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A Condensed History of Israel

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Ancient History

Modern day Israel was once called Canaan in ancient times. Egypt was the first known regional superpower and its sphere of influence included Canaan and most of the Middle East and North Africa. Although there were ancient cities, towns, and villages in ancient times, most of the Middle East and North Africa was sparsely populated by nomadic tribes. Abraham, the father of both Judaism and Islam, was the patriarch of one of these nomadic tribes. Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, from whom the Muslims and Hebrews claim to be respectively descended. In order to escape a prolonged and severe drought, the descendants of Isaac traveled to Egypt and were subsequently enslaved by the Egyptians for hundreds of years. After the exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt, they traveled to and settled in Canaan. Two Hebrew kingdoms arose in Canaan; Israel in the North and Judah in the South.

Around 900 BC, the kingdom of Assyria (modern day Syria and Iraq) conquered Israel and Judah, along with the entire Middle East and replaced Egypt as the regional superpower.

Around 600 BC, the kingdom of Babylon (modern day Iraq) conquered Israel and Judah, along with the entire Middle East, and became the new regional superpower. The Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar exiled most of the Jews to Babylon where they remained until the kingdom of Persia (modern day Iran) conquered the Babylonian Empire around 550 BC and the Persian King Cyrus allowed the exiled Jews to return to Israel and Judah.

Around 330 BC, Alexander the Great conquered Israel and Judah, along with everything as far west as modern day Greece, as far south as Egypt, and as far east as India.

Commentary: there is a lot of historical evidence supporting the existence of the ancient Hebrew kingdoms of Israel and Judah, including numerous archaeological discoveries in Israel of ancient Hebrew artifacts, scrolls, and structures. In addition, references to the ancient Hebrew kingdoms of Israel and Judah can also be found among the artifacts from the ancient Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks. Modern day Palestinians claim to be descended from the ancient Hittites and Philistines who also lived in and around Canaan and with whom the ancient Hebrews fought many skirmishes and battles. Although this could be true, there is not a lot of historical evidence to support this.

Roman Empire

Around 60 BC, the Roman Empire (modern day Italy) conquered Israel and Judah, along with everything as far north as modern day England, as far west as Spain, as far south as Egypt, and as far east as Iraq. Israel and Judah were governed as a Roman province, Judaea. In 135 AD, after a failed revolt against the Romans for independence, the Roman Emperor Hadrian exiled the Jews from Judaea and changed the name of the Roman province from Judaea to Syria Palaestina. Around 390 AD, Emperor Theodosius I made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire.
Caliphate

After the decline of the Roman Empire, Muslims conquered the Middle East and North Africa and established an Islamic empire, the caliphate. Western European Christians made a series of attempts to regain control of the Holy Land from the Muslims (the crusades) but were ultimately defeated by Sultan Saladin and the Muslim opposition. Sultan Saladin founded the Ayyubid Dynasty, a Muslim dynasty that ruled most of the Middle East, including what is now modern day Israel.

In 1250, the Mamluk Sultans overthrew the Ayyubid Dynasty and ruled most of the Middle East including what is now modern day Israel.

In 1517, the Ottomans (modern day Turkey) conquered most of the Middle East. As part of the Ottoman Empire, what is now modern day Israel, Gaza, the West Bank, and Jordan were all referred to as southern Syria.

Commentary: during the caliphate, there were very few Jews living in southern Syria. Although Arabs continued to live in southern Syria during the caliphate, there is little or no historical evidence that there was ever an independent Palestinian homeland or even a Palestinian identity. Rather, the ancestors of modern day Palestinians likely identified themselves as Syrian and/or as citizens of the ruling caliphate.

Post World War I

During World War I, the Ottoman Empire aligned itself with the Central powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary and after the defeat of the Central Powers the Ottoman Empire was ended and much of its former territory was divided among the Allied powers. The Ottoman Empire became modern day Turkey. France took control of Syria and divided it into the French protectorates of Syria and Lebanon. Britain took control of a large swath of territory and created the British protectorates of Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine. The British protectorate of Palestine included modern day Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank.

Commentary: Britain originally intended that Jordan would be for the Arabs and that Palestine (including modern day Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank) would become a national homeland for the Jews. Zionists who supported the creation of a Jewish national homeland began referring to Palestine as Israel. Arabs who opposed the creation of a Jewish national homeland in Palestine strongly resented this and referred to it only as Palestine.

