

The Gaza Strip is a ribbon of land on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea, 25 miles long and as little as five miles wide. The whole of it is only slightly larger in square miles than the City of Fort Wayne.

With more than 2 million people, Gaza Strip is one of the more densely populated areas on the planet. Today, most of those people are homeless, living in tent cities in a smaller and smaller portion of the tiny land. One in eight children are chronically malnourished; there is minimal employment and the large majority of families are water-insecure. Only half of its 38 hospitals are even partially operable.

Three years ago last week, Gaza was the launching point for Hamas terrorists who killed 1,195 people and injured 8,730, took 251 hostages and prodded Israel into a brutal, prolonged air and ground response. Since then, some 74,000 Gazans have died, according to figures cited by the United Nations from the Gaza Ministry of Health, and 175,000 have been injured. Today, despite a nominal ceasefire agreed to last October, the killing continues.

Across the border, Israelis also live in dread of further terror attacks and fiercely debate whether their nation's response has gone too far as a potentially historic national election looms yet this month.

In America, long Israel's staunchest friend, another question looms: Do we continue to lend military and economic support to an ally whose challenges are formidable but whose actions seem to many at odds with its basic values, and America's?

Gaza is not easy to find on a map. On the west is the Mediterranean; to the southwest, Egypt. Israel, itself less than a quarter of the size of Indiana, is at Gaza's north and east.

In ancient times, its geography made Gaza history's plaything.

Once a prosperous trade center, what is now Gaza City has been inhabited for 3,000 years. It was situated, with a nearby harbor, on the main route between Egypt and the empires to its north. But its key

location also made it a target for conquest. Over the centuries, notes the Encyclopedia Britannica, Gaza was conquered by the Assyrians, the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Persians, Israel's King David and Alexander the Great of ancient Macedonia.

The roots of both Jews and Muslims run deep in this land between the sea and the Jordan River which comprises modern-day Israel, Gaza and the West Bank — known for hundreds of years as Palestine.

Jews ruled kingdoms here in the years before the Romans conquered Palestine a few decades before the birth of Christ. The Roman Empire's heavy-handed rule led to a series of unsuccessful uprisings by the Jewish population. Harsh reprisals led many to flee to Europe, North Africa or other parts of the Middle East. Their story undergirds the concept of the Jewish diaspora, a people dispersed across the earth waiting for the day they could return to their homeland.

The Islamic religion originated in what is now Saudi Arabia. Islamic Arabs conquered Palestine in the seventh century, and historian Michael Scott-Baumann writes, "over time, most of the population adopted Arabic as its language and Islam as its religion, although a substantial Christian community and a small Jewish one remained."

Muslims, Jews and Christians lived peacefully side by side for centuries. In 1517, Palestine and Iraq were conquered by the Ottoman Empire, a Turkish Muslim sultanate.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, Jews in the Russian Empire began to flee an increasingly anti-semitic atmosphere there and some of them chose to return to Palestine.

The years preceding World War I saw the early stirrings of the Zionist movement — whose adherents argued that Jews should be allowed to return and colonize Palestine as their ancestral homeland. Many Arabs in Palestine began to question why they should be ruled by non-Arab Turks and began to identify not just as Muslims or Arabs but as a distinct Palestinian nation.

At the end of the war, Great Britain took control of Palestine and began to mull the idea of a Jewish colony there.

Britain made several policy decisions that proved crucial to the fate of Palestine and its peoples. Neither the region's Arab nor Jewish inhabitants seemed of prime concern as those decisions were made.

One brief letter had especially far-reaching consequences. In November 1917, British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour wrote a letter to Lord Rothschild, a leader of Britain's Jewish community, and declared:

"His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." For the appearance of balance, he added, "It is clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may harm the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine."

What wasn't said was as important as the 65 words in what came to be known as the Balfour Declaration. As Scott-Baumann wrote, "The declaration contained no sense of Palestine as an Arab land," nor did it acknowledge that the "non-Jewish communities" comprised 90 percent of the region's population.

