

Introduction: What is the Middle East?

The term “Middle East” can create an image of a group of similar countries and peoples with shared politics and histories, but this is deceptive. The people of this part of the world have diverse ethnicities, religions, languages, and understandings of their histories. They experience a variety of different ways of life.

Women in Saudi Arabia, for example, where there are strict rules about how women dress and move around, live very different lives from their counterparts in Turkey, where women are used to more European styles of dress and have a more public role. In Iran, society includes city dwellers in Tehran, a city of fourteen million, as well as nomads who live in the desert. In Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon, there are large Christian minority populations as well as Muslims. The religion of Islam (which is the identity most frequently associated with the Middle East) is understood



A park in Tehran, Iran.

Nimara (CC-BY 2.0).

and practiced in many different ways across the region. The landscape also varies—from sparsely populated arid deserts to vast urban metropolises to green forests, mountains, rivers, and marshes.

The great variation in culture, history, and geography influences the societies, governments, businesses, and some of the tensions in the area. This diverse and complex region plays an important role in U.S. foreign policy.

Why does the United States maintain an active role in the Middle East?

The U.S. role in the Middle East is a subject of debate in the United States. The United States has had an active role in the Middle East for three main reasons. First, the United States wants to ensure the steady flow of oil, the fuel which currently drives much of the global economy. Second, the United States is concerned about long-term stability and wants to retain power



Gigi Ibrahim (CC-BY 2.0).

Protesters demonstrating against former Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi in downtown Cairo, Egypt in August 2012.

2 | The Middle East in Transition: Questions for U.S. Policy Introduction

and influence in this important area of the world. The U.S. involvement in Iraq and its concerns about Iran's nuclear program fall under this category. Finally, the United States has long been involved in the dispute between Israel and the Palestinians. Each of these reasons overlaps with the others, making the U.S. role in the Middle East very complicated. Within the United States, there is often strong disagreement about the best approach to these issues.

The history of the region is long and complex. In the following pages, you will read about selected parts of this history. You will confront the same questions facing U.S. policy makers:

- Which interests and values should provide the basis for U.S. policy in the region?

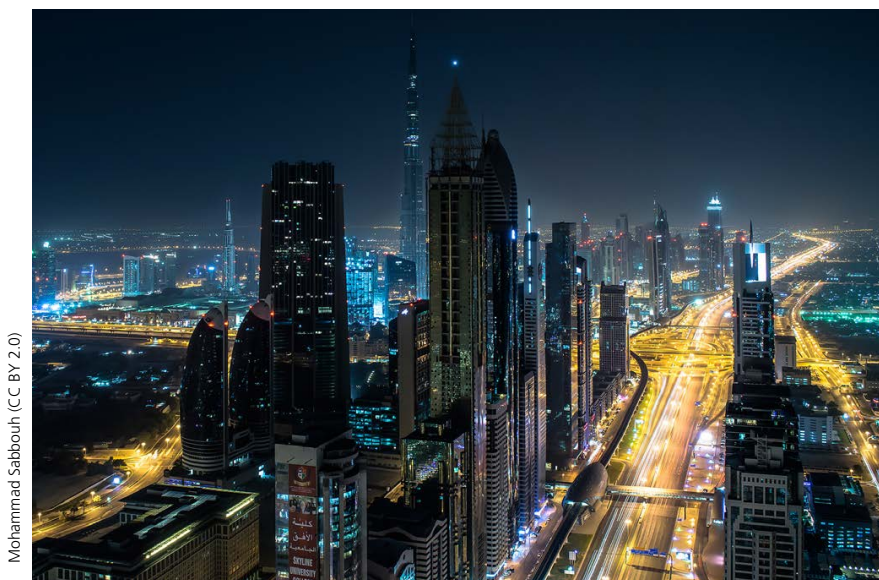


Bex Walton (CC BY 2.0).

