
A BRIEF HISTORY OF ISRAEL

SECOND EDITION

BERNARD REICH

**George Washington University
Washington D.C.**

 **Facts On File**
An imprint of Infobase Publishing

A Brief History of Israel, Second Edition

Copyright © 2008, 2005 by Bernard Reich

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage or retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher. For information contact:

Facts On File, Inc.
An imprint of Infobase Publishing
132 West 31st Street
New York NY 10001

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Reich, Bernard.

A brief history of Israel / Bernard Reich. — 2nd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8160-7126-5

ISBN-10: 0-8160-7126-8

1. Israel—History. 2. Arab-Israeli conflict. I. Title.

DS 126.5.R37 2008

956.9405—dc22

2008003838

Facts On File books are available at special discounts when purchased in bulk quantities for businesses, associations, institutions, or sales promotions. Please call our Special Sales Department in New York at (212) 967-8800 or (800) 322-8755.

You can find Facts On File on the World Wide Web at <http://www.factsonfile.com>

Text design adapted by Lina Farinella

Illustrations by Jeremy Eagle

Printed in the United States of America

MP FOF 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on acid-free paper and contains 30 percent postconsumer recycled content.

INTRODUCTION

Israel's beginnings were inauspicious. Its Declaration of Independence, lofty in ideals and objectives, was promulgated in a land of limited potential and greeted with a declaration of war by its neighbors. Nearly six decades later, Israel continues to face some, albeit fewer, hostile neighbors and its economic prospects are bright. While its democratic system has been buffeted by challenges never imagined, such as the assassination of a prime minister by a Jewish extremist, it has weathered them to sustain its parliamentary structure and Western-style liberal democracy. Israel's prospects are substantial, although both adversity and challenges seem to grow with each new accomplishment.

The modern State of Israel is the world's only Jewish state and a product of Zionism, an ideology that draws from history and religion, from the ancient connection of the Jewish people to the Jewish state. Israel is small in both size and population. It is located in southwestern Asia on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea and borders Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. It declared its independence on May 14, 1948, within the territory of the Palestine mandate, in accordance with the United Nations partition plan of 1947. Jerusalem is Israel's capital and the seat of its government. Most countries, including the United States, continue to maintain their embassies in Tel Aviv.

The Jewish connection to the "Land of Israel" (in Hebrew, Eretz Yisrael) is a recurrent theme in Jewish tradition and writing and can be traced to the period of the patriarchs of Judaism (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) around the 17th century B.C.E. The Exodus of the Jews from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan were followed by the establishment and consolidation of the Kingdom of Israel under Kings Saul, David, and Solomon. Subsequent defeats of the Kingdoms of Israel and Judea, the destruction of the Temple, and the dispersion of the Jews in the Diaspora (Jewish communities outside Israel) provide the base for the linkage of the Jews to the Land of Israel. The desire of the Jews to return to the historical homeland as recorded in the Bible was expressed in the period of the Babylonian exile and became a universal Jewish theme after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E.

For nearly 3,000 years, the Jews yearned to return to the Land of Israel where their early kingdoms existed. Since biblical days, Jews of

ETERNALLY OPTIMISTIC

Israel's eternal optimism that it will persevere and overcome adversity has emerged in numerous ways, including this widely told story.

Things are going badly for Israel. The economy is in a tailspin, inflation is rising, and immigrants are flooding into the country from all over the globe. Problems, problems, problems, but what to do? The Knesset (parliament) holds a special session to devise a solution. After several hours of debate without progress, one member stands up and says, "Quiet everyone, I've got the solution to all our problems. We'll declare war on the United States. Of course, we'll lose. The United States does what it always does when it defeats a country: It rebuilds everything—our highways, airports, shipping ports, schools, hospitals, factories—and loans us money and sends us food aid. Our problems would be over."

Another member quickly responds, "Sure, that's if we lose. But what if we win?"

the Diaspora have hoped that they would return to Zion, the "Promised Land," where the ancient Jewish state had been, as described in the Bible. Over the centuries, Zionism focused on spiritual, religious, cultural, social, and historical links between Jews and the Holy Land. Political Zionism (Jewish nationalism), with the establishment of a Jewish state as its goal, developed in 19th-century Europe, mostly as a response to anti-Semitism then prevalent in those societies.

The Jewish yearning and the Zionist efforts reached culmination in the declaration of an independent Jewish state of Israel in May 1948. But that declaration, lofty in ideals and objectives, was greeted by a declaration of war by its neighbors and their like-minded allies. From that point to this day, Israel has continued to face hostile neighbors not yet reconciled to the existence of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel. The modern history of Israel is thus recounted in the wars it has fought with its Arab neighbors who have challenged its right to exist and with the efforts by terrorists to prevent Israel from sustaining its democratic political system. The democratic and liberal political system marked by dramatic achievements and accomplishments in its economy, science, technology, education, society, and the arts, has nevertheless endured. Israel's exercise of its democratic concepts through elections for parliament and for prime

minister, as well as in numerous other ways, have also become significant watersheds in the history of the state.

The special relationship between Israel and the United States is perhaps the most interesting, if complex, achievement of Israel's diplomacy and foreign policy. Although the United States was a dispassionate, almost uninterested midwife at Israel's birth, and U.S. policy toward it evoked substantial and sometimes rancorous debate in U.S. policy circles, a "special relationship" has developed in which the overall nature of U.S. support for the existence and security of its small and embattled ally remains unquestioned, despite occasional areas of discord on specific matters. The United States and Israel are joined in an unparalleled relationship aimed at assuring Israel's survival, security, and well-being. This relationship rests on emotional, ideological, and moral pillars and commitment to democratic ideals and principles buttressed by strategic and political elements. This too has been a major factor in Israel's modern history.

Israel is a country seemingly always on the move, rushing from issue to issue and problem to problem. In the short period since the first edition of this book was published momentous events have taken place.

Most notably, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon suffered an incapacitating stroke. The seemingly "indispensable man" at the center of Israeli politics was poised to lead his new party—Kadima—to a significant election victory. He would have continued with his unilateral moves toward withdrawal from additional parts of the West Bank in order to improve Israel's security and regional position in the absence of a Palestinian peace partner. When he was suddenly removed from the scene, his departure from politics permitted and necessitated the ascent of a new generation of leaders who had not been directly a part of Israel's founding past.

In the summer of 2006, a seventh Arab-Israeli war, initiated by Hizballah, dramatically altered the regional landscape, pointing to a changed balance of power and an increasing role for Iran, which continued to call for Israel's elimination.

In addition to these developments, the past several years have seen the withdrawal of all Israelis—civilians and soldiers—from the Gaza Strip after 38 years of presence there, the formation of a new centrist political party that proved successful in its first electoral outing by becoming the largest party in the state and the leader of the new government, and a number of scandals, including one involving the president. However, there was no appreciable movement toward peace, security, or acceptance in the region.

Against all odds and despite overwhelming Arab (and other) opposition, Israel celebrated the 60th anniversary of the United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine of November 1947 (that terminated the British mandate of Palestine and divided the area into a Jewish state, an Arab state, and a special international regime for the Greater Jerusalem area) and of the independence of Israel declared on May 14, 1948.

In those six decades Israel became a modern, democratic state with substantial economic accomplishments and scientific achievements. However, the quest for peace continues and—despite peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan—Israel remains at war with other Arab neighbors and faces threats from Iran. These factors are all connected in the story that is told here.