Post World War II

Beginning in the late 19th century and continuing throughout the 20th century, millions of Jews emigrated from Europe and Russia in hopes of escaping persecution. Most moved to the United States but some returned to their ancestral homeland in the British protectorate of Palestine.

After World War II, most of the former British and French protectorates had already fought for and won independence. The future of Palestine, however, remained uncertain. Britain deferred to the newly
established United Nations regarding the future of Palestine and the UN recommended and adopted the creation of both an independent Jewish state (modern day Israel) and an independent Arab state (modern day Gaza and the West Bank).

Immediately following the declaration of the new state of Israel in 1948, the Arab League (comprised of Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen) rejected the UN resolution and invaded Israel with intent to destroy it and annex the territory between them. After an initial loss of territory, however, Israel succeeded in pushing the Arab armies out of Israel and even conquered some additional territory that the UN resolution had intended for the independent Arab state. Jordan then took control of and annexed the West Bank and Egypt took control of Gaza and held it as an occupied zone even though the UN had intended that Gaza and the West Bank become an independent Arab state. A ceasefire was declared but no peace agreements were signed and the Arab League did not recognize the new borders or even the new state of Israel itself.

After Jordan annexed the West Bank, all of the Jews living there were expelled and resettled in Israel. Similarly, large numbers of Arabs living in Israel fled or were evicted by Jews and resettled in large refugee camps in poor, overcrowded conditions. The UN (in response to a British proposal) established an agency to provide aid to the Palestinian refugees.

Commentary: judging by the actions of the Arab League, they seemingly viewed the creation of an independent Arab state mostly as a useful tool for obstructing the creation of an independent Jewish state. Indeed, the UN appeared to be far more concerned than the Arab League was about the welfare of the Arab refugees living in Palestine.

It should also be noted that four of the six original member states in the Arab League (Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq) were all created by the same authority (Britain and France) that also created Israel but, despite their similar origins, did not believe that the same international acceptance and recognition that they enjoyed should also be extended to Israel. Of all the nation states that were created in the Middle East by the Allied powers, only Israel was and continues to be hated and rejected by its Arab neighbors.

Suez Crisis

In 1956, Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal (previously controlled by Britain and France) and blockaded the Gulf of Aqaba preventing Israeli access to the Red Sea. In retaliation, Israel made a secret agreement with France to coordinate military operations against Egypt. Israel attacked the Sinai Peninsula and Britain and France called on both sides to withdraw from the Suez Canal. When Egypt refused to withdraw, Britain and France commenced air strikes to neutralize the Egyptian air force. With the help of the British and French air force, Israel took over the Sinai Peninsula and Britain and France re-took control of the Suez Canal. After the UN brokered a ceasefire, the Israelis completely withdrew from the Sinai Peninsula in exchange for renewed access to the Suez Canal, renewed access in and out of the Gulf of Aqaba, and the Egyptian promise to stop Arab raids out of Gaza.
Palestine Liberation Organization

Throughout the 1950’s and early 1960’s, the Arab League maintained an economic boycott on Israel. There were also intermittent clashes along Israel’s borders as Arab terrorism and breaches of the ceasefire agreement resulted in Israeli counter-attacks.

In 1964, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was founded with the purpose of creating an independent Palestinian state, expelling all Jews, and destroying Israel. Due to its use of terror attacks against civilians, the PLO was considered by Israel and the United States to be a terrorist organization.

Commentary: the PLO was responsible for the hostage crisis at the 1972 Munich Olympic Games, the school attack in 1974, the Air France hijacking in 1976, the bus hijacking in 1978, and numerous other bombings, murders, and kidnappings.

Six-Day War

In June 1967, Egypt, Jordan, and Syria amassed troops along Israel’s borders and Egypt closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, effectively preventing access to the Gulf of Aqaba (for the second time). Egypt threatened escalation to full war and Egyptian radio broadcasts talked of a coming genocide. The president of Egypt declared that “the battle will be a general one and the basic objective will be to destroy Israel”. Israel responded by launching pre-emptive air strikes that destroyed the air forces of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in a single day. Within six days, Israel had defeated Egypt, Syria, and Jordan and all parties had accepted a ceasefire. During the war, Israel conquered the Sinai Peninsula (for the second time) as well as Gaza (previously controlled by Egypt), East Jerusalem, the West Bank (previously annexed by Jordan), and the Golan Heights (previously part of Syria).