Istanbul is Turkey's largest city with a population of fourteen million. Previously known as Constantinople and Byzantium, Istanbul was once the capital of the Roman, Byzantine, Latin, and Ottoman Empires. One of the largest cities in the world, it straddles both continents of Europe and Asia and is divided by the Bosphorus Strait.

- How should the United States respond to the rise of ISIS and the Syrian Civil War?
- How should the Middle East's enormous oil reserves and the United States' close relationship with Israel figure into policy calculations?

The reading will prepare you to wrestle with these questions. You will explore the history of U.S. involvement in the Middle East through the Cold War. You will examine the critical issues facing the United States in the Middle East today. Finally, you will have the opportunity to consider three options for U.S. policy in the Middle East.



Mohammad Sabbouh (CC BY 2.0).

The skyscrapers of Dubai, United Arab Emirates, a modern city of more than two million people.

Part I: The Modern Middle East

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most people in the United States were introduced to the Middle East through the Bible. The territories that are at the center of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict today were referred to as the “holy land.” The Middle East, which is sometimes called the cradle of civilization, is the birthplace of three of the world’s major religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

During the Middle Ages, Islamic empires in the region were at the center of the world’s science, scholarship, and commerce. For example, the Safavid Empire of Iran was a thriving center of Persian culture and commerce from 1501 to 1736. A well-administered and stable governmental system allowed the Safavid capital of Isfahan, with its population of over 400,000, to become renowned for its poetry, paintings, and scholarship.

Beginning in the 1500s, the Ottoman Turks, another of those empires, skillfully ruled over the diverse peoples and religions of the area that stretched from the Persian Gulf to the western end of North Africa for three centuries. The Ottoman Empire was militarily strong as well. In 1683, an Ottoman army invaded Europe, conquering Eastern Europe as far as the Austrian city of Vienna.

World War I & The Mandate System

In the early 1800s, Protestant missionaries from the United States traveled to the Middle East hoping to convert the Muslims of the region to Christianity. To a large extent, U.S. impressions of the Middle East were filtered through the eyes of these missionaries.

Despite the earlier wealth and scholarship of the Ottoman and Safavid Empires, the



A mosque in Homs, Syria, ca. 1930. The mosque is an example of Ottoman architecture. The Ottoman Empire ruled the lands of Syria for many years prior to the mandates.

United States Library of Congress. LC-DIG-ppmsca-18437-00011.

Middle East had fallen behind the countries of Europe and the United States in science and technology by the nineteenth century. The advances that fueled the Industrial Revolution in Britain and the United States were slow to reach the Middle East. For example, during the Emperor Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798, the Ottoman military was unable to match the new firepower of the French army. Napoleon also introduced a rapid and efficient printing press to the region.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the Ottoman Empire had lost strength. Throughout Europe and the Middle East, nationalist movements challenged large, multinational empires. These nationalist movements, as well as European imperialism, weakened the empire. In southeastern Europe, local independence movements took territory away from the Ottomans. In the northeastern reaches of the empire, ambitious Russian tsars interested in

Part I Definitions

Colonialism—Colonialism is the acquisition and exploitation of territory by a foreign power for its own economic and political benefit.

Imperialism—Imperialism is a policy of exerting cultural, economic, or political influence over other societies. Colonialism is a form of imperialism, but imperialism includes a broader array of policies that powerful states use to influence the affairs of weaker states.

Nationalism—Nationalism is a strong devotion to the interests of one's people or country. In the case of anticolonial movements in the twentieth century, nationalism was a broad term used to describe the desire to gain independence from foreign influence and control.

gaining more land drove them out. Meanwhile, the Ottoman economy increasingly fell under the domination of European imperial powers eager to gain access to oil, an energy source growing in importance for military and civilian uses. Britain and France, with no oil fields of their own, were especially interested in controlling the region. In addition, the Suez Canal, which connected the Mediterranean and Red Seas, dramatically reduced travel time from Europe to Asia and was an important trade route to Britain's colony of India.

