

The Middle East Today

You have undoubtedly heard about conflicts in the Middle East on television or in the newspaper. If you have family members living in the region, you may have heard some news first-hand.

Sometimes it is hard for people living far away from a conflict to appreciate why it started—or why it is difficult to resolve.

Conflict in the Middle East partly concerns achieving peace for two groups of people—the Israelis and the Palestinians. Both groups say they want peace, but both groups also say they have a right to occupy the same territory.

Many problems can be traced back to the time when the state of Israel was created in 1948. For over 50 years before that time, many Jews had been fleeing terrible persecution in Europe by moving to Palestine, the Jewish homeland in biblical times. They believed they were entitled to return to territory they had inherited from their ancestors. During World War II, millions of Jews were

murdered by the Nazi followers of Adolf Hitler. After the war, hundreds of thousands of surviving Jews came to Palestine as **refugees**, hoping to create their own state. The Arab majority, who had lived there for generations, did not welcome their arrival, and warfare erupted. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs were displaced from their homes and became refugees. As a result, there has been conflict between the two groups ever since. Despite many attempts to reach a lasting peace agreement, tensions in the area remain high.

There are other issues in the Middle East that have a more immediate impact on North America. One of these is oil. Much of the world's oil comes from countries that surround the Persian Gulf: Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. In 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait to increase its access to

Figure 4-3 In 1947, the United Nations proposed to split Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state, as shown in this map. By the end of the Arab-Israeli war that broke out in 1948, Israel had taken a larger portion of land. Some of the land was also taken over by Jordan and Egypt.

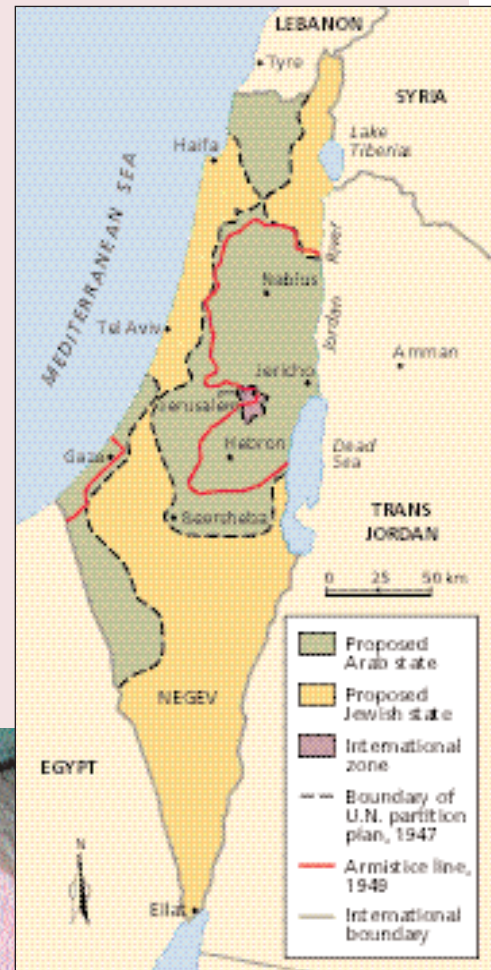


Figure 4-4 Palestinian representative Hanan Ashrawi is one of many politicians and negotiators on both sides of the Israel-Palestine conflict who have been involved in talks aimed at reaching a lasting peace agreement.

LINK-UP

continued

the Persian Gulf and to gain control of Kuwait's oil. The United Nations imposed **economic sanctions** against Iraq, in the hope that refusing to buy its oil would force its leader Saddam Hussein to withdraw his forces from Kuwait. When the sanctions failed to have this effect, the Gulf War broke out. A coalition of forces led by the United States, and including Canada, bombed and attacked the Iraqi forces using bases in Saudi Arabia and drove them out of Kuwait. The sanctions remained in effect as a way of keeping pressure on the Iraqi government.

While some people in the countries around the Persian Gulf supported the US-led attack, others did not. For example, some Muslims objected to the American presence in Saudi Arabia, the land of the Islamic holy sites of Mecca and Medina. Long after the end of the Gulf War, they resented what they saw as American interference in their affairs. In 2001, a small group of extremists—most from Saudi Arabia—took dramatic action. They hijacked planes and crashed them into the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon (US military headquarters) in Washington. These targets were symbols of US economic and military power. Over 2800 people were killed, in an attack that shocked the world.

The terrorist attacks were

planned by an exiled Saudi Arabian, Osama bin Laden, and his organization of Muslim extremists, al-Qaeda. This organization was based in Afghanistan, where the government was controlled by the Taliban, an extremist Islamic group. Declaring a “war on terrorism,” the United States led an attack on Afghanistan. The Americans were joined by several other countries, including Britain and Canada, to wipe out many al-Qaeda bases, overthrow the Taliban, and establish a more moderate government in Afghanistan.

refugee: a person who is forced to leave his or her homeland because of war, persecution, or natural disaster

economic sanctions: actions by one nation to force another to comply with international law, e.g., refusing to sell goods to or buy goods from that country



Figure 4-5 Kuwait is much smaller than Iraq but produces 15 percent of the region's oil, the same percentage as Iraq.



Figure 4-6 As Iraqi soldiers retreated from Kuwait during the Gulf War, they set fire to many of the country's oil wells. Some of the oil fires took almost a year to put out. What impact would these fires have on the environment?

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. Events in the Middle East are constantly changing. Brainstorm the types of information that would help you keep informed on these events. Where could you find this information? What types would be available in your community? What types would be available through the Internet?
2. There are often opposing viewpoints about issues in the Middle East. Why is it important to seek out several sources of information on issues of this type?
3. Explain why it can sometimes be difficult to determine your own point of view on complex issues such as those in the Middle East.