After the Six-Day War, Israel secretly decided to offer to return the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt and the Golan Heights to Syria in exchange for peace agreements. This decision was a closely guarded secret and had not yet been offered to Egypt and Syria when it was quickly rescinded after the Arab League issued the Khartoum Resolution in September 1967. The Khartoum Resolution is famous for the “Three No’s”: “no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, and no negotiations with Israel.”

In November 1967, the UN adopted the “land for peace” formula, which called for a just and lasting peace based on Israeli withdrawal from territories occupied during the Six-Day War in return for an end to all states of belligerency, respect for the sovereignty of countries in the region, and the right to live in peace within secure, recognized borders. The resolution was accepted by all sides, though with different interpretations, and has been the basis for all subsequent peace negotiations.

Fearing Israeli occupation, hundreds of thousands of Arabs fled from Gaza and the West Bank in the weeks and months following the Six-Day War. Most moved to Jordan but some relocated to other Arab countries.

Commentary: Israel had informed the United States of its intention to offer to return the Sinai Peninsula and Golan Heights in exchange for peace agreements. However, the United States did not have an opportunity to convey Israel’s offer to Egypt or Syria before Israel rescinded it.
**Jordanian Civil War**

In 1970-1971, there was a civil war in Jordan between the two major components of the Jordanian population; the native Jordanians and the Palestinians (represented by the PLO). The civil war resulted in the deaths of thousands of people, the vast majority of which were Palestinian. After the war, the PLO and thousands of Palestinian fighters were expelled from Jordan and resettled in Lebanon.

**Yom Kippur War**

In 1973, Egypt and Syria launched a well-planned surprise attack against Israel. The offensive was planned during the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur, when most Israelis, including military personnel, were at home with their families. During the first few days, it was uncertain whether Israel would be able to repel the invasion. The Egyptian army invaded the Sinai Peninsula and the Syrian army attacked the Golan Heights. However, a small Israeli tank force in the Golan Heights somehow managed to repel the massive Syrian invasion. Israel turned the tide of the invasion and launched a counter-offensive so far into Syria that it was able to shell the capital city of Damascus. Israel also turned the tide of the invasion in the Sinai Peninsula and successfully encircled the Egyptian army. All parties accepted a ceasefire after this stunning turn of events. Egypt retreated from the Sinai Peninsula and Israel withdrew from Syria back to the previously held Golan Heights.

After the Yom Kippur War, Saudi Arabia began an oil embargo with all countries that traded with Israel. Severe shortages led to a massive increase in the price of oil, and as a result, many countries downgraded relations or broke off relations entirely with Israel. In addition, Israel was banned from participation in the Asian Games and other Asian sporting events.

*Commentary:* the Golan Heights is a large plateau surrounded by relatively flat terrain. Behind the Golan Heights, the relatively flat landscape of Israel provides very few natural obstacles to an invading army. The Golan Heights itself, however, is an ideal defensive position and an ideal position from which to shell or launch rockets at Israel. If Israel had not been in possession of the Golan Heights when Syria attacked, it is likely that Israel would not have been able to repel the Syrian invasion and Israel might not exist today.

**Peace with Egypt**

In 1979, Egypt and Israel signed a peace treaty. As part of the treaty, Israel returned the Sinai Peninsula (but not Gaza) to Egypt. After the peace treaty was signed, the Arab League suspended Egypt from the organization and the president of Egypt was assassinated by an Arab fundamentalist who opposed peace with Israel.

*Commentary:* the suspension of Egypt from the Arab League for signing a peace treaty with Israel demonstrates that the Arab League remained opposed to making peace with Israel despite accepting the “land for peace” formula proposed by the UN after the Six-Day War.
Annexation of the Golan Heights

In 1981, Israel formally annexed the Golan Heights (previously part of Syria). Israel’s annexation of the Golan Heights was immediately condemned by the UN.

Commentary: although Israel’s annexation of the Golan Heights makes peace with Syria more difficult, if not impossible, Israel believes that controlling the Golan Heights (and the tactical military advantage it provides) is vital to its national security and continued survival.