To the east of the Ottomans, Russia and Britain competed to control Iran and its resources throughout the nineteenth century. Iran's economy and infrastructure suffered from being in the middle of the two great powers' struggle. In 1907, Russia and Britain, fearing that the newly established constitutional regime would limit their role in Iran, agreed to cooperate with each other. In 1912, they invaded Iran to assure "stability" and "security."

How did World War I affect the Middle East?

World War I, which began in 1914, ultimately destroyed the Ottoman Empire. In the early months of the war, the Ottoman Empire

allied itself with Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Although the decisive battles of the war took place in Europe, the Middle East was thrown into turmoil as well. British forces, with the assistance of their Arab allies, drove Ottoman armies out of most of the Empire's Arab provinces. Fighting between Russia and the Ottomans in southeastern Europe turned vast areas into wasteland.

During the war, parts of Iran were occupied by the Ottoman Empire, Russia, and Britain. Iranian leaders had hoped to free themselves from European influence after World War I. But after the Ottomans were defeated and the Russians left during their own revolution in 1917, the British took steps to make sure they could continue to access Iranian oil.

What was the Sykes-Picot Accord?

Meanwhile, much of the most important action took place away from the battlefield. In 1916, diplomats from Britain and France signed a secret treaty concerning the postwar division of the Ottoman Empire. Under the terms of what was known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the British and French agreed to divide the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire between themselves.

"It is accordingly understood between the French and British governments... [that] France and... Great Britain shall be allowed to establish such direct or indirect administration or control as they desire and as they may think fit to arrange with the Arab state or confederation of Arab states."

—Sykes-Picot Agreement, 1916

How did President Wilson's principle of "self-determination" affect the Middle East?

U.S. President Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921) presented the main obstacle to British and French plans to control the Middle East. When the United States joined World War I in 1917, Wilson insisted that his country was fighting for a higher set of ideals than the

European powers. He announced a sweeping fourteen-point peace plan that he hoped to implement at the end of the war. Among the key principles of Wilson's proposal was a call for a postwar international system (a "League of Nations") based on "self-determination," or the right of nations to govern themselves.

“The Turkish portion of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development...”

—Point XII of the Fourteen Points, Woodrow Wilson, 1918

Arab leaders applauded Wilson's views. They saw the president's emphasis on self-determination as an endorsement of Arab efforts to govern themselves without outside interference. In contrast, the British and French realized that self-determination undermined their plan to impose the Sykes-Picot Accord and redraw the international borders of the Middle East.

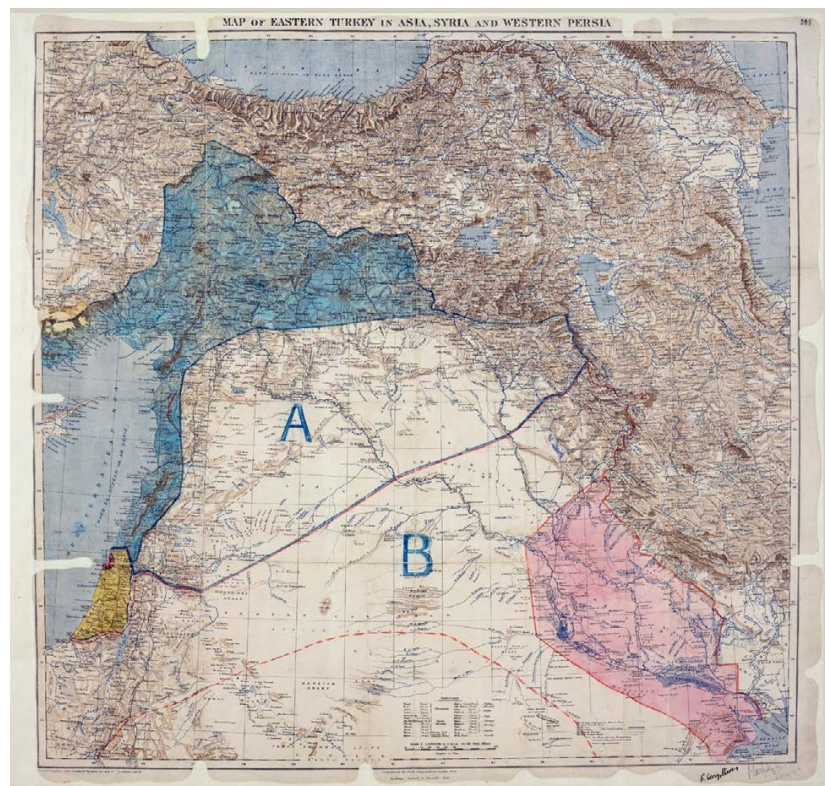
Ultimately, at the Paris Peace Conference following World War I, Wilson backed down from his call for self-determination. His European counterparts forced a compromise that allowed European countries not only to keep their existing colonies but also to expand their empires into new regions, including in the Middle East.

