

THE WIDER WORLD

Palestine: Sowing the Seeds of a Real 'Forever War'

By Diane Chido
October 2023

Contributor Note: This week, I had intended to continue our series on [migration](#). That ongoing global humanitarian crisis cannot wait, but my take on it can. I plan to resume that series after turning attention to the events in Israel and the Gaza Strip.

The undisputed facts are that on Oct. 6, members of the Islamic extremist group Hamas made a three-pronged attack on Israel from the Gaza Strip – by land, sea, and even using hang gliders by air. The news media has documented ongoing death and casualty tolls on each side, the estimated number of Israeli hostages held in Gaza, current Israeli counterattacks, and the expected ground invasion.

There are also complex regional and international implications of this event that deserve exploration, including:

- *Likely suspension of a pending U.S.-brokered peace agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia*
- *Distraction from the ongoing war in Ukraine and the ability of the U.S. and European countries to continue their support*
- *Possible consent, if not direct support, in planning and executing this attack by Iran, Syria, and potentially other countries or groups.*

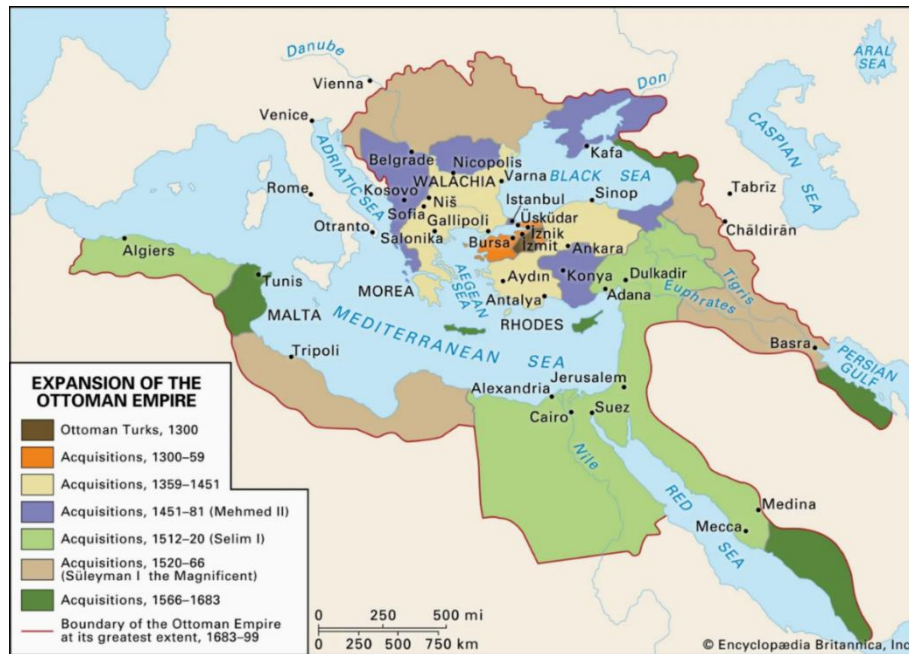
- *Challenges posed by Israel's current right-wing ruling coalition's unyielding attitude toward resolving the Israeli occupation of Palestinian areas discussed in a previous [essay](#)*
- *Political situation in the U.S. with no Congressional leadership, its constitutional mandate to declare war, as well as the newly appointed U.S. Joint Chief and several other senior service chiefs, suspension of promotion approval by a single member of Congress of over 300 senior military staff, and the looming threat of a government shutdown on November 17*

Here, I focus on what I believe is first needed by many: a better understanding of the historical context for this very long conflict that we are now seeing play out in real time. I wrote this on Thursday, Oct. 12, and worked with my editors until it was filed for publication on Monday, Oct. 16.

To explore the onset of the current violence in Israel and the Gaza Strip, it is best to look back at the history that has shaped the region. A more recent time and place would be the formation of the state of Israel in 1947. Another – much further back – would be to the biblical story of Yahweh parting the Red Sea and assisting the Israelites in escaping captivity in Egypt. That story tells us that the Lord of Israel brought his chosen people to a Promised Land.

For our purposes, let us turn to the era of the Ottoman Empire.

The Ottoman Empire was founded by Osman I after many decades of effort by tribal chiefs (including Osman's possible father, Ertuğrul) to unite the Turkish people of Anatolia (present-day [Türkiye](#) and parts of the Levant) over a thousand years ago. For those interested in this ancient tale, I highly recommend the lengthy but engaging series [Diriliş: Ertuğrul](#), which may be more about Turkish nationalism than history, but it still gives enough history to be of value.



Ottoman Empire expansion, 1300-1683

Modern history sets the origin of the Ottoman Empire at about 1300 with its height in the late 1680s.^[i] Essentially, it covered the area around the Black Sea, Eastern Mediterranean, and northern Red Sea through the start of World War I.

