

# A CONCISE HISTORY OF THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT



*Ian J. Bickerton • Carla L. Klausner*

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# PREFACE

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The Middle East is a puzzle to most people, and the continuing Arab-Israeli conflict is perhaps the most confusing dimension of the modern history of the area. Team-teaching a history colloquium on the Arab-Israeli conflict at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, we discovered that, like the general public, our students had lots of opinions but only fragmentary knowledge. We found that before we could discuss the topic, we needed to spend time providing background information and tackling preconceptions and emotional biases. Moreover, our students required more than a knowledge of the events in order to understand the conflict. They needed ready access to the documents most relevant to the issues, they needed maps, and they needed guidance as to their further reading. We found no single book that met these requirements.

The present book is intended to fulfill that need. The text is basically a chronological narrative; however, within that framework, we have tried to highlight certain themes that we regard as central to the conflict. We have brought the book as up to date as possible in an area that is constantly changing.

We believe that this book will also be of interest to a wider audience, since the Middle East is an area of significance and importance not only to students but also to an educated public.

We hope that it will be accepted as an attempt to achieve some balance and objectivity about a subject upon which most people feel it necessary to adopt a partisan point of view. Throughout the book, we have tried to present both sides of the issues, although we realize that even the selection of material to be included reveals some

subjective judgment on our part. If the book succeeds in provoking thoughtful discussion of the Arab-Israeli conflict, we will have achieved our goal.

We would like to acknowledge the assistance of the University of New South Wales and the University of Missouri-Kansas City, from which we received faculty research grants. We are also appreciative of the detailed and constructive comments and criticisms of Professor Arthur Goldschmidt, Jr., who read the manuscript for the publisher. Thanks are also due Rhonda Roosa and Bill Clipson who helped with maps, our history department office staffs, and the editorial and production staff at Prentice Hall, especially Bayani Mendoza de Leon. Finally, we thank our families, friends, and colleagues for their patience and support.

*Ian J. Bickerton  
Carla L. Klausner*

**A CONCISE  
HISTORY OF THE  
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CONFLICT**

*And thus is the way of the world.*

*No, rather, thus is the way we have made the world.*

*—Anonymous*

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# INTRODUCTION

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In this book we shall examine one of the most widely known and complex conflicts of the modern period. Scarcely a week goes by without some reference in our daily press or television news to the conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors. In some ways this is curious. The Arab–Israeli conflict is only one of the forty or so separate wars fought since the end of World War II; the loss of life of both soldiers and civilians has been small compared to Korea or Vietnam, for example; and the area being fought over is tiny in world terms.

Yet many reasons lie behind why this conflict attracts so much attention, and why we should seek to understand the causes and course of events taking place. It has been a particularly tragic conflict in that there is scarcely a family on either side in the immediate region of the conflict in which a relative has not suffered injury or loss of life. In addition to being the modern expression of an historic territorial battle between two traditional ethnic rivals, the Arab–Israeli conflict directly involves two great world religions; it is caught up in the great-power rivalries of the Cold War, and the outcome is of major concern to Jewish, Islamic, and Christian communities around the world. Furthermore, the establishment of Israel is the pivotal event of the last 2,000 years of Jewish history, and the attitude toward Israel is central to Islam’s response to the modern world.

Finally, given the seeming absolutes at stake, the threat of the activities of either party to the conflict escalating into a nuclear holocaust cannot be ignored. And to date, despite the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, and movement on the question of the Palestinians, there seems little sign of a resolution of the fundamental issues.

The primary object of this study is to make the Arab–Israeli conflict more intelligible without the distortions that result from oversimplification. This involves tracing the broad sweep of the history of the region and the perceptions both parties have of each other. Both the Arabs and the Israelis are locked into the histories they have created for themselves—into the dreams of their pasts. Both also seek to set in our minds favorable cultural images and symbols of themselves and unfavorable ones of their opponents. Remember that legitimizing one's position is an essential element in any international conflict—that is one reason why the Arab–Israeli conflict is so passionately argued over, by participants and observers alike. The distinction between the past and the present is an artificial one; there is only the present. But constructing and controlling “the truth” about the past to justify one's actions in the present is an important function of all political activity, and one of your tasks as a student is to separate the rhetoric designed by both sides to create a usable, legitimizing, and heroic past from the reality of past events. The primary sources included in this text will provide you with the opportunity to reach your own conclusions as to the issues involved and the way they are portrayed by both sides.