When Wilson returned to the United States, he encountered strong opposition to U.S. participation in the new international system he had imagined. In 1919, the

U.S. Senate rejected the treaty that Wilson had helped negotiate and refused to join the League of Nations. Over the next two decades, U.S. leaders chose to be involved in international affairs only in ways that were beneficial to the United States. Once the United States had retreated from the international scene, Britain and France were able to divide the defeated Ottoman Empire despite objections from Arab leaders.

How did the “mandates” allow European empires to exert control in the Middle East?

The newly-formed League of Nations claimed that many of the areas that had been controlled by the Ottoman Empire were unprepared for self-governance and needed time, assistance, and advice from “advanced” powers before gaining independence. The League established “mandates,” which gave Britain and France the authority to control and manage the new states that had been carved out of



The map that Sykes and Picot drew on to divide the former Ottoman Arab Provinces between Britain and France. Area A was to be under French control and area B under British control.

Royal Geographical Society.

6 | The Middle East in Transition:
Questions for U.S. Policy
Part I

the Ottoman Empire. In truth, the mandates allowed European empires to exert control over former Ottoman territories for their own economic and political gain.

While France took over Syria and Lebanon, the British controlled Iraq, Kuwait, Palestine, Jordan, and most of the coastal areas of the Arabian peninsula. Although the British and French did not call these areas “colonies,” the people living within these mandates saw themselves as subjects of European colonialism.

With Russia weakened by civil war, Iran increasingly fell within Britain’s sphere of economic domination as well. Turkey and Saudi Arabia were the only Middle Eastern countries to attain complete independence after World War I. In Turkey, a nationalist movement overthrew the last remnants of the Ottoman Empire and established a republic in 1923. In