Palestinian Arabs who had been led to support England's war effort by implicit promises that the end of Ottoman rule would mean the establishment of Arab states in the region were to learn that Britain would take over the governance of Palestine, Iraq and what is now Jordan for the foreseeable future and France would administer Syria and Lebanon.

For the next three decades, British leaders talked out of all sides of their mouths in an effort to keep all sides in line.

Until the birth of the State of Israel after World War II, Zionists were led to believe that the Balfour Declaration meant they had Britain's backing.

Meanwhile, Arabs were being reassured that Britain in no way intended to allow Jewish migration to supplant their dominance.

Distrust between Palestinian Arabs and Jews had been simmering since the time of Ottoman rule, and there was sporadic violence along the way, often because of disputes involving sites that were holy to either or both Jews and Arabs.

Pressures mounted as more and more Jewish settlers poured into Palestine, and Europe began to slide toward another world war. In the late 1930s, an Arab revolt and a general strike led to more killings on both sides and dispelled any hope that things would just naturally get better.

A British inquiry headed by Lord Robert Peel had one of the best chances to ever resolve the dilemma of what to do with the region and avert decades of unrest and suffering. But many of the factors that would doom negotiations over the next 90 years were evident in the efforts that followed.

With arrogant miscalculation, Arab leaders boycotted the Peel Commission until its work was almost completed in early 1937. “The Zionists got a better hearing,” as historian Arthur Goldschmidt Jr. noted.

Nonetheless, the commission’s final plan would have resolved the conflict in a manner modern Palestinian advocates will likely never dream of.

Finding that “their national aspirations are incompatible,” the commission recommended allowing the Zionists to form a small Jewish state in northern and central Palestine and giving Palestinian Arabs a much larger portion of the country, which then could merge with Arab Transjordan, soon to emerge from British rule as the sovereign state of Jordan. To guarantee all religions access to most of the nation’s holy sites, Jerusalem and its surrounding areas would become a neutral zone that would continue to be administered by the British.

The plan wasn’t foolproof, but something like it might have averted the decades of war and chaos that were to follow. But for the future of Gaza and the rest of Palestine, no good plan went unpunished.

The Zionists would have accepted it, though some of their leaders were in agreement only because they calculated that they could bide their time and expand the Jewish state when it became more populous and powerful.

Encouraged by other Arab states and perhaps sensing that the Zionists had bigger things in mind, the Palestine Arabs rejected the plan.

And, “as often happened in the contest for Palestine,” Goldschmidt wrote, “Britain soon scaled down the offer and finally retracted it.”

“This was a turning point in the history of the Palestinians ... a kind of coming-of-age for Palestinian nationalism and for organized, armed resistance to Zionism,” historian Dov Waxman wrote. “Any slim hope for Arab-Jewish rapprochement was lost in the bloodshed of those years, as enmity hardened on both sides and outright war increasingly became inevitable.”

Speaking of the whole sweep of efforts to resolve things, Eric Schreier, a Fort Wayne Jewish leader who has made many trips to Israel, recalled the words of a former Israeli ambassador to the United Nations:

“The Palestinians have never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity.”

The end of World War II, with its the revelations of the Nazi Holocaust, put resolving Palestine’s future at the top of the world’s agenda.

Britain, whose leaders badly wanted to offload the perpetual challenge of keeping the peace, asked the newly formed United Nations to step in.

The UN’s Special Committee on Palestine offered up a partition proposal with many similarities to the Peel Commission’s. The difference was that the Jewish state, whose population was burgeoning with the outflux of Jews from postwar Europe, would receive 55 percent of the land.

It was another opportunity to resolve things that later seemed unresolvable. But in the Arab world, anger and resentment overshadowed sympathy for the stateless Jews. Palestinians didn’t cause the Holocaust, the reasoning went. Why should they give up some of their land to help heal its victims?

In 1947, the United Nations approved the partition and Britain announced it would be leaving Palestine the following year. Never fully resolved, was how to deal with the Palestinian families whose longtime homes were within the new Jewish state.

It was an ugly time.

