The Context of the Conflict
by Raja S. Tanas

Turn on the evening news just about any night lately, and you'll be treated to images of carnage and words of desperation, beamed at you from the Middle East. Such mayhem without context can cause some to harden their allegiance to one side or another; others may react by simply turning off their TV. But there are historical forces at work in the region -- forces 2,000 years in the making -- that aren't included in most broadcasts. To make sense of what appears to be nothing more than senseless violence, a brief look at the region's history is necessary.

The history of the modern Middle East region began with the rise of Islam in 622 when a powerful Arab-Muslim empire emerged, extending from the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Sea. A non-Arab-Muslim empire known as the Ottoman Empire gradually replaced the Arab-Muslim empire beginning in 1301, eventually meeting its own demise during the Great War (World War I). Palestine was a province of these two empires between 638-1918, except for one century under the rule of the Crusaders (1099-1187).

During this period, anti-Semitism in Europe was the norm. More than 18 centuries after the Romans drove the Jews out of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, European anti-Semitism reached a high point by the mid-1880s as epitomized in the Dreyfus affair. Alfred Dreyfus, then a military officer in the French army, was falsely accused of selling military secrets in Germany. The cry of "Death to the Jews" resounded throughout Europe. That was the world into which Adolf Hitler was born.

In 1897, an Austrian Jew by the name of Theodore Herzl envisioned the establishment of a separate safe haven for European Jews in Palestine, then a province of the Ottoman Empire. In Herzl, the Zionist movement was born. Its goal was to create a European Jewish homeland in Palestine.

At its inception, Zionism faced horrendous difficulties. The Ottoman Sultan refused to allow European Jews to leave for Palestine. However, the golden opportunity for the success of Zionism materialized when the Great War commenced in 1914.

For the success of the allies against the Ottoman Empire, the British promised Sharif Hussain, then the leader of the Arabs, the entire Eastern Arab homeland (the Arabian Peninsula) for an independent Arab state if his militia forces were to join the allies against the Ottomans. It was a sealed deal for Sharif Hussain. Two years later, on November 2, 1917, the British made another deal with European Zionist leaders, promising them Palestine as a homeland, if they were to support the war effort with finances and fighters. This was another sealed deal made by the British, known as the Balfour Declaration.

When the Great War was over, the victorious allies split up the Ottoman Empire into independent nation states. In the San Remo Agreement of 1920, Palestine, Lebanon, Transjordan, Syria and Iraq were created. Between 1920-73, other states were created as the British gradually left the Arabian Peninsula, resulting in the gestation of 13 states that had once made up the Arabian Peninsula.

In 1920, the League of Nations assigned Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq to a British

mandate, while France received Syria and Lebanon. (A mandate was intended to administer a newly created country until it was strong enough to establish its own government.) All of the new Arab states received their independence as promised from the British and the French between 1920 and 1973 -- except for Palestine. Under the British mandate (1920-1948), the newly created Arab state of Palestine was transformed demographically and politically into a European Jewish state. How did this come about?

The British mandate over Palestine officially began on July 1, 1920. Immediately, the British implemented a policy allowing European Jews to immigrate into Palestine according to the terms of the Balfour Declaration. Over a period of 28 years (1920-1948), the Palestinian Jewish population increased from 3 percent to 31 percent, while Jewish land ownership increased from less than 2 percent to 6.5 percent. During the same period, the Palestinian population became aware of the goals of Zionism and the plans of the British Mandate. Fierce fighting commenced as early as 1922 and lasted through 1948 between European Jewish immigrants and native Palestinians.

Just a few months before the termination of the British mandate in Palestine, the United Nations recommended the partition of Palestine into two states, one Palestinian and the other Jewish. The Palestinians refused to share their homeland. Subsequently, a civil war began around November 1947 and lasted until February 1949. The result was the birth of yet another state, taking up 78 percent of historic Palestine. This state was called Israel.

It was U.S. President Harry Truman who was instrumental in creating the State of Israel on May 15, 1948, the same day a Jew from Poland by the name of Ben Gurion unilaterally announced the birth of Israel. The new creation was immediately recognized as a sovereign nation by the United States. Franklin Roosevelt had promised Arab leaders that they would be consulted after World War II as to the fate of Palestine, but his promise died with him in the waning days of the war.

