



ONE LAND, TWO CULTURES

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict has become more complicated following the recent suicide bombings of predominantly civilian populations. The bombings and the Israeli responses certainly have focused the world's attention on this troubled land.

Emotions run high around the world about the Middle East conflict, making it difficult to write about. Even the most balanced report can inflame emotions because the Israelis and Palestinians are so polarized. Still, it is important to discuss the facts, so that the general public understands the core issues.

The state of Israel occupies land that, prior to 1947, was occupied mostly by Palestinians. Today, 80 percent of Israel's population of 5.8 million is Jewish, the remaining 20 percent is non-Jewish, mostly Palestinian Arabs. Of the world's 14.6 million Jews, 32 percent live in Israel.

Israel's area is only 8,000 square miles (20,720 sq. km.), a little smaller than Massachusetts. Along with Lebanon and Syria, Israel occupies the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea.

In the minds of the world's Jews, Israel is their homeland, promised by their Hebrew father King David about 1,000 B.C. Twice in ancient times the territory around Jerusalem was controlled by Jewish kingdoms, once from 1,000 to 597 B.C. and again from 168 to 42 B.C., when the Romans took control. The Romans named the region around the Jordan River *Judea Palestine* after the Philistines, nearby coastal residents.

Arab Muslim invaders conquered Palestine in 636 A.D., as Islam spread through the region. Then non-Arab Muslim conquerors, the Seijuks, Mamluks and Ottomans, followed. There were brief periods of control by the European Crusaders (Christians) between 1098 and 1291. Near the end of World War I in 1917, Britain took control of Palestine from the Ottomans and promised to establish a Jewish national homeland on the western half of Palestine, west of

the Jordan River.

Immigration of Jews from Europe to eastern Palestine rapidly increased as a result of World War II. Arabs opposed the increase of Jews and violence ensued. In 1947, the United Nations agreed to divide Palestine into Jewish and Arab states. Israel declared itself a state in 1948, but the surrounding countries refused to accept the division of Palestine that included a Jewish state. The surrounding Arab countries invaded Israel, but Israel prevailed, winning the war and gaining territory.

The non-Israeli portions of Palestine were divided, with Jordan taking control of the West Bank located between Israel and the Jordan River and Egypt taking over the Gaza Strip on the Mediterranean. None of the three countries involved would permit the formation of an independent Palestinian state in the non-Israeli portion of Palestine.

Because of continued terrorist attacks emanating from the Gaza Strip, Israel took control in 1956. Egypt briefly retook the territory in 1967. In the ensuing 1967 Six-Day War, Israel took the Gaza Strip again, plus all of the Sinai Peninsula, East Jerusalem, Jordan's West Bank and Syria's Golan Heights. In 1973, Egypt and Syria's armies attacked Israel, and Israel prevailed once more.

As a result of the conflicts and wars described above, three core issues are at the

heart of the present Palestinian-Israeli conflict. These are Palestinian Arab refugees with no state of their own, Israel's occupied territories since the Six-Day War and Israeli settlements in traditional Palestinian territories. Although the recent suicide bombings are a major issue, they are a symptom of these three core issues.

First, when Israel was declared a state, Palestinian Arabs within the territory of Israel protested and some fought against the declaration. The Israelis forced those Palestinians out of its territory and many more left fearing Israeli retribution. These forced and voluntary immigrations initially displaced thousands of Palestinians to refugee camps scattered around Israel in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

Recent counts now list 3.9 million Palestinians scattered throughout the region, according to the *World Refugee Survey 1999*. Those Palestinians remaining in refugee camps represent a displaced, landless population without a country. Until a Palestinian state is designated and declared sovereign, there is little chance for regional peace.

The Israeli-occupied territories captured during the 1967 Six-Day War continue to include Syria's Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem. Peace with neighboring countries is not likely without a resolution of these territories.

Although Israel tacitly turned most of the West Bank administration over to Yassir Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization in the late 1990s, newly-built Jewish settlements there have increasingly created problems. In most cases, land developers bought the land within the West Bank and built Jewish settlements within Palestinian jurisdiction.

Typically, when problems erupted between Jewish settlers and local Palestinian Arabs, for whatever reasons, settlers armed themselves and often defied local Palestinian police authority. In essence, these settlements have become armed Jewish enclaves within Palestinian territory. This creates an untenable situation for local Palestinians.

Now world leaders are again seeking solutions in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Any successful solution must deal with all three of the core issues underlying the conflict. However, only common respect-the toughest issue of all-can guarantee peace between two cultures occupying one land.

And that is Geography in the News. April 18, 2002. #620.

(The author is a Geography Professor at Appalachian State University, Boone, NC.)