As sporadic violence flared first into civil war and then, after Israel officially proclaimed its independence in 1948, to war between the new state and its Arab neighbors, a huge wave of Palestinian refugees left their family homes. Many went voluntarily, fearful of the fighting and the uncertainties of their status within the new nation. Some may have believed they would be escorted back to their homes by triumphant troops from surrounding Arab nations. Some were forcibly evicted by the Israelis as they seized control of the new state town by town. Most of all, historians now believe, refugees fled out of fear and panic as their society began to collapse around them.

Nonetheless, wrote historian Waxman, “the expulsion of Palestinian civilians by Zionist and Israeli forces was a war crime according to international law. Palestinian and Arab forces also expelled Jewish civilians from areas that they conquered, and both sides committed various other kinds of war crimes.”

The end results set the stage for all that followed. Some 800,000 Palestinians had fled, most of them to Gaza, which was to be administered by Egypt, or to East Jerusalem and the West Bank of the Jordan River, an area which was annexed by Jordan. Some 200,000 of them, and many of their descendants, never left Gaza. The refugee population there today is estimated at about 1 ½ million people.

Israel’s victory over a poorly organized Arab coalition in 1949 left the fledgling nation in control of 78 percent of the territory Britain had relinquished, rather than the 55 percent the UN had originally allocated to Israel.

Palestinians still call it the Nakba — the Disaster.

“Before 1948,” wrote Goldschmidt, “a compromise might have been found between the extremes of Arab nationalism and political Zionism. But no attempt at accommodation worked, and the world continues to pay a high price for that failure.”

It is beyond the scope of this paper to trace the twists and turns of Mideast history in the decades since. Suffice it to say that through all the years of war, terror and crisis, the people of Gaza have remained in a kind of stateless limbo.

Egyptian control after the first Arab-Israeli War did not mean Egyptian citizenship for those refugees, whose daily life was supported by the newly created UN Agency for Relief and Works for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. Though the United States has cut our contribution to its funding, UNRWA still runs schools and provides food and health care for refugees and their descendants in the strip and elsewhere.

In the early years, guerrilla fighters who called themselves the Palestinian fedayeen had sporadic battles with Israelis on the Gaza border. Those groups were the forerunners of a long line of fringe Palestinian organizations who used terrorism aimed at overcoming the Israelis. Known by such names as Fatah, the PLO, the PFLP and Islamic Jihad, their efforts led to many deaths in Israel and around the world. But instead of advancing the cause of the Gazan refugees, they generally harmed it, giving Israel reason to crack down ever harder and providing their opponents with excuses to scuttle the best efforts to settle things or restore rights to refugees.

In the Six-Day War of 1967, Israel vanquished a coalition of Arab armies and seized control of several territories, including Gaza, East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Israel ran Gaza as an occupied territory for the next quarter-century.

In the 1990's, Israel began to withdraw its soldiers and settlers from Gaza, though it still maintained control over the territory's airspace, most of its land crossings and its territorial waters.

After the withdrawal was completed, the expectation was that Gaza would be run by the increasingly moderate Palestinian successors of the late Yasser Arafat. But in 2006 elections, Gazans chose Hamas, a rival organization that promised progress and change.

Instead, Gaza found itself living under a repressive government bent on endless confrontation with its more powerful neighbor.

Under Hamas rule, wrote Scott-Baumann, Gaza became “the most frequent flashpoint in the (Israeli-Palestinian) conflict and the epicenter of its deadliest violence ... escalating into major military clashes every few years.”

To Israel, the Palestinian territories, particularly Gaza, became an archipelago of unwanted stepchildren who had to be constantly watched and kept in line. Think blacks in America’s white-run Deep South before the modern civil rights movement, then deepen the poverty, raise the level of mistrust between the races and add a layer of military hypervigilance.

The severity of Israeli restrictions on Palestinians waxed and waned depending on the level of tensions.

In the early years of Israeli control, Gazans and West Bank Palestinians were allowed to work but required to apply for work permits and to submit to checkpoints and travel restrictions while they were in Israel.