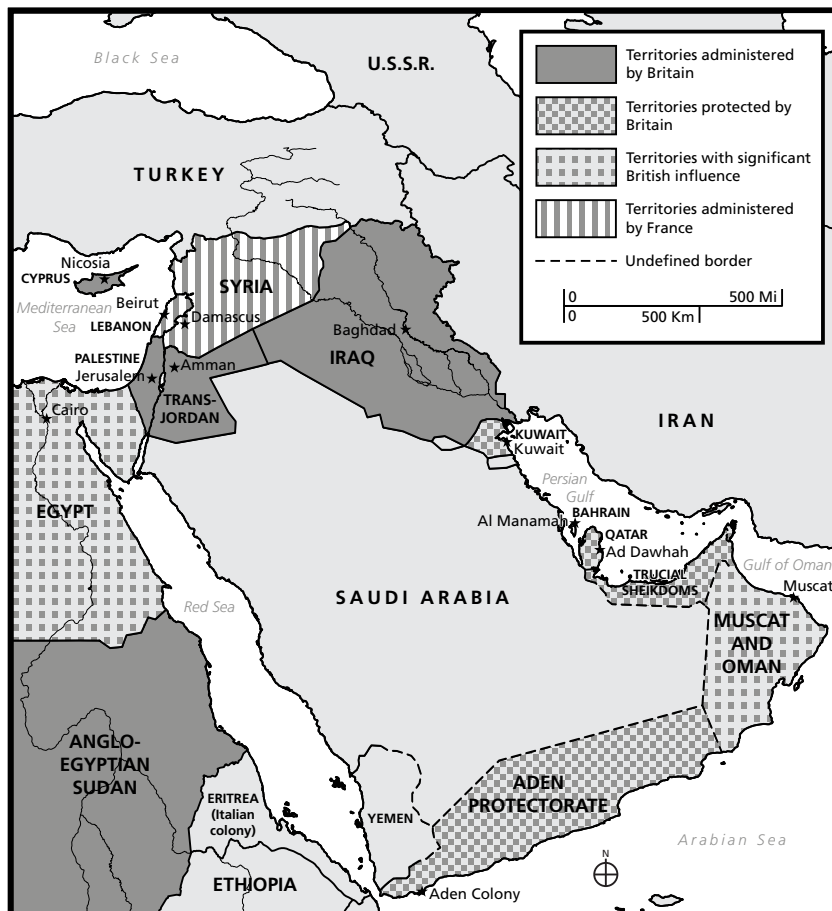


George Westmoreland. © Imperial War Museums (Q 12366)

Damascus, Syria, October 2, 1918, the day after it had been occupied by Allied forces. Syria became a French Mandate after the Paris Peace Conference.

the Saudi Arabian kingdom, leaders preferred not to have connections with the international world.

The outlines of the countries of the present day Middle East were clearly recognizable by the 1920s. With few changes, the map drawn at the Paris Peace Conference is the same one that exists today.



British and French influence in the Middle East, 1926.

Oil Politics

The contest for European control of the Middle East during and after World War I was driven largely by oil. The war effort had been powered mostly by coal, but far-sighted military strategists understood that the next major war would be fueled by oil. Oil was quickly becoming the lifeblood of industrial economies around the world.

“I am quite clear that it is all-important for us that this oil should be available.”

—Arthur Balfour, British foreign secretary, 1918

How did the United States become involved in the oil politics of the Middle East?

Compared to Europe, the United States was a latecomer to the oil politics of the Middle East. Unlike Britain and France, the United States was an oil giant and produced roughly two-thirds of the world's oil during World War I. Nonetheless, U.S. policy makers worried that domestic supplies would run out and encouraged U.S. oil companies to begin looking overseas for new oil reserves.

To maintain good relations with the United States in the 1920s, the British agreed to allow U.S. oil companies to participate in the development of the Middle East's oil resources. At the time, the two main centers of oil production in the region were northern Iraq and the Iranian side of the Persian Gulf.

Serious oil exploration in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait did not take place until the 1930s. Leading members of the Saudi royal family were reluctant to open their country to foreign oil firms in the 1920s because they were worried that their traditional way of life would be disrupted.

But the Saudis also wanted to increase their wealth and reduce poverty in their kingdom. In 1933, they signed a sixty-year agreement with Standard Oil of California (SOCAL). In exchange for \$175,000 up front and the promise of royalty payments on any oil produced, SOCAL was permitted to explore 360,000 square miles of eastern Saudi Arabia (an area larger than Texas and Oklahoma combined). SOCAL invested \$10 million before making a major discovery in 1938. At about the same time, a British-American partnership also struck oil in Kuwait.



R. S. Leonard/Saudi Aramco World/PADIA. Used with permission.

SOCAL changed its name to ARAMCO in 1944. This aerial photograph of the ARAMCO headquarters and workers' community in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia was taken in 1947.

What role did oil politics play in World War II?

