

Arabs and Israelis: The

The Battleground from

By MARC D. CHARNEY

IN the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem, the conflict between Israeli and Palestinian is being shaped by a fratricidal agony: competing, centuries-old claims to the same precious strip of land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean, and the right to exist there as a nation.

The rivalry is as old as the contest between Moslem and Jew for the legacy of their common father, Abraham. Which people should own the land where the Temple stood, or Mohammed ascended to heaven — or, for that matter, where Abraham himself is buried?

But the rivalry is also distinctly modern. For the precise lines on the modern map of the Middle East — the lines that divide the West Bank and Gaza from Israel, and define Israel itself — were drawn only in the 20th century. They reflect the breakup of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of Arab nationalism, an inward rush of Jews to flee pogroms and the Holocaust, the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Arabs, and the seemingly intractable conflict that continues. In part, the map was drawn to suit the interests of powers outside the region; but it was also forged in round after round of local warfare — a resort to arms when ambiguous promises and agreements failed to tame hatred and suspicion.

The Question of Land

Jews who assert that Israel should keep control of all the land between the Jordan and the Mediterranean often cite God's promise to Abraham, invoking a vision of a land they controlled intermittently before the destruction of the Second Temple in A.D. 70; Israelis also cite a modern claim to secure borders, saying it could mean suicide to give up this land without first obtaining peace and a formal recognition by its neighbors of Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state.

For the Arabs, this is a land their people have lived on for centuries, and for the thousands of refugees the Israeli occupation of the West Bank — the ancient Jewish lands of Judea and Samaria — and Gaza is now made more bitter by tribal memory, passed on from generation to generation.

If for centuries Jews longed to return to Jerusalem, today thousands of Palestinians cherish a vision of rocky villages and citrus groves that they left when conflict broke out with the Jews in 1948. What the Jews call Eretz Israel, they call Palestine. For many of these, it is not a question of a West Bank state for Palestinians, but the dissolution of the Israeli state — a point in the Palestine Liberation Organization charter that the P.L.O. has never renounced. The current protests have brought forward some Palestinians willing to say they would recognize Israel's right to exist if that would bring an independent state. But they have been unwilling to renounce the leadership of the P.L.O., with which Israel will not negotiate; if anything, the attitude of the current young



Agence France-Press

Palestinians throwing rocks at Israeli soldiers in the West Bank town of Nablus.

leaders of the protest appears even more radical.

The precise boundaries of the disputed land today are, for the most part, limits defined by Britain under a mandate approved by the League of Nations in 1922 after Britain and France divided up power over the Middle East territories that the Ottoman Empire held before World War I. Under the Ottomans, Palestine had been administered as a section of Syria, and it was in this period that Zionist Jews began immigrating in the late 19th century, in large part in response to pogroms in Russia. Nevertheless, by the end of World War I Arabs still constituted more than 90 percent of the population.

When Britain was granted the mandate, a central condition was that it foster the creation of a Jewish national homeland in Palestine, as long as this did not prejudice the rights of those already living in the area. The promise was in the Balfour Declaration, a letter written in November 1917, in which Britain, seeking Jewish help in its war effort, had promised Lord Rothschild, president of the British Zionist Federation, that it would work for a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

Undefined Boundaries

The mandate and the Balfour Declaration became central pillars for the Jewish claim to the land that is now Israel. These documents did not, however, spell out boundaries for a Jewish homeland within Palestine or define the form it should take. Britain, meanwhile, had made another promise during World War I, in a letter sent in 1915 by Sir Henry McMahon, Britain's high commissioner in Egypt, to Hussein, Hashemite Sherif of Mecca, in hopes of encouraging the Arab revolt that later broke out against the Ottomans. This letter pledged British support for Arab independence in the area, but left ambiguous whether this included Palestine.

