. The two countries announced that they intend to sign bilateral agreements regarding investment, tourism, direct flights, security, telecommunications, technology, energy, health care, culture, the environment, the establishment of reciprocal embassies, and other areas of mutual benefit.²⁴

On 31 August 2020, the first commercial El Al flight from Israel to the UAE took place. Saudi Arabia granted El Al the right to overfly Saudi air space, another development in Israel-Gulf States relations. The official Israeli delegation on board the flight were warmly greeted by their Emirati counterparts, before they began work on the initial details of agreements on a range of issues, including diplomacy, trade, science, technology and cooperation in countering the Covid-19 pandemic. As part of the normalisation of relations with the UAE, Israel agreed to suspend any move towards declaring sovereignty over areas of the West Bank, as had previously been foreshadowed by Prime Minister Netanyahu to widespread condemnation, including within Israel.



Figure 12.8 Israeli and US officials arrive in UAE on historic flight.

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