The starting gun for that Great War was the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914 by Bosnian Serb nationalist Gavrilo Princip. The Archduke was heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, seated in Vienna. This was considered a critical bastion of white “Europeanness” against the Muslim Ottoman Turks. Ferdinand was a household name across Europe and North America at this time, as he and his elegant wife, Sophie, who was also killed that day, had made extensive global tours and their fame would rival that of any major Hollywood star today.

Because the Balkans were Slavic, not Turkish, and mainly Christian, not Muslim, except for the Bosnians, these peoples were becoming increasingly restive in seeking independence from the Ottomans. World War I became a messy war of allegiances among interrelated European royal houses. It was also a European war against the Ottomans with heavy doses of religious fervor involved. One could almost say that this war settled the half-century European struggle for dominance between Catholics and Protestants sparked by the publication of Martin Luther’s famous 95 *Theses*^[ii] in 1517.

The Ottoman Empire had overextended itself by this time and was threatened by internal dissent. This wasn’t just from the ever-restive Balkans; it also included

the Committee of Young Turks, a group of junior military officers, who wanted to modernize the country and orchestrated the deposition of the last Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamit in 1909.^[iii] The Young Turks installed Abdul Hamit's brother Muhammad as Sultan Mehmet V, replacing absolute rule with a constitutional monarchy. These crises led to the application of the name "The Sick Man of Europe" to the Ottoman Empire. World War I drove the stake into the heart of the Sick Man and led to its ultimate breakup.

As a result, the victors in World War I divided up the spoils with the Caucasus region, including present-day Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, and Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, as well as parts of southern Russia going to the Russian Empire, which itself was also "sick" and would be destroyed by the Bolsheviks by 1920. The Balkans became the independent country of Yugoslavia, which would spectacularly collapse in the 1990s. The nation of Türkiye would remain of the rump state, mainly across Anatolia, while much of the old Persian Empire would become the modern state of Iran, and the allied French and Brits would carve up the rest of the Middle East. This is the part of the story that interests us today.

[i] "Ottoman Empire," *Britannica*, latest update October 9, 2023 available [here](#), accessed on October 12.

[ii] Full text of 95 Theses in English available [here](#), accessed on October 12, 2023.

[iii] "Images of Twentieth Century Genocide: Decoding Symbols and Heeding Warnings," Diane Chido, 2006 *Mercyhurst University Masters Thesis for Department of Intelligence Studies*, May 3, 2006 available [here](#), accessed on October 12, 2023



In 1916, the French and British made a secret agreement, the Sykes-Picot Agreement, so named for their respective ministers who negotiated the treaty, with Russian and Italian support that at the end of the war, they would divide the Middle East.^[vi] Due to the traditional European imperial hubris that similarly divided up much of Africa in 1885,^[v] as well as a lack of cultural understanding that relied on rivers, existing borders, and lines of latitude and longitude,

this resulted in a century of conflict in the region.

The mechanics of British alliances during World War I, as well as the complex cultural and ethnic divisions of the region – including the Shi'a-Sunni divide, which was no less divisive than the Catholic-Protestant division in Europe –

were known to various degrees by the European powers, brilliantly illustrated in the epic film *Lawrence of Arabia*. They seemed to believe that all Arabs could be brought together under a singular Arab chief. They also recognized as part of the “Arab question” that they would have to resolve the thorny issue of Palestine. The region at the time was mainly inhabited by Arabs, but the British government was greatly influenced by European and North American Jews, who insisted that although they had largely dispersed from the region two thousand years ago, Talmudic and Biblical testimony ensured that this land was given to the Jews by their god.

Throughout the early 20th century, European and American Jews under the auspices of the Zionist Federation were rapidly purchasing land from the Palestinians to begin to settle in this place and ensure their claim to an independent state along the eastern coast of the Red Sea. This was addressed by the Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917, made to the British Cabinet consisting of only these few lines:

I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet.

His Majesty's Government view with favour [sic] the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours [sic] to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.

I should be grateful if you would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.[vi]

In hindsight, this declaration can be viewed as criminally naïve. How can both people peacefully inhabit the same piece of land? As we have seen in the ensuing century of strife, the answer is: they cannot.

For the next three decades, the victorious European powers held protectorates in the region as dictated by the Sykes-Picot Agreement. This is why there were fighting and proxy battles during World War II to consolidate these and Northern African spheres of influence. With the post-war emergence of the Cold War, American diplomats were increasingly concerned that the Arabs in the region would ally with the Soviet Union and placed greater emphasis on their support for unlimited Israeli settlement in the aftermath of the Holocaust. President Franklin D. Roosevelt had given his personal assurances in 1945 that nothing would be settled in the contested region without both Arab and Jewish consultation, but when he died, his promises went with him.