With the ascendancy of Hamas, though, Gazan Palestinians were banned from working in Israel until 2014 when, according to Carnegieendowment.org, Israel began letting a limited number of Gazan workers in. Within days of the 2023 attacks, all Gazan workers were again banned.

Even before those attacks, Scott-Baumann wrote, Gaza was sometimes referred to as “the largest open-air prison in the world ... It was dependent on Israel for most of its water and electricity. The lack of power hit businesses, hospitals and sanitation facilities particularly hard, contributing to high levels of unemployment, ill health and poverty. Sewage was sent untreated into the sea, and much tap water was undrinkable.” In 2020, he noted, 70 percent of the population was dependent on some form of humanitarian aid.

Fort Wayne's Dr. Ron Caldwell has made several trips to Israel to learn about the conflicts there.

He was not able to go into Gaza. But his visits with Palestinians living in the West Bank were, he said, "life-changing."

On one trip, in 2018, he joined about 40 people on what he said was a weekly, peaceful march families from the area make toward a local spring in a village called Navisala that has now been appropriated by Israeli settlers.

As they walked over a hill, they saw a group of Israeli soldiers and "four or five" Israeli trucks. The soldiers had shoulder-mounted teargas guns and two of the trucks had gas-firing devices that "looked like pipe organs" mounted on them.

"We got peppered with tear gas," he said, "just for walking." None of the adults was armed or did anything threatening, he said, though some of the children might have thrown some rocks from slingshots, he said.

"I've heard the stories" he said, when residents tell of the reminders of their particular status that they encountered on a daily basis.

"Checkpoints, control of water, control of food and electricity — control of everything.

"When you're an occupied person on the West Bank, you're not under civil law — you're under military law," he said.

So what's the answer for Gaza and its hapless, beleaguered population? There is some hope that the Israeli elections will lead to some respite from the air attacks and restrictions that prevent any attempt at rebuilding and healing the territory. There may be slight hope that things will change in Gaza too.

Thus I'd like to end with some comments two people I know from their ties to Fort Wayne, both people I consider friends — and add some comments of my own.

One is Mark Lavie, a journalist who was born here, went to school at Indiana University and has covered the Mideast for such entities as The Associated Press, NPR and NBC and now writes commentary columns for The Media Line. Mark became an Israeli citizen in 1972 and now lives in a suburb of Tel Aviv.

The other is Ahmed Abdelmageed, who lived in Fort Wayne for several years and served as an assistant professor and assistant dean of the Manchester University School of Pharmacology. His parents were born in Gaza and they and their families were forced to leave their homes in 1948. Ahmed and his siblings were the first generation on either side of their family to be born outside of Palestine.

Lavie is one who hopes the election will be a turning point.

Lavie holds no brief for Hamas, which he believes is the driver for all that is wrong today. “Gaza had a chance to become an enclave of peace — but they chose the opposite” when the election put Hamas in charge, he says. “That’s how we got where we are.” He is troubled by the Netanyahu government’s decision to ignore intelligence warnings beforehand, but contends Israel’s first response to the terror strike from Gaza was wholly appropriate. “This was not retaliation,” he said, “this was a counterattack.”

Indeed, Lavie argues that Israel went out of its way to protect noncombatants as it went after Hamas. Before attacks, “Israel removed the civilians from Hamas areas — Find me another army who’s ever done this,” he said. “Before every airstrike, (there was) mass dialing of cellphones” to warn civilians, and the first bomb to hit a building was low-yield.

“Since then,” he said, “Israel has made a number of critical errors ... There was too much destruction, simply because it looks bad. ... Israel went overboard in knocking down buildings.

“Then, demanding total victory,” Lavie continued. “The war should have been over a long time ago. There was not going to be total victory. You have to be realistic.”

Some critics within Israel go much further than Lavie. “NAZA,” a documentary by two Israeli filmmakers, presents anonymous interviews with war-weary IDF soldiers who describe an AI-heavy surveillance system that identifies human targets in Gaza and calculates how many inadvertent deaths of innocent people could be justified in eliminating the target. The Israeli government has fiercely denied the film’s allegations: Benjamin Netanyahu is said to be looking into revoking the filmmakers’ citizenship. But if these stories turn out to be true, it is the world, and probably much of Israel itself, who would be outraged.

