

Contentious issues in modern Israeli history

Explanatory notes to a six-part lecture series for U3A Stonnington

Peter Schattner

Semester 1, 2024



Introduction

There are two main aims or perspectives to this series on modern Israeli history: what happened from the birth of Israel in 1948 to today, and what are some of the principal 'contentious issues' that Israel has faced during this time? These notes cover topics that are referred to in each of the lectures but the historical aspect is dealt with here as a 'timeline'. I have also added a list of the Israeli prime ministers; most of them are mentioned in the lectures.

I am well aware that there is no sharp distinction between what is put forward as the 'facts' of history and what is depicted as contentious, arguable or possibly impossible to resolve. I have tried to be fair and to put forward both sides. However, although Israel is much more than the Arab/Israel conflict, I know that this slice of history arouses strong emotions and my attempt to provide a neutral, informative story is more difficult to achieve than usual. You will have to work out what you think is 'true', based in part on the values you believe in.

Historical timeline

Lecture one: Israel's Declaration of Independence and the 1940s

132 – 135 CE – The last independent Jewish state till the modern era. It was led by Simon Bar Kokhba until it was defeated by the Roman Empire. Jews did not lose their physical, spiritual and emotional connection to the Land of Israel.

1896 – Beginning of modern political Zionism with publication of *Der Judenstaat* ('The Jewish State') by Theodor Herzl.

1917 - Britain seizes Palestine from Ottomans. Gives support to "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine through the Balfour Declaration, along with an insistence that "nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities".

1920 - San Remo Allied Powers conference following victory in WW1 grants Palestine to Britain as a mandate, to prepare it for self-rule.

1922 - Britain separates Transjordan from Mandate Palestine and forbids Jewish settlement in former.

1939 - British government White Paper seeks to limit Jewish migration to Palestine to 10,000 per year.

1941 - 1945 - Nazi Holocaust. Six million Jews murdered.

1946, July – King David Hotel bombing.

1947 - United Nations recommends partition of Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states, with international control over Jerusalem and its environs. The Jews accepted the plan; the Arabs rejected it.

1948, April – Deir Yassin massacre. Right-wing Jewish ‘militants’ kill over 100 men, women and children. One of the causes of the flight of Arabs from Palestine.

1948, May – Kfar Etzion massacre. Jewish kibbutzniks killed by local Arabs and possibly the Jordanian Arab Legion. Over a dozen were killed after surrendering. Settlements destroyed.

1948-1949 - First Arab-Israeli war. 1947 – 1948 = a civil war but following the Declaration of Independence by Israel in May 1948, several Arab countries invaded, making this Israel’s War of Independence. Armistice agreements leave Israel with more territory than envisaged under the Partition Plan, including western Jerusalem. Jordan annexes West Bank and eastern Jerusalem, Egypt occupies Gaza. The new armistice border becomes the Green Line.

Around 750,000 out of a total Palestinian Arab population of about 1,200,000 either flee or in a few cases are expelled. This is known as the Nakba or catastrophe.

1949-1960s - Up to a million Jewish refugees and immigrants from Muslim-majority countries, plus 250,000 Holocaust survivors, settle in Israel.

Lecture two: The Sinai Campaign and the 1950s

1948 – 1954 – Yemenite babies’ affair. Many babies ‘disappeared’. Most probably died of illness but there have been accusations that some babies were stolen for Ashkenazi parents.

1953, October – Qibya massacre. A reprisal when Israeli troops under Ariel Sharon attacked the village of Qibya in the West Bank, and massacred more than sixty-nine Palestinian villagers,[1] two thirds of which were women and children.

1954 – The Lavon Affair. The Minister of Defense, Pinhas Lavon, had to resign from his post when he was accused of authorising a planned Jewish terrorist action in Egypt which went wrong. The accusation was false.

