

Is Peace Possible?

by Steph Smith

Israelis and Palestinians have fought five wars since Israel was born in 1948. They are on the brink of a sixth war.

Some people see this cycle of violence as evidence that the two sides will never live in peace. Others point to periods in history when Jews and Arabs lived side by side, sometimes for hundreds of years, without serious violence. Many government officials from around the world believe that peace is possible—a steady stream of diplomats and ambassadors have poured into the region over the years, hoping to help with negotiations.

Jews and Arabs have a long and complicated history. To understand the current conflict, one must know something about its roots.

Roots in History

Both Arabs and Jews consider the Middle East their ancestral land. The Romans, who called the region Palestine, had forced out the Jews more than 2,000 years ago. Only a small number of Jews remained in Palestine, and for centuries lived in peace among the Arabs.

But the Jews who had scattered around the world were often treated cruelly wherever they had settled. Jews wanting a homeland began to return to Palestine in the late 1800s. Their numbers there swelled from a few thousand to more than 60,000 by 1918. The Arab population was about 600,000 at that time.

As the treatment of Jews grew worse in Europe between World War I and World War II, hundreds of thousands more Jews migrated to Palestine. Creation of a nation for the Jews became a major issue after World War II. Nazi Germany had killed more than 6 million Jews in the Holocaust. Jews wanted the safety of a homeland for their future. When the United Nations (UN) voted in 1947 to divide Palestine into two separate states—one Jewish and one Arab—1.3 million Palestinian Arabs and about 600,000 Jews were living in the disputed area.

Throughout the mass immigration of Jews to Palestine, Palestinian Arabs feared that they were going to be overrun by their new neighbors.

Years of War

The Arabs rejected the plan put forth by the UN. When Israel was declared an independent state in 1948, the surrounding Arab countries immediately attacked, starting the first of several Arab-Israeli wars. Israel won that war, claiming more land for the new nation.

Only 170,000 of the 800,000 Palestinians remained after the conflict. The rest became refugees in neighboring Arab nations. The displaced people missed their former state and fought back with guerrilla terrorist attacks on Israel.

Three more full-scale wars broke out between Israelis and Arabs: in 1956, 1967 (the Six-Day War), and 1973. In the Six-Day War, Israel gained more land, including the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, the Golan Heights from Syria, and the Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula from Egypt. When that war ended, 2 million Arabs were under Israeli control.

In 1979, Egypt and Israel signed a formal peace treaty ending 30 years of war and establishing diplomatic relations. Israel returned the Sinai to Egypt.

Later peace agreements between the Israelis and the Palestinians—the 1993 Oslo accord and the 1997 Wye agreement—gave some West Bank land back to the Palestinians, but the areas have yet to be completely handed over.

More than 5.7 million people now live in Israel, which is about the size of New Jersey. About 80 percent are Jews, and the rest are mostly Arabs. Three million Palestinians live alongside 200,000 Jewish settlers in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

The Palestinians have asked for their own state, free of Israeli control, which would include the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem. Israelis consider Jerusalem their capital, but Arabs lay claim to it too. Both consider it sacred. One major obstacle to Israel's handing over the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to the Palestinians is that doing so would put Jewish settlers there under Palestinian rule.

Peace in the Future?

Today, the prospects for peace seem bleak. More than a thousand Palestinians and hundreds of Israelis have died since violence erupted again in the fall of 2000, and many more have been injured. Three separate trips by General Anthony Zinni, an American diplomat sent to help with the peace process, achieved little. Suicide bombings by Palestinians have become commonplace, as have attacks by the Israeli Defense Forces against Palestinian targets.

But the international community has not ceased its efforts to help bring peace to the region. The UN continues to send ambassadors and urge the participants to find common ground. For the first time since the conflict broke out again, a peace proposal was written by an Arab nation. Many people outside—and inside—Israel still hope for peace.