Throughout the world after 1945, there was a great deal of deserved pity and shared guilt over the Holocaust, which gave the Zionist push for a homeland great momentum. At one time European leaders even discussed forcing Germany to carve out a new Jewish state as a penance. But with Jewish settlement in Palestine already underway for two decades, and with religious beliefs tied to that place, Zionists preferred to stay the course.

President Truman made the recognition of Israel without consulting with the Congress or the American people. When asked why he did this, he replied, "I am sorry, gentlemen, but I have to account to hundreds of thousands of people who are anxious for the success of Zionism. I do not have hundreds of thousands of Arabs among my constituents."

America's involvement in the Middle East dates to that moment. In its new role as a superpower, the U.S. also inherited the messy situation that the British and the French had created in the region dating back to 1918.

On June 5, 1967, Israel waged a war against its Arab neighbors. The result was the occupation of the remaining 22 percent of Palestine (the West Bank and Gaza), the Syrian Golan Heights and Sinai. Israel returned Sinai to Egypt in 1979 as a result of

the Camp David Accords, while it annexed the Golan Heights in 1981.

After the 1967 war, Israel did not spare a moment in building settlements for Jewish newcomers from all over the world on land confiscated from the native Christian and Muslim Palestinians. Often, this required bulldozing Palestinian homes or building bypass roads that cut across their neighborhoods. As would be expected, animosity between the native Palestinians and the Israelis was there to be nourished.

Seeing no hope from Arab regimes to help them liberate their homeland, the Palestinians launched the first intifada in December 1987; it lasted until September 13, 1993, when the Oslo Accords were signed at the White House. Despite the ongoing peace process, Israel continued its policy of land confiscation, building settlements and demolishing of Palestinian homes. Meanwhile, Israel continued to offer immediate citizenship to any Jews who wanted to move in. And their calls have been answered; for example, since 1990, 1 million Russian Jews have settled in Israel.

In July 2000, the peace process culminated in Camp David II under the auspices of the Clinton administration. During the summit, the Palestinians came under tremendous pressure from the U.S. to accommodate Israeli demands to renegotiate U.N. Resolution 242, which required Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories, and U.N. Resolution 194, which required Israel to allow for the return of the Palestinian refugees. No agreement was reached. Camp David II was a total failure.

Two months later, the Israeli leader (now prime minister) Ariel Sharon provoked the Palestinians by visiting Haram Al-Sharif, the third holiest place in Islam, along with more than 1,000 Israeli soldiers. That incident triggered the current intifada that has resulted, so far, in nearly 500 Israeli and more than 2,000 Palestinian deaths.

In the aftermath of September 11, a variety of voices, inside and outside the United States, argued that the healing of the Israel-Palestine dispute was central to winning the war on terror led by President George W. Bush. Yet in the weeks after 9/11, the Bush administration maintained its stance of diplomatic disengagement from the dispute.

On March 28, 2002, the 22 member states of the Arab League offered Israel a comprehensive peace plan that would lead to full diplomatic relations between each of them and Israel if the latter were to end its occupation of Palestinian territories, the Golan Heights and Shaba Farms in southern Lebanon. A day later, Israel invaded the Palestinian towns and villages in pursuit of Palestinian militants. The world has yet to see the consequences of this military operation.

The Palestinians demand peace with justice. For them, peace and justice can take place only within the parameters of international law and implementation of U.N. resolutions. The Palestinians contend that Israel defies international law and ignores U.N. resolutions because of the strong support it receives from the U.S. to do so. For example, they highlight the more than 70 U.N. Security Council Resolutions issued against Israel since 1948, none of which has been implemented to date.

In order to allow the children of Palestine and Israel to live in peace, it is our responsibility as Americans not to support one party against the other. Rather than becoming pro-Palestinian or pro-Israeli, we should become pro-justice and call for

the application of international law, the four Geneva Conventions and the implementation of U.N. resolutions that pertain to the conflict.

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