Over the next 20 years, Jewish immigration and acquisition of land became the central issues in a growing conflict between Arabs and Jews — particularly in the 1930's, when Britain tried to stem the flow. In 1936, Arabs staged a general strike that was followed by an uprising that lasted until 1939. It included bitter Arab attacks on Jews in Hebron, Haifa, Jaffa and Tel Aviv, and prompted a strengthening of Jewish self-defense groups. In May 1939, with war imminent, the British published a White

Paper that effectively promised the Arabs a halt to the flow of Jews after five years, to be followed by self-government with an Arab majority. The Zionists were outraged. By 1947, despite continuing British efforts to restrict immigration, a Jewish population that had been 56,000 in the early 1920's had grown to 650,000 — two-fifths of the population of Palestine — and the United Nations split the land into Jewish and Arab countries.

Partition and War

The map, as drawn by the United Nations, divided the land into six sectors — three Arab, three Jewish, with Jerusalem reserved as an international zone well within the largest Arab sector. The Jewish leadership in Palestine accepted partition; the Arab leadership did not.

In the fighting that developed as the date of partition approached, and in the invasion by neighboring Arab countries that followed, the Jews made major gains, including the modern city of Jerusalem, although the Old City and the Wailing Wall fell under Jordanian control. The fighting also established a pattern of Arab displacement and bitterness that lasted 40 years, erupting again last December in sustained violence in the occupied territories. Today, many Arabs say they were driven off their land by war and by aggressive land acquisition policies, and have a right to return to all of it. The Israelis say that this claim means the Arabs are arguing not for the West Bank and Gaza or even the existence of a Pal-

stinian state, but for the destruction of Israel itself.

Israelis maintain that Arab moderates who might agree to recognize Israel's right to exist in return for a homeland carved out of the occupied lands have been intimidated by the popularity of the militant positions of the P.L.O. The Israelis would prefer a state federated with Jordan, not an independent one. Moderate Palestinians say Israeli occupation policies have prevented the emergence of popular moderate leaders. The immediate causes for the refugee flight of 1948 before the advancing forces are disputed, and most historical accounts cite a combination of factors.

The cease-fire lines of 1949 set the frontiers of Israel as it was to exist until 1967. Jordan, whose Arab Legion had fought in the 1948 war, held until the 1967 war the area now known as the West Bank, as well as East Jerusalem, including the holy sites in the Old City, from which Jews were barred. The Gaza Strip fell under Egyptian administration. But during all those years neither Egypt nor Jordan fostered the creation of a Palestinian nation in these territories. The West Bank, in fact, became incorporated into Jordan.

Angry Lesson at Suez

The refugee centers in Syria, Jordan and the Gaza Strip became sources for Palestinian raids on Israel, prompting retaliatory raids by Israel. In 1956, Israel cooperated with Britain and France in overrunning Gaza and Sinai while the British and French occupied the Suez Canal. But international pressure — notably from the United States — forced a pullback without a peace agreement with Egypt. Israelis drew an angry lesson from this. After the fighting in 1967, they were determined that future withdrawals must bring peace.

This time their armies seized, in addition to Sinai, the Golan Heights, all of the West Bank, and the Arab part of Jerusalem, including the Old City. East Jerusalem was annexed almost immediately, the city was declared Israel's capital and the Golan Heights was annexed in 1981. Some one million Arabs who remained in the West Bank and Gaza Strip were compelled to live under Israeli military administration.

In November 1967, the United Nations had passed Resolution 242, envisioning, as a basis for future peace negotiations, a withdrawal by Israel from occupied Arab lands in exchange for peace and recognition of Israel's right to exist. The resolution left a central ambiguity, however, in failing to specify how much territory would be evacuated. It also referred only to refugees, rather than to a Palestinian nation — a point at the core of the P.L.O.'s refusal to accept Resolution 242 as a sole basis for negotiations.

Israel has since withdrawn completely from Egyptian land in Sinai under terms of the Camp David treaty signed with Egypt in 1979. But reaching a solution over the Gaza Strip and West Bank has proven vastly more difficult. Sites in the West Bank in particular are linked to the Jewish past. And the land, with its strategic hills, long border and proximity to the coastal cities, is critical to Israeli military planning. In any comprehensive negotiations, the question of Jerusalem would be the most difficult of all, because of its religious significance for Moslems as well as for Jews, and because Israel insists its annexation is irrevocable.