1956, October – Kafr Qasim massacre. Took place in an Israeli Arab village situated on the Green Line (Israel-Jordan border); Arab civilians were returning from work during a curfew of which they were unaware, imposed earlier in the day on the eve of the Sinai War.[1] In total 48 people died, of whom 19 were men, 6 were women and 23 were children aged 8–17.

1956 - Israel colludes with Britain and France to invade Egypt during the Suez Crisis, in order to re-open canal to Israeli shipping and end armed incursions by Palestinians from Gaza and Sinai. Short conflict known as the Suez Campaign.

1957 - Israel begins to build a large nuclear reactor at Dimona in the Negev desert, with French assistance. This becomes the basis for the country's officially unconfirmed nuclear weapons programme. Facility probably was completed in **1962**.

Lecture three: The Six-Day War and the 1960s

1961- 1962 - Trial and execution of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, whom Israeli agents kidnapped from Argentina.

1964 - National Water Carrier completed, to bring water from the River Jordan to the Negev. Tensions rise with Arab neighbours over Jordan water allocations.

1964 – Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) founded.

1966 - SY Agnon is joint winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature.

1967 June – Six-Day War. After months of tension, including border skirmishes, Egypt's expulsion of the UN buffer force from Sinai and its closure of the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, Israel launches a pre-emptive attack on Egypt, and Jordan and Syria join the war. The war lasts six days and leaves Israel in control of east Jerusalem, all of West Bank, Gaza, Golan Heights and Sinai.

1967, September – Khartoum Resolution (the 3 Nos)

1967, November – UN Resolution 242. 'Land for peace' principle, following the 6-Day War.

1968 – 1970 – War of Attrition. Egyptian-Israeli shelling and skirmishes alongside the Suez Canal. Ended in ceasefire. No change in territory.

Lecture four: The Yom Kippur War and the 1970s and 1980s

1972 - Palestinian "Black September" gunmen take the Israeli team hostage at the Munich Olympics. Two of the athletes are murdered at the site and nine more killed during a failed rescue attempt by the German authorities.

1973, October - Yom Kippur War. Egypt and Syria launch co-ordinated attack against Israeli forces in the occupied Sinai and Golan Heights. Israel prevails, but only after suffering significant losses.

1974 - Gush Emunim (Block of the Faithful) movement formed to promote Jewish religious settlements on the West Bank.

1975 - UN General Assembly adopts a resolution describing Zionism as a form of racism. Rescinded in 1991.

1977 May - Menachem Begin's right-wing Likud party wins surprise election victory, partly by harnessing non-European Jews' resentment at political hegemony of European-origin Jews. Launches economic liberalisation, brings religious Jewish parties into mainstream, and encourages settlements. Known as 'The Upheaval'.

1977, November - Egyptian President Anwar Sadat visits Jerusalem and begins the process that leads to Israel's withdrawal from Sinai and Egypt's recognition of Israel in the Camp David Accords of **1978**. Accords also pledge Israel to expand Palestinian self-government in the West Bank and Gaza.

1982 June - Israel invades Lebanon (the First Lebanon War) in order to expel Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) leadership after assassination attempt by small Palestinian militant group on Israeli ambassador to London.

1982 September - Massacre of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila camps in Beirut by Israel's Christian Phalangist allies.

1984, November - Covert mass airlift of Ethiopia's Jews begins. Operation repeated in 1991.

1985 - Austerity programme tackles hyper-inflation and stabilises currency, introducing New Israeli Shekel.

1985, June - Israel withdraws from most of Lebanon but continues to occupy narrow "security zone" along border.

1987, December - First Intifada uprising begins in Gaza and spreads to West Bank. Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza forms Hamas movement, which rapidly turns to violence against Israel.

Lecture five: The Oslo Accords, the Peace Process and the 1990s

1990 - Soviet Union allows Jews to emigrate, leading to about a million ex-Soviet citizens moving to Israel.

1991 October - US-Soviet sponsored Madrid Conference brings Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Palestinian representatives together for first time since 1949. Sets in motion talks to normalise relations.

