

A Short Israeli History from encyclopedia.com

Beginnings of the Israeli State

The state of Israel is the culmination of nearly a century of activity in Zionism . Following World War I, Great Britain received (1922) Palestine as a mandate from the League of Nations. The struggle by Jews for a Jewish state in Palestine had begun in the late 19th cent. and had become quite active by the 1930s and 40s. The militant opposition of the Arabs to such a state and the inability of the British to solve the problem eventually led to the establishment (1947) of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine, which devised a plan to divide Palestine into a Jewish state, an Arab state, and a small internationally administered zone including Jerusalem. The General Assembly adopted the recommendations on Nov. 29, 1947. The Jews accepted the plan; the Arabs rejected it. As the British began to withdraw early in 1948, Arabs and Jews prepared for war.

On May 14, 1948, when the British high commissioner for Palestine departed, the state of Israel was proclaimed at Tel Aviv. Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq invaded Israel, as most Palestinian Arabs fled from Jewish territory. By the time armistice agreements were reached (Jan., 1949), Israel had increased its holdings by about one-half. Jordan annexed the Arab-held area adjoining its territory, and Egypt occupied a coastal strip in the southwest, including Gaza.

The New Nation

A government was formed at Tel Aviv, with Chaim Weizmann as president and David Ben-Gurion as prime minister. The capital was moved (Dec., 1949) to Jerusalem to strengthen Israel's claim to that city. Following the Lausanne Conference of 1949, Israel allowed the return of 150,000 Arab refugees, mostly to reunite families. One major aim of the government was to gather in all Jews who wished to immigrate to Israel. This led to the 1950 Law of the Return, which provided for free and automatic citizenship for all immigrant Jews. Border incidents with Egypt, Syria, and Jordan continued.

Trouble in the Gaza area reached new heights in the mid-1950s despite UN intervention, and in 1956, Egyptian President Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal . On Oct. 29, 1956, Israel made a preemptive attack on Egyptian territory and within a few days had conquered the Gaza Strip and the Sinai peninsula, while Britain and France invaded the area of the Suez Canal. Israel eventually yielded to strong pressure from the United States, the USSR, and the United Nations and removed its troops from Sinai in Nov., 1956, and from Gaza by Mar., 1957, as UN forces were sent to the Sinai and Gaza to keep peace between Egypt and Israel. Through this war, Israel succeeded in keeping open its shipping lanes via Elat and the Gulf of Aqaba to the Red Sea.

In 1962, Israel became the scene of the celebrated trial of Adolf Eichmann . In 1963, Ben-Gurion resigned as prime minister and was succeeded in that office by Levi Eshkol . Eshkol had to cope with increased guerrilla incursions into Israel from Syria and the shelling of Israeli villages by the Syrian army from the Golan Heights.

Renewed Hostilities

In May, 1967, Nasser mobilized the Egyptian army in Sinai. The UN then acceded to his demand to withdraw from the Israeli-Egyptian border, where it had been stationed since 1956. Egypt next blockaded the Israeli port of Elat (on the Gulf of Aqaba) by closing the Strait of Tiran.

On June 5, 1967, Israel struck against Egypt and Syria; Jordan subsequently attacked Israel. In six days, Israel occupied the Gaza Strip and the Sinai peninsula of Egypt, the Golan Heights of Syria, and the West Bank and Arab sector of E Jerusalem (both under Jordanian rule), thereby giving the conflict the name of the Six-Day War. Israel unified the Arab and Israeli sectors of Jerusalem, and Arab guerrillas stepped up their incursions, operating largely from Jordan. After Eshkol's death in 1969, Golda Meir became prime minister. There followed an inconclusive period when there was neither peace nor war in the area.

On Oct. 6, 1973, on the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur, Egypt and Syria attacked Israeli positions in the Sinai and the Golan Heights. Other Arab states sent contingents of soldiers to aid in the attack on Israel. Egypt succeeded in sending troops in force across the Suez Canal to the east bank before being halted by Israeli troops. Toward the end of the fighting, the Israelis managed to send their own troops across the Suez Canal to the west bank, encircling Egypt's Third Army on the east bank and clearing a path to Cairo. They also drove the Syrians even further back toward Damascus. A cease-fire called for by the UN Security Council on Oct. 22 and 23 went into effect shortly thereafter.

Attempts at Peace

In Dec., 1973, the first Arab-Israeli peace conference opened in Geneva, Switzerland, under UN auspices. An agreement to disengage Israeli and Egyptian forces was reached in Jan., 1974, largely through the "shuttle diplomacy" mediation of U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Israeli troops withdrew several miles into the Sinai, a UN buffer zone was established, and Egyptian forces reoccupied the east bank of the Suez Canal and a small, adjoining strip of land in the Sinai. A similar agreement between Israel and Syria was achieved in May, 1974, again through the efforts of Kissinger. Under its terms, Israeli forces evacuated the Syrian lands captured in the 1973 war (while continuing to hold most of the territory conquered in 1967, such as the Golan Heights) and a UN buffer zone was created.

