Israel's history

WHY WAS ISRAEL CREATED?

- The land of Israel has always been integral to Jewish religious, cultural and national life and remains so to this day.

- Zionism is the national movement of the Jewish people, calling for sovereign Jewish life in the land of Israel.

- Zionist leaders hoped that the fulfilment of such aspirations would end centuries of anti- Jewish persecution and allow for the renewal of Jewish culture, language and traditions

HOW WAS ISRAEL CREATED?

- Zionists sought to end the status of Jews as a persecuted minority, by re-establishing a majority in Palestine through immigration, settlement and peaceful agreement with the local Arabs. Most of the Jews who moved to Palestine prior to the establishment of the State of Israel came not as colonisers, but as refugees fleeing persecution in various parts of Europe. Jews did not enter Palestine by force, but purchased land and built new communities.

- The objective of establishing a Jewish homeland in Israel gained strong international support with the Balfour Declaration, issued by the British government in 1917. The British government's decision to support the foundation of a national home for the Jewish people was made known in the form of a letter written by then-foreign secretary Lord Balfour to Zionist leader Lord Rothschild.

- In September 1922, the League of Nations granted Britain a Mandate over Palestine, noting the 'historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine' and the 'grounds for reconstituting their national home in that country.'

- Under the British Mandate, three-quarters of the territory east of the Jordan River formed the Emirate of Transjordan (later the Kingdom of Jordan), and was closed to Jewish immigration. The remaining territory remained open to Jewish immigration until this was blocked by Britain in 1939.

- By 1936, the Jewish population of Palestine was approaching 400,000, close to 30% of the total.

- By 1945, the Nazi Holocaust had exterminated approximately six million Jews in Europe. After the war, tens of thousands of survivors attempted to bypass the British blockade to enter Palestine. This led to illegal Jewish immigration and a direct confrontation between the British government and the Jews of Palestine.

- In 1947, the British turned the question of the future of Palestine over to the United Nations, which established the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) to determine its future.

- The UN recommended partition into a Jewish and an Arab state, with Jerusalem under international control. The plan would have created a Jewish state with a Jewish majority on the Mediterranean coast, western Galilee, and Negev Desert.

- On 29 November 1947, the UN General Assembly voted in favour of Resolution 181, to approve the UNSCOP plan, by 33 votes to 13. The Jewish Agency accepted the plan, but the Arab Higher Committee, the Palestinian Arabs' political representatives, rejected it.

- As the British Mandate formally ended, on 14 May 1948, David Ben Gurion declared the establishment of the State of Israel in line with the UN resolution.

WHAT HAPPENED IN ISRAEL'S WAR OF INDEPENDENCE?

• As the State of Israel's establishment was declared, the armies of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria invaded the former Mandate territory with additional forces from Saudi Arabia. The Jewish forces fought with very limited resources.

• The conflict was a disaster for the Arab population of Palestine, who left in large numbers for neighbouring Arab states.

• At the same time, Israel faced the challenge of absorbing hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants. These were not only refugees from the Holocaust, but from Jewish communities fleeing persecution in Arab countries.

• The war came to an end at the beginning of 1949, with Israel signing armistice agreements with each of its Arab neighbours.

• The borders of Israel now somewhat exceeded those defined by the UN Partition Plan. What remained in Arab hands was the West Bank, which was annexed by Jordan in 1950, and the Gaza Strip, which was held under Egyptian military rule. Neither Jordan nor Egypt made any attempt to establish an autonomous Palestinian Arab state as mandated by the UN.

• Estimates of the numbers of Palestinian Arab refugees created as a result of the conflict range from 600,000 to 850,000. The refugee crisis came as a result of the war, and there was no deliberate, coordinated Jewish policy to expel the Arabs.

• In the absence of a peace agreement, those Palestinian Arabs who fled to neighbouring Arab states were not able to return.

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE SIX DAY WAR?

• In the years following Israel's establishment, pan-Arab nationalism gathered force under the leadership of President Nasser of Egypt. One of the main unifying features of Arab nationalism was hostility towards Israel and opposition to its existence. In May 1967, after a period of increasing tension, Nasser illegally ordered UN peacekeeping troops to leave the Sinai Peninsula which borders Israel, and replaced the UN troops with his own forces.

• The Arab states, led by Egypt, declared their intention to destroy the State of Israel. Israel mobilised its forces, but delayed action in the hope that international mediation would defuse the conflict. When this failed to materialise, fearing an all-out assault, Israel launched a pre-emptive strike on Egypt. Jordan and Syria joined the war on the Egyptian side.

• The War led to the occupation by Israel of the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Old City, and the Golan Heights.

• Whilst the war was a military triumph for Israel, it created long-term challenges that Israel still deals with today. In the immediate aftermath of the war, Israel hoped that the Arab states would seek peace, in return for Israeli withdrawal from territory it had captured. Israel accepted the principles of UN Security Council Resolution 242, which proposed this 'land for peace' formula. But in September 1967, at a conference in Khartoum, the Arab League made its 'three noes' declaration, rejecting peace, recognition and negotiation with Israel. As a result, Israel found itself in control of the Palestinian Arabs living in Gaza and the West Bank.

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