

The Middle East and the United Nations

The United Nations has been involved in various problems in the Middle East since 1948. Whereas the Korean War and the Congo issues were settled in the sense that there was no further outbreak of hostilities, the United Nations has not managed to do the same in the Middle East. Wars have broken out in 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973 and severe problems exist to this day.

After World War One, Britain had governed Palestine as a League of Nations mandate. Britain got more and more embroiled in the area and in 1947 asked the United Nations to take over the duty of running the area. The Palestinians and the Jews in the area may have detested and fought one another but both fought the British troops who were stationed there. By 1947, Britain had had enough.

The United Nations took over the area and set up an eleven-man commission to examine the problem. Their solution was to divide Palestine in half with one part for the Jews and the other for the Palestinians. The Arab nations that surrounded Palestine made it clear that this plan would not be acceptable. Regardless of this – and aware of world sympathy for the Jews in the aftermath of World War Two - the United Nations went ahead with its plan. The General Assembly approved the partition in November 1947.

The United Nations plan came to nothing. The British left Palestine in May 1948 and the Jews set up Israel almost immediately using territory given to them in the United Nations plan. The Arab nations that surrounded Israel immediately attacked with the intention of destroying the new state - the war of 1948.

The United Nations, now with a war to deal with, arranged for a four-week truce. However, the end of the truce saw the start of hostilities again. A major problem for the United Nations was the murder of their chief negotiator in the area – Count Bernadotte. His successor was Ralph Bunche and he managed to arrange for another cease-fire in 1949. This was signed by Israel and all but one of the Arab nations that had attacked Israel in 1948. However, for many it was a truce and a renewal of war was only a matter of time. The Middle East was to present to the United Nations its most difficult question.

During the 1948 conflict, 800,000 Palestinians had fled from what was now Israel and lived in refugee camps along the border of Israel and the Arab nations that surrounded Israel. Their lifestyle was poor and the humanitarian side of the United Nations was needed to improve the lot of people who felt that they had been dispossessed of their homeland. The United Nations responded to this problem by setting up the United Nations Relief and Welfare Agency (UNRWA). It was the task of UNRWA to deal with the refugee camps – provide clean water, decent tents etc. – until a political solution could be found for the refugees who would entail them returning to Israel or being accommodated by a nearby Arab nation.

These refugee camps became homes to Fedayeen – men who were willing to make raids on Israel in cross-border attacks. Fedayeen means ‘self-sacrificer’. A round of tit-for-tat attacks occurred. Fedayeen men would attack the Israelis which led to an Israeli counter-raid against the refugee settlements.

The United Nations also set-up the CCP – Conciliation Commission for Palestine. This body held talks in neutral Switzerland. The main issue that had to be addressed was the border Israel held between itself and its Arab neighbors. In 1948, Israel had taken much of the land from the Palestinians that had been scheduled under the United Nations plan to be given to them.

In 1956, a full-scale war broke out when Israel attacked the Sinai – Egypt east of the Suez Canal. Egypt, lead by Nasser, had nationalized the Suez Canal. Up to 1956, this had been co-owned by Britain and France with both countries benefiting from the profits this canal made. Now, Nasser believed that these profits should go to Egypt.

As a result of this, Britain and France had helped Israel plan out its October attack on Egypt. Their plan was simple – Israel would attack the Sinai (Egypt east of the Suez Canal) while Britain and France would attack and occupy the Suez Canal zone.

When the Security Council voted on a resolution for Israel to withdraw from the Sinai, Britain and France vetoed it. The Security Council transferred its power to the General Assembly using the 'Uniting For Peace' principle and the General Assembly of the United Nations called for a cease-fire and on November 5th 1956, it created a United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF). The role of the UNEF was to act as a buffer between the Israelis and the Egyptians thus ensuring that a cease-fire was maintained.

Just one day later the British and French launched their attack on the Suez. The United Nations was powerless to stop this attack. However, America, lead by Eisenhower, expressed its severe reservations regarding this attack and threatened to stop oil supplies to both Britain and France. The Suez Canal could not be used to gain oil as it had been shut. Therefore, unless Britain and France did what America wanted, they would be starved out of oil. They had to pull out of the Suez.

On November 16th 1956. 6000 United Nations troops arrived in Sinai to keep both Israel and Egypt apart. The United Nations troops came from Finland, Canada, Yugoslavia, Denmark, Norway, Brazil, India and Columbia. They carried only light weapons and were ordered only to use them in self-defense. The UNEF remained in the Sinai as a buffer until told to leave by Nasser in 1967. During the time they were there, 89 UNEF troops had been killed. The mission also cost the United Nations over \$200 million.

The UNEF left the Sinai in 1967 because it had agreed that if told to leave it would do so. To many observers, the order by Nasser for the UNEF to withdraw meant that trouble was brewing. Israel feared that she would be attacked and before waiting to be attack, Israel launched attacks on Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Iraq. This war lasted only six days and the fighting only stopped when the Security Council ordered a cease-fire. It also drew up Resolution 242 which they believed would restore peace to the Middle East.

Resolution 242 called for:

The withdrawal of Israeli forces from all Arab land they had occupied A solution to the Palestinian refugee problem The right of every state concerned in the Middle East to live in peace Free navigation of international waterways Secure boundaries between each nation in the Middle East.

All the involved nations signed 242 except Syria. However, it was not long before it became clear that each side – Arabs and Jews – interpreted each point differently. Each side also put a different emphasis on each point. What was important to the Arabs had much less importance to Israel. As an example, Israel declared its intention of staying in Arab land that they considered to be of strategic importance to the survival of Israel. The Arab nations viewed the withdrawal of Israeli forces from occupied Arab land as not open to interpretation. With such distrust, it was clear that some form of warfare would occur again. This happened in 1973 and once again the United Nations could do nothing to prevent it.

In 1973, Egypt had a new leader – Anwar Sadat. He announced that any future peace for the Middle East could only be settled once and for all by the use of military force. On Israel's most holy of days, Yom Kippur, Egypt attacked catching the usually vigilant Israeli forces off guard.

The United Nations called for a cease-fire and passed Resolution 338. A United Nations conference in Geneva was called but produced no result. This was an obvious rebuff for the United Nations and all future peace negotiations were taken on by the USA – not the United Nations. As a result of America's Henry Kissinger's 'shuttle diplomacy' a Disengagement Agreement was signed in January 1974. This allowed for a new UNEF to be sent to the Middle East. This new force was made up of 7000 men and was again stationed between Egypt and Israel. A United Nations Observer Force was sent to monitor the border between Israel and Syria.

Between 1973 and the 1978 Camp David agreement, most of the work done at a diplomatic level regarding the Middle East was centered on an American input. However, in 1975, the United Nations did criticize Israel regarding its treatment of those Palestinians who continued to live outside of Israel's borders in refugee camps and who wished to return to live in what they would refer to as Palestine. In 1977, the United Nations also criticized Israel's policy of building settlements on land they occupied as a result of military victories.



While most of the people of the region have ancient roots, most of the nations of the Middle East have existed for a relatively short time. This map shows modern borders and the years in which these countries gained independence.

Sources:

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