

Middle East Expert Offers Fresh Solutions to Deep-Seated Arab-Israeli Conflict

The latest Palestinian-Israeli battle related to Hamas ended after 11 days of heavy attacks from both sides, the liquidation of hundreds of citizens and enormous destruction. The two sides agreed to a tentative ceasefire at least for the moment; a permanent ceasefire remains only a daydream until the diverse, complicated dimensions of the problem are acknowledged and addressed.

The issues that complicate the Palestinian-Israeli conflict include Arab-Palestinian refugee relationships, religious differences, a cultural and ethnic mosaic and long-term regional interference by outside powers. Some of the issues operate subtly; other issues remain open and demanding. Whether subtle or aggressive, each issue plays an important role in diplomacy and in reaching a lasting agreement. I offer both background and possible suggestions to help move toward resolution of this conflict.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) considers Palestinian refugees “persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both homes and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict.” Known as the Arab-Israeli War, the conflict began when several Arab nations invaded territory in the former Palestinian mandate following the establishment of Israel as a state.

More than 1.5 million of the Palestinian refugees live in camps in Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. The camps usually exist on plots of government-owned land or land leased

by the host government from local landowners. The camps often have high density population and inadequate living conditions. The refugees have had a fraught history.

According to Human Rights Watch, the Arab states to which the Palestinian refugees fled in 1948 initially responded well, thought the situation would be temporary, but when the states realized the problem would be prolonged, they changed their policies toward the refugees. Most of the host countries began to oppose resettlement and naturalization and adopted policies and procedures designed to “preserve the Palestinian identity of the individuals and their status as refugees.”

Lebanon serves as home to thousands of Palestinians, many of whom arrived in the country as refugees as they attempted to escape the 1948 war between the Arabs and Israelis. The population also includes descendants of the refugees and Palestinian militias. Much of the Palestinian contingent does not have Lebanese citizenship and is not, therefore, eligible for identity cards or such government services as healthcare and education. Many Palestinians in Lebanon live in 12 refugee camps, the conditions of which are dire and which armed guerillas often control.

In 2010, Lebanon’s Parliament granted Palestinians in Lebanon permission to work legally in the private sector but could not accept employment in the public sector or such professions as medicine, law or engineering. They do not have access to state medical or educational facilities. The legislation has provided the Palestinians certain legal rights but has not greatly improved their social and economic situation.

The Middle East has birthed a plethora of religions. Zoroastrianism, arguably the oldest monotheistic religion, originated in the region in the sixth century B.C. Christianity, Islam and Judaism also emerged in the area. The Baha’I faith grew out of Shia Islam in the 19th century. Other religious groups include the Yazidis, the Copts and the

Samaritans. The Middle East displays considerable religious diversity.

Despite the diversity and the spiritual and cultural similarities among Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the three "Abrahamic religions," competition, conflict and resentment have long characterized their relationships. Intolerance and violence continue to divide Sunni and Shia Islam.

Hatred and mistrust have long been powerful between Saudi Arabia and Iran. When I was living in Iran under the Shah and working in Saudi Arabia as a consultant, the Saudi government refused to allow me to enter until a vaccination administered in Iran could be proved effective. Only after two weeks of observation and waiting in Lebanon did the Saudi government permit me to return to my duties in Riyadh. The hatred and mistrust between the two countries seem to have escalated after the Islamic Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic.

The Middle East represents an interesting cultural and ethnic mosaic. The three main ethnic groups include Arabs, Turks and Iranians, but the larger ethnic mosaic also reflects nomads and tribes. While the three main ethnic groups can claim a degree of cultural coherence within their sphere of influence, each country in the region includes groups of minorities who are different from the larger population in terms of such cultural markers as language and common values. These differences have not, however, always produced a society torn apart by conflicting primordial loyalties and ancient animosities.

The phrase "foreign interference" has long been heard in the Middle East. In the premodern era, religious references defined the term; today, specific nations provide the definition. The defining nations include England, France, Russia and the United States.

The United States has engaged in regional interference for many years. In Iran, for example, America orchestrated the coup against the government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953 and subtly supported the overthrow of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in 1979. Former President Trump brokered Abraham Accords between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. The Accords recognized the importance of maintaining and strengthening peace in the Middle East, but, as referenced above, since the conclusion of the Accords, an 11-day battle between Israel and the Palestinian militant group Hamas saw over 200 people killed in Gaza.

The Arab-Israeli conflict represents a significant factor in the Middle East conundrum and involves much of the cultural and ethnic mosaic of the region. Proxy wars continue, and relations between Arab leaders and refugees suffer from a lack of intracultural trust. Shia-Sunni differences add to the complexity of the situation.

The conflict presents the current U.S. administration a substantial challenge. The traditional emphasis on interference has not produced positive results, but a complete diplomatic withdrawal from the region will not result in a positive outcome. To promote regional peace, the various Arab nations should be encouraged to overcome their doubts about the Palestinians and work on agreements that display mutual trust. Sanctions against Iran should be lifted only with a formal statement from the government of Iran that no further arms support will be provided to Hamas nor efforts made to develop nuclear weapons. The U.S. should make every effort to conclude an Abraham Accord between Israel and Iran.

No such accord seems possible between the Arab countries and Iran because of, at least in part, the lack of trust between the Shia and Sunnis. These suggestions may seem beyond possibility, but other approaches to conflict settlement in the Middle East region have essentially failed. Why not try a totally new approach? {eoa}

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