Golda Meir resigned and was succeeded (1974) by Yitzhak Rabin, who formed a coalition government. In 1977, the Likud party under the leadership of Menachem Begin defeated the Labor party for the first time in Israeli elections. As prime minister, Begin strongly supported the development of Jewish settlements in the Israeli-occupied territories and opposed Palestinian sovereignty.

Egypt began peace initiatives with Israel in late 1977, when Egyptian President Sadat visited Jerusalem. A year later, with the help of U.S. President Jimmy Carter, terms of peace between Egypt and Israel were negotiated at Camp David, Md. (see Camp David Accords). A formal treaty, signed on Mar. 26, 1979, in Washington, D.C., granted full recognition of Israel by Egypt, opened trade relations between the two countries, returned the Sinai to Egyptian control (completed in 1982), and limited Egyptian military buildup in the Sinai.

The 1980s to the Present

Israeli troops briefly invaded (1979) Lebanon in an unsuccessful attempt to eliminate Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) bases and forces used in raids on N Israel. On June 6, 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon in a second attempt. Israeli troops advanced to Beirut and surrounded the western part of the city, which housed PLO headquarters, and a siege ensued. Israeli troops began a gradual

move out of Lebanon (completed in 1985) after PLO forces withdrew from Beirut. A 6-mi (10-km) deep security zone within S Lebanon was established to protect N Israeli settlements.

Begin had been returned to office in 1981, but he resigned in 1983 and was replaced by Likud's Yitzhak Shamir. Undecisive majorities in the 1984 elections led to a sharing of the prime ministership by Shamir and Shimon Peres of the Labor party. Shamir, who regained sole prime ministership after the 1988 elections, strongly upheld the policy of increased Jewish settlement in the occupied territories. Large numbers of emigrants from Ethiopia and, primarily, the Soviet Union increased Israel's population by nearly 10% in three years (1989-92), leading to increased unemployment and a lack of housing.

In Dec., 1987, a popular Arab uprising (Intifada) began against Israeli rule in the occupied territories. During the Persian Gulf War in early 1991, Israel suffered Iraqi missile attacks, as Iraq unsuccessfully attempted to disrupt the allied coalition and widen the war. Peace talks between Israel, Syria, Lebanon, and a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation began in Aug., 1991.

Rabin reentered the political scene in 1992, becoming prime minister after the defeat of the Likud party and the establishment of a Labor-led coalition. He pursued Arab-Israeli peace negotiations, in which significant progress was made. In 1993, Israel and the PLO signed an accord providing for joint recognition and for limited Palestinian self-rule in the Gaza Strip and Jericho. In 1995, Israel and the PLO agreed on a transition to Palestinian self-rule in most of the West Bank, although acts of terrorism continued to darken Israeli-Palestinian relations. In 1994 a treaty with Jordan ended the 46-year-old state of war between the two nations.

In Nov., 1995, Rabin was assassinated by a right-wing Israeli extremist who opposed the West Bank peace accord with the PLO; Peres, who was foreign minister, became prime minister. In early 1996, Israel was hit by a series of suicide bombs, and Shiite Muslims launched rocket attacks into Israel from Lebanon. Retaliating, Israel blockaded the port of Beirut and launched a series of attacks on targets in S Lebanon.

The 1996 elections, in which the prime minister was elected directly for the first time, resulted in a narrow victory for Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu, who opposed Labor's land-for-peace deals. In an attempt to allay fears about Israel's future policies, Netanyahu pledged to continue the peace process. After setbacks and delays, most of Hebron was handed over to Palestinian control in Jan., 1997, and, under an accord signed in 1998, Israel agreed to withdraw from additional West Bank territory, while the Palestinian Authority pledged to take stronger measures to fight terrorism. Further negotiations over territory, however, were essentially stalled.

In the May, 1999, elections, Labor (renamed One Israel) returned to power under Ehud Barak, a former army chief of staff. He formed a broad-based coalition government, promising to ease tensions between secular and ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel, as well as to move the peace process forward. In September, Barak and Yasir Arafat, the Palestinian leader, signed an agreement to finalize their borders and determine the status of Jerusalem within a year; Israel also began implementation of a plan to hand over additional West Bank territory, which was completed in Mar., 2000.

Barak's coalition was weakened in May, 2000, when three right-of-center parties pulled out of the government. In the same month, Israeli forces withdrew from the buffer zone that had long been

maintained in S Lebanon. In July, negotiations in the United States between Israel and the Palestinians ended without success. Israeli-Palestinian relations turned extremely acrimonious when a September visit by Ariel Sharon to the Haram esh-Sherif (the Temple Mount to Jews) in Jerusalem sparked riots that escalated into a new, ongoing cycle of violence in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Israel itself. Barak resigned in Dec., 2000, in an attempt to reestablish a electoral mandate, but he was trounced in the Feb., 2001, election by Ariel Sharon, who formed a national unity government.