Roots of the Conflict

the Jordan to the Sea

At the same time as the Camp David peace treaty was drawn up, Egypt and Israel reached accord on a framework for a Palestinian settlement: a five-year transition period intended to lead to "autonomy" for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. But again, a central ambiguity was left, this time on the question of what autonomy meant. The Arabs interpreted it to mean statehood, the Israelis limited self-rule.

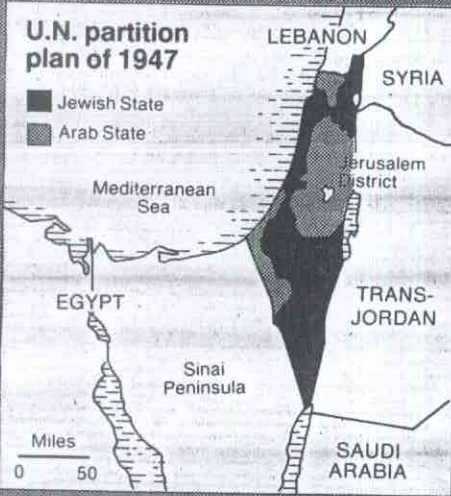
The question of who should negotiate for the Palestinians is crucial; until it is answered, no settlement is likely. Israel refuses to negotiate with the P.L.O., on the ground that it is a terrorist organization, preferring instead to deal with other Palestinians and with King Hussein of Jordan. But these Palestinians are reluctant to take the step of entering any negotiations without the participation or approval of the P.L.O.

Meanwhile, Israel has been busy establishing its own presence in the territories it occupied, changing their character by establishing military camps and Jewish

settlements. At first, Labor Governments attempted to limit the pattern of settlement to one that more heavily reflected security concerns than links to history, appearing to leave room for territorial compromise. After 1977, when the right-wing Likud bloc came to power, encouragement was given to groups that seek to retain all the occupied territories as part of the ancient land of Israel.

By late last year, it seemed that the Arab world had begun to pay less attention to the Palestinians. But in December, a new phase of the fratricidal agony opened — the rocks and firebombs of a frustrated new Palestinian generation. Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who has become the spokesman for Israeli determination to put down the unrest, declared: "We have to drive home to their minds and hearts: 'By violence you'll gain nothing.'" But youthful protesters in Gaza seemed to express how difficult that might be. "Kill us all," they taunted Israeli soldiers as they stoned them. "Come and kill us all or get out."

How the lines have changed



West Bank: Numbers tell the story

- Israeli civilian settlements
- Israeli military settlements
- Refugee camps
- Major cities