World War II illustrated the geopolitical importance of oil. The eruption of war in 1939 dashed hopes of turning a quick profit from the newly discovered oil fields of the Middle East. Instead of expanding production, U.S. and British leaders wanted to prevent the energy resources of the Middle East from falling into the hands of Nazi Germany. In 1941, British and Soviet troops jointly occupied Iran to block German forces from entering. Technicians even made plans to destroy the oil wells of the Persian Gulf in case Germany invaded the region. World War II had a profound impact on the position of the Middle East in international affairs.

As strategists in World War I had foreseen, oil was essential for the armies of World War II. The decisive weapons of the conflict—airplanes, tanks, and military trucks—all ran on fuels derived from oil. The war aims of the leading Axis powers, Germany and Japan, were shaped by their quests for oil resources.

The United States was the industrial engine of the Allied victory in World War II. Protected from attack by two oceans, U.S. industry boomed. By the end of 1942, U.S. military production surpassed the output of Germany and Japan combined. During the next year, U.S. factories turned out roughly 100,000 warplanes. The United States also had abundant oil reserves. In 1940, for example, the United States produced 63 percent of the world's oil (compared to less than 5 percent from the Middle East). U.S. leaders feared that demand would soon outstrip supply. Like their British and French counterparts in World War I, U.S. officials in World War II wanted to secure their country's access to foreign oil.

“If there should be a World War III it would have to be fought with someone else's petroleum, because the United States wouldn't have it.”

—Henry Ickes, United States secretary of the interior, 1943

Why was Saudi Arabia so important to the United States?

The U.S. strategy in World War II included paying new attention to Saudi Arabia. Before 1939, the United States did not have a single diplomat in the country. But in 1943, President Franklin Roosevelt (1933-1945) began providing aid to the Saudi monarchy, which was on the verge of financial collapse because of the war. Over the next decade U.S. involvement in Saudi Arabia increased dramatically as U.S. citizens consumed more gasoline in their cars and industry boomed. SOCAL's 1938 discovery of a huge oil field brought increased cooperation between Saudi Arabia and the United States that continues to this day. (SOCAL changed its name to ARAMCO, or Arab-American Oil Company, in 1944.) Since then, oil has been a central pillar of U.S. policy in the Middle East.

The Creation of Israel

The creation of Israel in 1948 complicated U.S. efforts to retain allies in the Middle East. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, the Jewish quest for a homeland gained support in the

UN Partition of Palestine, 1947



United States. But most Arab leaders opposed the creation of Israel because the country was carved out of lands where Muslim and Christian Arabs already lived. Saudi King Saud Ibn Saud even threatened to break his contract with ARAMCO to protest U.S. policy. Nonetheless, the United States played a key role in bringing the Jewish state into existence. The story of Israel's creation starts in the late 1800s.

What is Zionism?

“Zion” is a Hebrew word for the land of Israel. Zionism, the movement for establishing



Library of Congress. LC-DIG-ppmsca-18902.

The city of Jerusalem in the early twentieth century. This photograph was taken by members of the American Colony—a colony in Jerusalem formed in 1881 by a small religious society of U.S. (and later also Swedish) Christians. The American Colony gained the trust of the local Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities through doing charitable work with people in Jerusalem regardless of religious affiliation.

the state of Israel, had its origins in Europe, where Jews had long been subjected to persecution. At the end of the nineteenth century, some Jewish intellectuals argued that Jews could flourish safely only by establishing an independent state. They looked in East Africa and South America before settling on Palestine, a significant region in Jewish history. In the early 1900s, these Zionists started buying land there for Jewish settlements.

“One fundamental fact—that we must have Palestine if we are not going to be exterminated.”

—Chaim Weizmann, Zionist leader, 1919

What promises did Great Britain make to Arabs and Jews during World War I?

In 1917, Britain issued the Balfour Declaration, pledging to help establish “a national home” for Jews in Palestine. The British hoped that the declaration would rally Jewish opinion, especially in the United States, behind the Allied war effort in World War I. The British also promised Sharif Hussein, the ruler of Mecca, that they would help to set up an independent Arab state across all of the Arab areas of the Ottoman Empire after the war. In exchange, Hussein began a rebellion against the Ottomans that helped the Allies win the war. These two promises and the misunderstand-

ings that followed proved to have long-term effects on the Middle East.