First Lebanon War

In 1982, Israel invaded southern Lebanon in response to continued PLO attacks out of southern Lebanon. Israel invaded southern Lebanon in order to expel the PLO, destroy Lebanon’s refugee camps, and expel approximately 200,000 Palestinians. After the initial invasion, Israel continued to occupy southern Lebanon.

Hezbollah

In 1982, Hezbollah was founded with the purpose of ending the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon and destroying Israel. Hezbollah is a Shi’a Islamic militant group and political party based in Lebanon. Hezbollah has seats in the Lebanese government, a radio and satellite TV station, and social development programs. Hezbollah also receives military training, weapons, and financial support from Iran and political support from Syria.

Hezbollah waged a guerilla war against Israel in southern Lebanon and northern Israel and eventually forced Israel to withdraw from southern Lebanon in 2000. Due to its use of guerrilla warfare against both military targets and civilians alike in violation of the Geneva Convention, Hezbollah was considered by Israel and most of the world to be a terrorist organization.

First Intifada

Between 1987 and 1993, there was a Palestinian uprising against Israel’s occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, known as the First Intifada. The uprising consisted of civil disobedience, economic boycotts, and increased violence and terrorist attacks, including throwing stones and Molotov cocktails at Jews and Israeli soldiers. Israel responded by deploying soldiers which used beatings and live ammunition to crack down hard on the uprising.
Peace with Jordan

In 1994, Jordan became the second Arab country to sign a peace treaty with Israel. Prior to and paving the way for the treaty, the United States promised to forgive all of Jordan’s debts and Jordan abandoned its claim to the West Bank (annexed by Jordan after Israel declared independence and captured by Israel during the Six-Day War) in favor of a peaceful resolution between Israel and the PLO.

Egypt welcomed the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan while Syria ignored it. Hezbollah opposed the treaty and launched mortar and rocket attacks against towns in northern Israel right before the signing ceremony.

Oslo Accords

In 1995, Israel and the PLO signed the Oslo Accords (also known as the Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement) which incorporated and superseded the previous agreements. The agreement allowed the PLO leadership to return to Gaza and the West Bank and granted autonomy to the Palestinians with talks to follow regarding final status. In return, the Palestinians promised to abstain from using terrorism and changed the Palestinian National Covenant, which had previously called for the expulsion of all Jews and the elimination of Israel. The agreement was opposed by Hamas and other Palestinian factions which opposed any peace agreement with Israel and they launched suicide bomb attacks against Israel. Israel responded by constructing a wall along its border with Gaza and the West Bank to protect itself from the suicide bomb attacks.

Second Intifada

Between 2000 and 2005, there was a second Palestinian uprising against Israel’s occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, known as the Second Intifada. The Second Intifada was even more violent than the first, and consisted of gunfire, suicide bombings, and throwing stones at Jews and Israeli soldiers. And like during the First Intifada, Israel responded by deploying the military which used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse demonstrations and used live ammunition, tanks, air attacks, and assassinations against militants.

Israeli-Palestinian Relations

In 2002, the Arab League adopted the Arab Peace Initiative, which offered full normalization of relations with Israel in exchange for Israeli withdrawal from all occupied territories (including the Golan Heights), Israeli recognition of Palestinian independence in Gaza and the West Bank, and a “just solution” for the Palestinian refugees.

In 2004, the leader of the PLO died. After the PLO leader’s death, factions within the PLO, the two main factions of which are Fatah and Hamas, became more apparent. Fatah is a secular Palestinian political party and the largest faction of the PLO. Hamas is a Sunni Islamic Palestinian political party of the PLO.
which desires to destroy Israel and establish an Islamic state in what is now Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank.

In 2005, Israel evicted all Israeli citizens (some forcibly) from Gaza, the Israeli military withdrew from both Gaza and the West Bank, and the PLO assumed responsibility for internal governance of Gaza and the West Bank.

In 2006, Hamas won the Palestinian parliamentary election, the first and only genuinely free Palestinian elections. After winning a parliamentary majority, Hamas’ leader rejected all previous agreements signed with Israel, refused to recognize Israel’s right to exist, and refused to abandon terror tactics. Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza and Hamas’ victory have left the status of Gaza unclear. Although Israel no longer exercises sovereignty on the ground, it continues to control and restrict access to Gaza.