Change on the Israeli side alone, though, would not really be change. As always, unrealistic as it may seem to some, hope depends on the homeless, stateless people of Gaza restraining the most embittered and vengeful among them from lashing out again with violence against their vastly better-equipped and grimly determined neighbors.

Hello ... First of all, let me make sure you all can hear me.

Secondly, I am forever grateful that for my first Quest paper I got such an easy, noncontroversial topic. I want to thank some of the people who offered me their insights:

Jaki and Eric Schrier
Dr. Ron Caldwell
Rabbi Meir Barger
Ahmed Abdelmageed
and Mark Lavie

All very fine people with strong Fort Wayne roots or connections and very strong opinions. I'm quite certain not one of them will agree with the whole of this talk.

The Hamas leaders who launched the 2023 terror attack must have known their plan would lead to unimaginable suffering and death on their side of the border as well as Israel's. How heedless of their people's fate must they have been to continue to fire rockets across the line even as Israel was raining vengeance on Gaza. Palestinians who voted Hamas in two decades ago must be given another chance to choose leaders who actually care about their own people.

In the American South, Martin Luther King Jr. and his followers won their war for full rights and personal dignity by eschewing violence. But students of the civil rights movement know that there was a time, after the Birmingham bombing deaths of four little girls, when even some of King's closest aides contemplated taking a different path. How might things have gone in America if blacks and whites had gone to war against each other in the Sixties?

My friend Ahmed Abdelmageed condemns violence and was as dismayed at the terrorist attacks as any other American. "There is nothing heroic or patriotic about killing civilians," he said. "Hamas, they've done their fair share of terrible things for sure."

But while condemning them, Abdelmageed insists that the Oct. 7 attacks must be viewed as a product of a larger struggle with an equally barbaric opponent that we must grasp and resolve.

"A person is in a corner, back against the wall," he says. "A vicious dog is biting him. He grabs a stick ... it makes the dog attack him even more."

And when I mention Martin Luther King's path to justice in America through nonviolent resistance, he reacts sharply.

“That’s the same thing as people who say, ‘where’s the Palestinian Gandhi?’” he says. “They’ve killed each and every one of them — that’s where we are. There were a lot of peaceful people that they killed.

“This concept that’s ingrained in the American mind is that Palestinians are hell-bent on the destruction of Israelis and the killing of Jews.” That concept, he says, is perpetrated by an Israeli regime which wants the world to believe the only solution is an Israeli state run and populated only by the Jewish people.

“It’s the ‘otherization’ of people,” says Abdelmageed. The record shows that Israeli leaders over the years have called Palestinians “beasts,” “like animals,” and “like drugged cockroaches.” “It’s an intentional tactic,” Abdelmageed says. ... “We dehumanize them altogether.”

His hope is that even within Israel, “that foundation is starting to erode.” To him, the problem might be solved if Israel would simply acknowledge the humanness of their Palestinian neighbors and craft a government that would be mindful of the rights and privileges of all.

If Arabs and Jews could exist peacefully together, he said, they would find there is “plenty of space for all of them.”

My final thought is a question. After more than a hundred years of equivocating, double-dealing, fighting, killing and destruction centered on this tiny piece of the world, should we not be asking ourselves whether more violence can ever change things in Gaza for the better? The continuing barrage on Gaza obliterates not only people and buildings but the crucial distinction between the attacked and the attackers, and erodes the already slim chance Israel will ever find longterm peace and security.

Can the world get past the pointless provocations of Hamas and the stubborn bellicosity of Benjamin Netanyahu and find a way to make life more bearable for the millions crammed into this little Fort Wayne-sized strip of land?

It is tempting to put such questions aside and ignore our own responsibility to help answer them. Phil Ochs once addressed that in a folksong — “There, but for fortune, may go you or I.”

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Tim Harmon

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