On November 29, 1947, the newly formed United Nations adopted Resolution 181 (also known as the Partition Resolution). This divided Great Britain's former Palestinian mandate into Jewish and Arab states as of May 1948 when Britain withdrew. Of note, just like the issue of slavery being kicked down the road in the U.S. Constitution, Resolution 181 determined that "the area of religious significance surrounding Jerusalem would remain a *corpus separatum* under international control administered by the United Nations." According to the U.S. State Department official history, "On May 14, 1948, David Ben-Gurion, the head of the Jewish Agency, proclaimed the establishment of the State of Israel. U.S. President Harry S. Truman recognized the new nation on the same day."^[vii] Thus, the seeds of future conflict were nurtured.

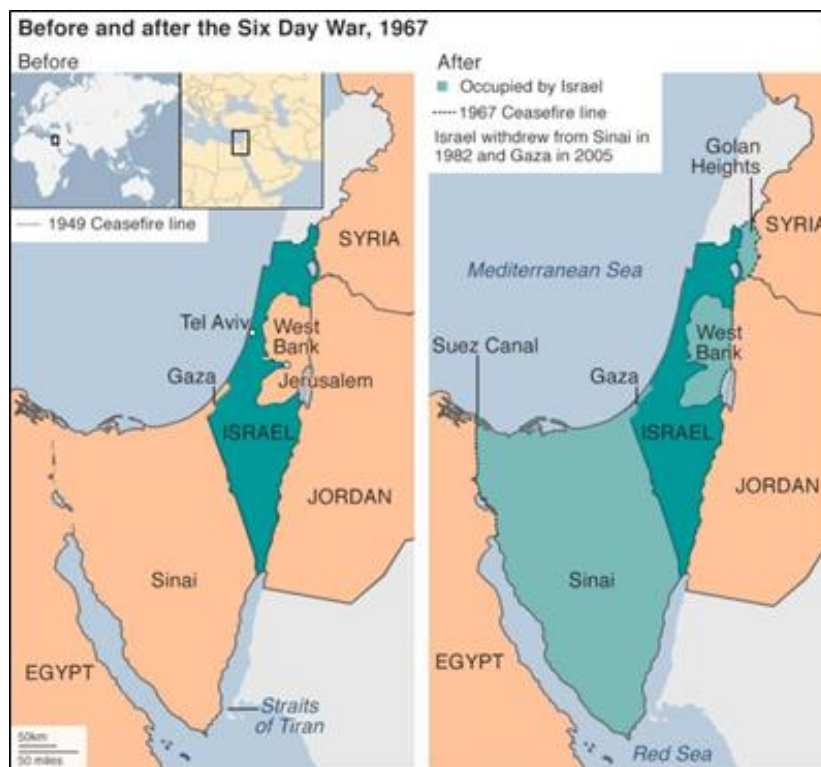
European Jews flocked to the new state within the boundaries of the mandated areas, which quickly became a treacherous neighborhood, surrounded by Arab enemies on all sides.

[iv] "Unintended consequences: The Sykes-Picot carve-up led to a century of turbulence," *The Economist*, May 12, 2016 available [here](#), accessed on October 12, 2023.

[v] "130 Years Ago; Carving Up Africa in Berlin," DW, February 25, 2025 available [here](#), accessed on October 12, 2023.

[vi] Balfour Declaration, The Avalon Project of the Lillian Goldman Law Library at Yale University, available [here](#), accessed on October 12, 2023.

[vii] "Creation of Israel, 1948," *Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations*, U. S. State Department History, available [here](#), accessed on October 12, 2023



Israeli Territory before and after the Six-Day War, 1967

The 1956 Suez Crisis followed when Israel invaded Egypt for refusing Israeli ships passage through the Suez Canal. This led to a United Nations agreement on free passage. Then the Six-Day War in 1967 followed, as Israel invaded the Sinai Peninsula and the Egyptian occupied Gaza Strip. Having caught Egypt unaware, the Israeli Air Force achieved full air control. By the end of the week, Israel had control of Sinai, Gaza, and Syria's Golan Heights, as well as the West Bank of the Jordan River.

On October 6, 1973, a coalition of Arab allies launched an attack on the Israeli holiday of Yom Kippur (the day of atonement) also during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. This war lasted for three weeks and essentially ended in a stalemate.

The recent attack on Israel by the Islamic extremist group Hamas was intentionally launched on the 50th anniversary of the 1973 unsuccessful invasion. This assault is the most recent in a long line of conflicts seen throughout history. To better understand today's tensions erupting in violence gripping the world's attention and provoking military response, knowing the history of the region – and the people and cultures present there – reveals the complexity of the situation.

Our next installment will address the complex geopolitical challenges surrounding this resumption of conflict, including the items in the note at top.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diane Chido is an Erie native who spent her early career in Washington, D.C, returning to found DC Analytics, a research and analysis firm. She has taught Intelligence Studies at Mercyhurst University, Political Science at Gannon University, and Cultural Analysis at the US Army War College and has conducted research for numerous US defense agencies. She holds an MS in Applied Intelligence Analysis, an MA in Russian Language, and a BA in International Relations and Soviet Studies.



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