In 2007, Hamas fought Fatah for and took control of Gaza. In response, Egypt and Israel closed their border crossings with Gaza and imposed a blockade. The reasons for closing the border crossings and imposing a blockade were that Fatah had fled and was no longer providing security on the Palestinian side as well as to prevent Hamas from smuggling weapons into Gaza. Although Hamas took control of Gaza, Fatah remains in control of the West Bank.

Commentary: the peace process was derailed by the Palestinians in 2006 when they elected Hamas and rejected peace with Israel. Therefore, the onus for restarting the peace process also lies with the Palestinians. The peace process will remain stalled until the Palestinians reject Hamas and abandon the hardline ideology that Hamas represents in favor of compromise and tolerance. After all, why would Israel, or any nation, relinquish territory to an enemy who actively seeks their destruction?

Second Lebanon War

In 2006, Israel invaded southern Lebanon in response to the ambush and capture of 3 Israeli border patrol soldiers by Hezbollah. Hezbollah demanded the release of Lebanese prisoners held by Israel in exchange for the captured Israeli soldiers. Israel refused and responded with airstrikes and artillery fire on both Hezbollah military targets and Lebanese civilian infrastructure, followed by a ground invasion of southern Lebanon and an air and naval blockade. Hezbollah engaged the Israeli army in guerrilla warfare and launched rockets into northern Israel. After 34 days of fighting, the UN brokered a ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon, under the terms of which, Israel was to withdraw from Lebanon and Lebanon was to disarm Hezbollah. Since the ceasefire was declared, Israel has withdrawn from southern Lebanon but Hezbollah remains armed and as dangerous as ever.

Commentary: due to the significant amount of military support that Iran provided to Hezbollah before and during the war, some consider the Second Lebanon War to be the first round of the Iran-Israel proxy conflict, rather than a continuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict.
2012 Gaza Conflict

In response to increased attacks out of Gaza, Israel launched an 8-day air offensive into Gaza in order to stop the rocket attacks out of Gaza and crack down on Hamas. Israeli airstrikes attacked launch pads, weapons caches, government facilities, and apartment buildings that Israel believed were being used by Hamas. During the offensive, approximately 1,500 rockets were fired out of Gaza at Israel. Most of the rockets slipped through Israel’s newly developed Iron Dome missile defense system and landed in Israel.

*Commentary: due to the failure of the peace process, increased Palestinian terror attacks from Gaza, and occasional attacks from Hezbollah in Lebanon, many Israeli’s have lost confidence in the Palestinian Authority as a peace partner. Many Israeli’s suspect that most Palestinians view any peace agreement with Israel merely as a temporary measure to acquire territory.*

2014 Gaza Conflict

In June 2014, Hamas kidnapped and murdered 3 Israeli civilians. Israel responded by cracking down on Hamas in the West Bank and Hamas responded to the crack down by launching rockets out of Gaza into Israel. In July, Israel launched an air offensive into Gaza in order to stop the rocket attacks and crack down on Hamas. After several weeks of airstrikes of escalating intensity, and no letup in rocket attacks, Israel invaded Gaza in order to destroy the elaborate underground tunnel system that Hamas used to hide, transport, and launch rockets. During the escalating air offensive and subsequent ground invasion, Hamas repeatedly rejected a ceasefire because Israel refused to lift the preexisting blockade of Gaza. In August, Israeli ground forces withdrew from Gaza and a ceasefire was finally agreed to. During the conflict, Hamas fired approximately 4,500 rockets and mortars into Israel, most of which were intercepted by Israel’s Iron Dome missile defense system. Israel attacked approximately 5,200 targets in Gaza and destroyed approximately 34 tunnels. During the conflict, approximately 2,200 people were killed and 11,500 people were wounded, the majority of which were Palestinian. Approximately 50-75% of Palestinian casualties were civilians.

*Commentary: one reason for the high number of Palestinian civilian casualties is that Hamas deliberately hid fighters, rockets, and weapons caches in civilian homes, schools, and hospitals. Hamas knew that Israel would be more reluctant to attack civilian targets and, if it did, Israel would draw international condemnation. Although this tactic was effective at slowing Israel’s offensive, Hamas deliberately put Palestinian civilians in harm’s way. In contrast, Israel locates military infrastructure and targets away from civilians in order to prevent civilian casualties.*