It is also important to recognize that neither side is a monolith; there are divisions and tensions within both sides along ethnic, class, and religious lines that lead to many different political attitudes. One aim of this book is to assist you in sorting out the various groups and their opinions, assessing which ones are more likely to lead to peaceful rather than violent solutions. As David K. Shipler points out in *Arab and Jew: Wounded Spirits in a Promised Land*: “The time has passed when Jews and Arabs could face each other in simple conflict. They live together now in rich variety. There is no single Arab–Jewish relationship; there are many, and they require an elusive tolerance that must somehow run against the forces of war, nationalism, terrorism and religious certainty.”

## DEFINING THE QUESTION

How, then, can the Arab–Israeli conflict be explained? Is it a religious war between the followers of Islam and Judaism in which the protagonists are driven by deep-seated suspicions and hostilities concerning the Divine instructions to each other? Is it an ethnic war between traditionally rival groups, reflecting changing demographic patterns? Is it a war of territorial expansion in which one state is attempting to expand its borders at the expense of its neighbors? Is it a war of self-defense in which a newly established state is defending itself against the determination of its neighbors to destroy it? Is it a war of national liberation in which rival militant nationalisms are seeking to establish their “place in the sun?” Is it an imperial war reflecting the history of the rivalries and ambitions of the imperial states of Europe, and more lately the United States and the Soviet Union in the Middle East? Is it the inevitable consequence of the disruptive process of transition from traditional society to modern state taking place in the Middle East? Or is it simply a series of random, unconnected events that have had tragic and unforeseen consequences for the people involved?

All these elements are present in the Arab–Israeli conflict, but to single out any one of them as *the* explanation for the events that make up the conflict is to oversimplify a situation that has developed over the past century. As we shall see, the tragedy of the Arab–Israeli conflict is that it is the collision of two sets of historic and

moral rights of groups who are both victims—victims of outsiders as well as each other's violence. The opposing claims differ, of course. In Shipler's words: "To draw the boldest outline of the past is to make Israel's basic case. To sketch the present is to see the Arab's plight."

## WHO ARE THE ARABS AND JEWS?

We must begin with a definition of Arabs and Jews. Both terms have a historical and cultural meaning. Mythically, Arabs and Jews have a common origin. Thus, some regard Noah's eldest son, Shem, as the ancestor of the Hebrews and Arabs. Arabs as well as Jews see themselves as descendants of the patriarch Abraham, and therefore as inheritors of the Promised Land—Palestine. Arabs trace their lineage to Ishmael, Abraham's first son born of Hagar, Sarah's handmaiden, while Jews, or Israelites, trace themselves to Isaac, son of Abraham and his wife, Sarah. In the Hebrew Bible, known to Christians as the Old Testament, the term Arab referred to the nomadic inhabitants of the central and northern Arabian Peninsula. Over the centuries, these nomadic tribes, headed by a sheikh who acted as a first among equals, developed a structure shaped by the harsh deserts and dependent on the camel. Survival depended upon the strength and solidarity of the tribe, and on obedience to custom and an unwritten code of honor called *muruwwa*. We can learn more about Arab values and the Arab experience during the period just before Muhammad through the heroic poetry they spoke and sang in the sixth and early seventh centuries. The greatest of these poems are the "Seven Odes" or "Mu'allaqat" (qasidahs of Imru al-Qays, ruler of an ephemeral desert kingdom between the fourth and sixth centuries). When the Arab conquest of the Middle East occurred in the seventh and eighth centuries of the common era (C.E.),\* following the founding of Islam, Arabic became the language and Islam the religion of the region. The term Arab acquired a new cultural definition that lasted during the period of Arab hegemony until the Mongol sack of Baghdad in 1258. Not all the inhabitants adopted the new language and religion, however. Some remnants of early Christianity remained: Nestorians in Persia and Iraq, the Christians of Syria, the Maronite Christians of Mount Lebanon (who use Syriac in their liturgy but recognize Rome as the head of the Christian Church), and some Greek Orthodox. And, of course, Jews resisted the new conquerors.