Mediterranean Sea

Tel Aviv

ISRAEL

Jordan River

JORDAN

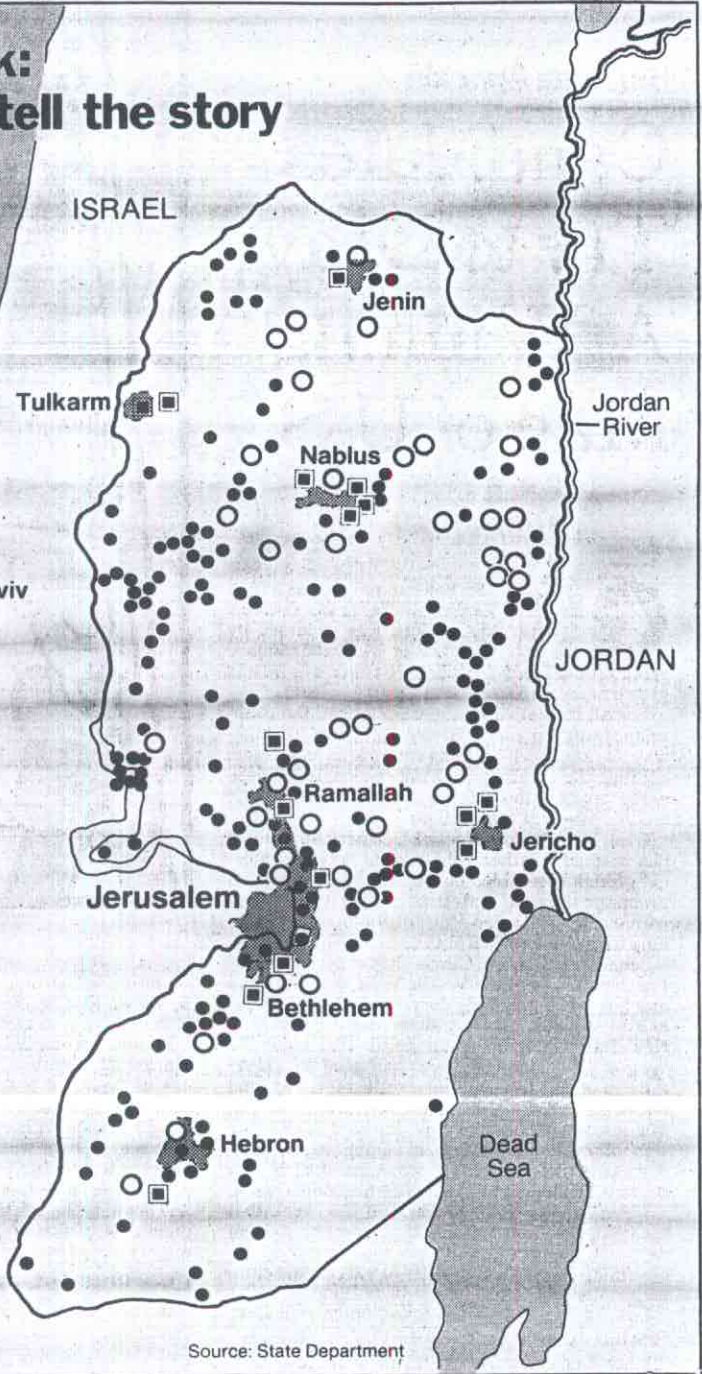
Dead Sea

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West Bank populations		
	Jewish	Palestinian Arab and others
Pre-war 1967	0	831,000*
1977	5,000	690,000
1987	55,000	775,000

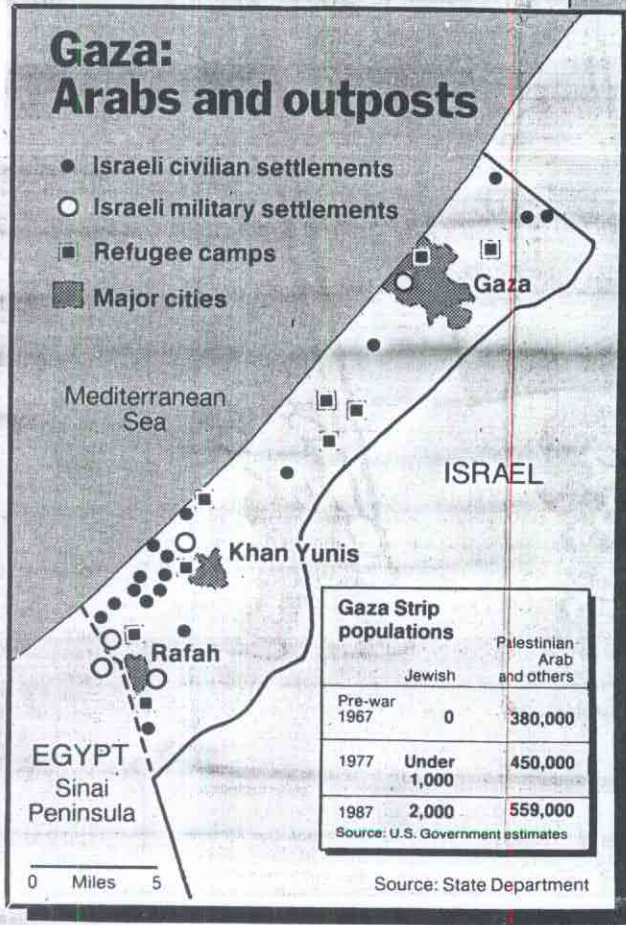
*includes East Jerusalem

Source: State Department



Gaza: Arabs and outposts

- Israeli civilian settlements
- Israeli military settlements
- Refugee camps
- Major cities



Gaza Strip populations		
	Jewish	Palestinian-Arab and others
Pre-war 1967	0	380,000
1977	Under 1,000	450,000
1987	2,000	559,000

Source: U.S. Government estimates

Source: State Department