1992 - Labour returns to power under Yitzhak Rabin. Pledges to halt Jewish settlement expansion programme, opens secret talks with PLO.

1993 - Prime Minister Rabin and PLO leader Yasser Arafat sign Oslo Declaration to plot Palestinian self-government and formally end First Intifada. Violence by Palestinian groups that reject Oslo Declaration continues.

1994 May-July - Israel withdraws from most of Gaza and the West Bank city of Jericho, allowing Yasser Arafat to move PLO administration from Tunis and set up Palestinian National Authority.

1994 October - Jordan and Israel sign peace treaty.

1994 December - Yitzhak Rabin, Yasser Arafat and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres jointly awarded Nobel Peace Prize.

1995 September - Mr Rabin and Yasser Arafat sign Interim Agreement for transfer of further power and territory to Palestinian National Authority. Forms basis for 1997 Hebron Protocol, 1998 Wye River Memorandum and internationally-sponsored "Road Map for Peace" of 2003.

1995 November - Jewish extremist shoots Yitzhak Rabin dead in Tel Aviv. Shimon Peres takes over as prime minister.

1996, May - Likud Party returns to power under Benjamin Netanyahu, pledges to halt further concessions to Palestinians. Nonetheless signs Hebron Protocol and Wye River Memorandum. Settlement expansion resumes.

1998 – Wye River Memorandum.

1999 May - Labour-led coalition elected under Ehud Barak, pledges to move ahead with talks with Palestinians and Syria.

Lecture Six: Internal and external crises – the 21st century

2000 May - Israel withdraws from southern Lebanon.

2000 July - Talks (Camp David Summit) between Prime Minister Barak and Yasser Arafat break down over timing and extent of proposed further Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank.

2000, September - Likud leader Ariel Sharon visits the Jerusalem site known to Jews as the Temple Mount and to Muslims as Al-Haram al-Sharif. Palestinian protests escalate into new wave of violence called the Second Intifada (2000 – 2005).

2001, January - Failure of last-ditch efforts at restarting Israeli-Palestinian talks in Taba, Egypt; Ehud Barak loses elections to Ariel Sharon, who declines to continue talks.

2002, March-May - Israeli army launches Operation Defensive Shield on West Bank after spate of Palestinian suicide bombings. Largest military operation on West Bank since 1967.

2002, June - Israel begins building security barrier in and around West Bank. Israel says barrier aimed at stopping Palestinian attacks; Palestinians see it as a tool to grab land. Route is controversial as frequently deviates from pre-1967 ceasefire line into West Bank.

2003, June - Quartet of United, States, European Union, Russia and United Nations propose road map to resolve Israeli-Palestinian conflict, proposing independent Palestinian state. Israel and Palestinian National Authority both accept plan, which requires freeze on West Bank Jewish settlements and an end to attacks on Israelis.

2005, September - Israel unilaterally withdraws all Jewish settlers and military personnel from Gaza, while retaining control over airspace, coastal waters and border crossings.

2006 - Hamas Islamist group wins Palestinian parliamentary elections. Rocket attacks on Israel from Gaza escalate. Met with frequent Israeli raids and incursions over following years. Second Lebanon War between Hezbollah and Israel.

2007, November - Annapolis Conference in the USA for first time establishes "two-state solution" as basis for future talks between Israel and Palestinian Authority.

2008, December - Israel launches month-long full-scale invasion of Gaza to prevent Hamas and other groups from launching rockets.

2014 July-August - Israel responds to attacks by armed groups in Gaza with a military campaign by air and land to knock out missile launching sites and attack tunnels.

2017 December - US President Donald Trump recognises Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, upsetting the Arab world and some Western allies.

2019 - Benjamin Netanyahu is charged with bribery, fraud and breach of trust in connection with three separate cases.

2020 August - The United Arab Emirates become the first Gulf state to establish diplomatic relations with Israel.

2021 May - Unrest over forced evictions of Palestinians in east Jerusalem leads to conflict with Hamas and communal violence in Israeli cities.