Arabs today do not form one nation-state although, like Jews, they consider themselves a people and national group. They constitute a majority in many modern nation-states (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, South Yemen, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Sudan, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria). Today there are more than 100 million in the region from Morocco to Iraq who consider themselves Arab. Nor are Arabs a race in the commonly understood sense. Neither are they a religion, for many Arabs—about 5 million—are Christian. And only about one-fifth of the world's Muslims are Arab. Indeed, the largest concentration of Muslims in the world is in Indonesia. In the final analysis, Arab can be applied to those who use Arabic as their language and identify with Arab culture and Arab causes.

\*The term C.E. is preferred by Muslims and Jews to the corresponding designation A.D. (the year of Our Lord).



The term Jew is as difficult to define as the term Arab. Jews trace their history to the Semitic tribe or groups of tribes who claimed descent from Abraham through his son Isaac who were known as Hebrews or Israelites. Although Jews consider themselves a people, as do the Arabs, Jews are not simply a nationality, not a race, and are more than a religion. They are at once an ethnic group, a religious group, and a cultural group. Even identifying as Jews those who use Hebrew as a language does not help us much as it is the native language of only about one-third of the inhabitants of Israel, and many who identify themselves as Jews have little or no familiarity with the language. The term Jew can be best applied to those who have a Jewish mother, or who call themselves Jews because of conversion to Judaism.

One problem for Europeans in discussing Arabs and Jews is to free themselves from the distorting lens of two destructive ideologies: anti-Semitism (in the sense of anti-Jewishness), and Orientalism (anti-Arabness). Irrational suspicion, fear, and hatred of Jews, as Jews, have characterized European history for centuries, leading to almost uninterrupted oppression and persecution of Jews throughout all the countries of Europe. Anti-Semitism—the term was first used by the German racist Wilhelm Marr in 1879—in its modern form defined and attacked Jews in terms of race rather than religion and relied on pseudo-scientific Social-Darwinist theories in attempting to prove the superiority of the “Aryan” race over the “inferior” Semitic Jews. These twisted ideas found their ultimate expression in the Holocaust, in Hitler’s attempt to exterminate the Jews.

Westerners have also exhibited a contempt, disregard, and sense of arrogance toward Arabs and Muslims. Thus, as they have also done with Jews, Westerners have failed to recognize the intrinsic value and contributions of Arabs to history. These assumptions, or more correctly, limitations, have been defined by one scholar, Edward Said in his book *Orientalism*, as “Orientalism.” Said describes Orientalism as the racist way we view the inhabitants of the Orient, including the Middle East, in relation to ourselves as Europeans. The West, Said argues, has tried to establish the idea that Europe, by defining the political, economic, and cultural characteristics of the people of the Orient as inferior to those of the West, has the right to hegemony or dominance over the Orient. Thus non-Middle-Easterners have come to regard the Middle East as politically despotic, economically backward, and culturally decadent. As a result, there is a tendency to overlook completely the contributions of the Middle East to the development of Western European civilization and, in restructuring the realities of Middle Eastern life and history, to distort them. The cultural or intellectual assumptions that Occidentals bring to their study of Jews and Arabs make an understanding of the Arab–Israeli conflict considerably more difficult.

More serious as far as solving the conflict is concerned, Jews and Arabs bring their own prejudices and negative stereotypes—exaggerated by past and recent history—to bear upon each other. For Jews, the most pervasive stereotype of the Arab according to Shipler is “the fearsome violent figure of immense strength and duplicity. . . . Capable of great cruelty, given to fanatical disregard for human life, he murders easily, either out of a crazed lust for blood or as an emotional animal easily incited and manipulated by murderous leaders.” Arab stereotypes of Jews are remarkably similar to those of their Jewish counterparts. Jews are seen by Arabs as violent and cowardly. Ignoring the ancient ties of the Jews to Palestine, the Arabs regard them as aliens, as outsiders, as interlopers who do not belong. Jews and Arabs also share Western views of each other as backward and primitive. Needless to say, these prejudices add significantly to the passions of the participants in the conflict.