Between 1922 and 1939, as Zionists moved to Palestine, the Jewish population in Palestine rose from 84,000 to 445,000, or about 30 percent of the total population. But the Zionist movement increasingly found itself at odds with the aspirations of Palestinian Arabs seeking to forge a state of their own. British efforts to strike a balance between Palestinians and Jews failed to hold down the escalating tensions.

Why did many Jews head to Palestine in the 1940s?

During World War II, Adolf Hitler sought to exterminate all of the Jews of Europe. Six million Jews were put to death by the Nazis. After the war, hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees saw immigration to Palestine as the only hope for rebuilding their lives. The Holocaust also won the Zionists widespread sympathy in the United States. President Truman (1945-1953) became personally committed to the Zionist cause.

In 1947, the British announced they would leave Palestine within a year, turning over responsibility for the mandate to the newly formed United Nations (UN). A plan to partition the mandate between Jews and Palestinian Arabs passed the UN General As-

sembly by two votes, thanks in large part to U.S. lobbying.

How did Israel's creation plant the seeds of conflict?

The Zionists viewed the UN partition plan as their best hope for a Jewish state, and accepted it. The Arab world did not, fearing that Arabs, who were in the majority, would become subject to a minority immigrant population. Some also felt that the creation of Israel would lead to instability in the region.

Knowing the British would pull their troops out the day the partition went into effect, Zionists began to take control of the territory allotted to them by the UN, including many predominantly Arab towns that had been included in the Jewish zone. As the date of the British departure approached, violence erupted as each side fought to extend its control. Fighting soon engulfed much of Palestine. This violence was intense; there were terrorist acts on both sides.

With the withdrawal of the last British forces in May 1948, Israel proclaimed itself a state and immediately won recognition from the United States and the Soviet Union. The Arab states refused to recognize Israel.

For some time, Palestinian Arabs had been supported in their fight by men and arms from neighboring Arab countries. The day after Israel declared itself an independent state, forces from Egypt, Syria, Transjordan (now known as Jordan), Lebanon, and Iraq invaded Israel.

Fearing just such an attack, Zionist leaders had been collecting weapons for years. By the time a truce was reached in January 1949, the Zionists had seized a large portion of the land that the UN had designated for the Palestinians. Israel refers to this conflict as the War of Independence; Palestinians often refer to it as the “disaster” (*nakba* in Arabic).

What was left of the former mandate was claimed by Transjordan (which absorbed the West Bank) and Egypt (which held the Gaza Strip). Arab countries refused to make peace with or to recognize the fledgling Israeli state. Without a treaty, the cease-fire lines in effect became the borders between Israel and its neighbors.

The animosity set the stage for decades of conflict. More than 750,000 Palestinians fled or were forced from their homes and became refugees. Those with skills, money, or connections fled to neighboring countries. The vast majority were not so fortunate and neighboring countries were unwilling to take them in. By 1950, nearly one million Palestinians lived in UN refugee camps in Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. (In 2014, there were 1.5 million Palestinian refugees living in fifty-eight UN camps). Israel, a new country, found itself surrounded by countries that were hostile to its very existence. Security issues were a top priority for Israel's government.

Although the Truman administration approved a \$100 million loan for Israel, U.S. policy remained torn. Within the State Department (the governmental body responsible for carrying out U.S. foreign policy), many officials advised against supporting Israel. They feared an Arab backlash against the United States. These fears were based in part on the United States' need for oil from Arab nations, and also on the growing presence of the Soviet Union following World War II.



The United States National Archives.

President Truman (left) in the Oval Office receiving a menorah as a gift from the Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion (center), and the Ambassador of Israel to the United States, Abba Eban (right). May 8, 1951.