2021 June - Naftali Bennett of the Jewish nationalist Yamina party forms a broad coalition to oust Benjamin Netanyahu.

2023 – Massive demonstrations in Israel on proposed judicial reforms.

2023, October 7 – Beginning of 5th Israel-Gaza War, principally involving Hamas.

Prime Ministers of Israel

- David Ben-Gurion (first time, 1948–53)
- Moshe Sharett (1953–55)
- David Ben-Gurion (second time, 1955–63)
- Levi Eshkol (1963–69)
- Golda Meir (1969–74)
- Yitzhak Rabin (first time, 1974–77)
- Menachem Begin (1977–83)
- Yitzhak Shamir (first time, 1983–84)
- Shimon Peres (first time, 1984–86)
- Yitzhak Shamir (second time, 1986–92)
- Yitzhak Rabin (second time, 1992–95)
- Shimon Peres (second time, 1995–96)
- Benjamin Netanyahu (first time, 1996–99)
- Ehud Barak (1999–2001)
- Ariel Sharon (2001–06)
- Ehud Olmert (2006–09)
- Benjamin Netanyahu (second time, 2009–21)
- Naftali Bennett (2021–22)
- Yair Lapid (2022)
- Benjamin Netanyahu (third time, 2022–)

Contentious issues in modern Israeli history

This list could be twice as long as it is. However, I feel that it represents a wide selection of topics that are worth discussing. Note that many of them cover ‘internal’ Israeli issues and are not about the Arab/Israel conflict.

1. Israel/Arab conflict: Is Israel guilty of ‘original sin’ or is a national homeland in Israel justice for the Jews and let’s move on?
2. Terrorism in the 1940s – what is terrorism and could either side justify their use of it in the 1940s?
3. Refugees: the Nakba and the ‘forgotten Jewish refugees’ – what are the moral rights of the Palestinian and the Mizrahi (Middle Eastern) Jews?
4. The nature of the State – how Jewish should a state for the Jews be?
5. ‘Errors’ in the use of force: the Qibya and Kafr Qasim massacres – can they be forgiven?
6. The Yemenite ‘stolen babies’ – how could this happen in Israel, or did it?
7. The Eichmann trial – what impact did this trial have on Israel?
8. The Occupied Territories – could ‘the occupation’ have turned out any other way?
9. The 1960s: the faltering of the Zionist dream? = would the early Zionist theoreticians have been happy with the evolution of Israel to be an ordinary state like so many others?
10. The lessons of the Yom Kippur War – what went wrong and why?
11. Zionism is racism (1975) – how could such a resolution pass in the UN General Assembly?
12. The Oslo Accords – were the results good or bad?
13. The legacy of Rabin – if Rabin has lived, would Israel be closer to peace or disaster?
14. The judicial reforms – who is right: the Netanyahu government or the demonstrators?
15. Antisemitism and Israel – is Israel the Jew among the nations, or are antisemitism and anti-Zionism quite different entities?
16. Israel vs the Jewish Diaspora – what is and what should be the relationship between the two?
17. After October the 7th: Israel’s future – in what way will Israel be different after the October 7 atrocities by Hamas?
18. And finally, has this course led you to change your mind about aspects of Israel’s history or its ‘contentious issues’ and if so, in what way?

Recommended reading

- Gordis, Daniel. *Israel: A concise history of a nation reborn*. HarperCollins, 2016 (pp. 560). A thorough and very well written history of Israel, which is sympathetic but fair.
- Dowty, Alan. *Israel*. John Wiley & Sons, 2021 (pp. 224). A short version of its history which not only covers the politics but also the social evolution of Israeli society.
- Dowty, Alan. *Israel/Palestine*. Polity, 5th edition, 2023 (pp. 272). An historical approach to discussing both sides of the clash between two nations in one land. Balanced and very readable.

* (Historical timeline above based largely on a version found on the BBC website titled, ‘Israel profile – Timeline’).