

## GATEWAY DOCUMENT 4.3a

# Religion and conflict: Israel/Palestine

### WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

The complexity and sensitivity of the conflict in Israel/Palestine makes it one of the most difficult topics to teach well. While the conflict is not new, it evokes a strong political and personal response from many young people in the UK (Muslim, Jewish, Christian and from other backgrounds). This presents an opportunity as well as a potential problem, since some students will already have an interest in the topic. As a tale of two opposing sides, it is used as a unifying force for some religious/political/cultural groups/ideologies. At worst, this perceived dichotomy can lead to generalisation, demonisation, anti-Semitism or Islamophobia, and in some cases, violence.

The challenge is clear. But teaching this topic sensitively, and navigating the complex issues in a calm manner, will be useful for all young people. This is particularly important for those who are at risk of being attracted to extremist ideologies, to help them see multiple world views and narratives and to challenge the binary approach of any extremist ideology.

The conflict also raises important questions about global connectedness – how some people have incredibly strong links with individuals/areas, how people in this country form views of other people's realities and how global conflict affects local cohesion in British communities.

In addition there is a pastoral concern and teachers need to be prepared for possible conflict within the school community, triggered by violence in the Middle East.

*N.B. in this Gateway the term 'Palestine' is used in several ways – e.g. historically (in different times) and currently referring to the potential future state. Now 'Palestine' is generally understood to refer to the West Bank and Gaza (although there are no agreed boundaries and there are different views on issues concerning Jerusalem). The term 'Palestinian' refers to Arab inhabitants of the area who identify as themselves as Palestinian, some of whom are Israeli citizens, and also to those of Palestinian heritage who are currently living in other countries.*

## KEY QUESTIONS

### How can this help teachers and students to increase their understanding of contentious issues?

Some of the following questions can draw out the aspects of this topic that are particularly relevant to RE as opposed to those which are more likely to emerge in the context of the citizenship curriculum.

- Should we take sides? Although we may not be part of the Middle East conflict, we each come with our own personal views and perspectives. How can we ensure that our sympathies are helpful and positive rather than destructive and negative? How can people take pride in their own backgrounds while recognising and respecting the rights of others?
- How do we respond to fear or hatred of others? Many Palestinians encounter only the very worst side of Israeli society, while many Israelis feel under threat and have a fear of Palestinians. How can we help to build trust, respect and understanding within any society?
- What possibilities exist for reconciliation or forgiveness? It is very difficult for people to forgive those who have caused suffering or death to those they love. However, some feel they can be 'reconciled' – for example by meeting the families of perpetrators or sharing pain with those from the 'other side'. What is the difference between reconciliation and forgiveness? [NB. There are lots of possible RE themes here, including different approaches to forgiveness]
- What is the role of religion in conflict? Religion can be used as a rallying point for conflict. The Israeli/Palestinian situation can be seen as essentially socio-political, although some see it as a Muslim-Jewish issue. However, religious traditions and histories are vitally significant. The place of Palestinian Christians is also extremely important though often ignored.
- Why do some people choose non-violent responses, while others engage in violence? What are the motivations for these choices (e.g. family, religion, social pressures)?

### Why is this a contentious topic?

This conflict is often used as the ultimate example of a contentious topic, so it is important to allow time for full consideration of the implications and to identify clearly the desired learning outcomes.

- It is an emotive issue. Many people feel directly involved, for instance those with family/cultural/religious ties to the region, and for whom any discussion of the conflict cuts to the core of their identity. Incensed by the perceived injustice of the situation and its wider effects, others in the UK are involved with activism for one side or the other.

- Taking sides. The conflict is often presented as having two opposing sides. This inaccurate portrayal (e.g. right/wrong, victim/aggressor), ignores the complexity of Middle Eastern politics and how it could be used as a model for the complexity of any global conflict.
- Choosing words. Key terms are very difficult to agree upon and most are 'markers' of political views e.g. Palestinian, Palestine, Israel, West Bank, settler, martyr/freedom fighter, separation wall/fence/barrier, Occupied Territories, Arab, Zionist, terrorism, occupation, injustice, oppression. Exploring key terms is a valuable way to understand different perspectives.
- Everyone's got an opinion. The Middle East conflict receives more attention and media coverage (often presented out of historical context) than other global conflicts, so both students and teachers may already have formed opinions on events, where to lay blame, and what should happen next.
- What's the solution? Initiatives between individuals and groups and negotiations at a governmental level have sought to work towards peace, but the basic issues of security for Israel and justice for Palestinians remain unresolved.

### **What classroom challenges might arise in RE?**

- Inadequately facilitated discussions risk polarising views even further.
- There are no simple questions or answers in such a complex situation.
- The issue is often framed as a debate, which can be counter-productive. Understanding that various narratives can all be valid (but conflicting) is an unfamiliar and difficult abstract thought process for young people.
- Many students in the UK have grown up feeling a part of the conflict and are, or feel, directly involved (e.g. with family members, through visiting the region, activism etc...) so classroom discussions may leave them feeling distressed or facing hostility from others.
- Identifying strongly with either side without a balanced view of the situation may lead to generalisations such as Arabs = Muslims, Jews = Israelis.
- Students often make assumptions about people involved in the conflict (e.g. that Jews and Muslims, in the Middle East or elsewhere, have a long standing/inherent hatred of each other, or that any faith community shares a single opinion on the situation).

### **How can teachers address such challenges?**

Debating rights and wrongs will not solve the conflict but framing the classroom experience as an exercise in empathy and understanding complexity can broaden students' minds and equip them with skills to speak about contentious issues sensitively and effectively.

Teachers may want to plan work on this topic, or it could come up in relation to other subjects and they may wish to pause to consider the timing and their own preparation for the

discussion. However, when the discussion begins, strong ground rules are essential (see gateways 2.7 and 3.1).

Teachers need to reflect on their own biases and their connections with the conflict (see Gateways 2.1, 2.2 and 2.4 and the REC's Code of practice for teachers of RE).

- Make sure different opinions are shared with the class (see Signposts below);
- Make sure there is enough time to learn about the situation and reflect on the emotions that the discussions might provoke;
- Be ready to pause/stop the discussion if it gets too heated;
- Prepare strategies to deal with offensive or incorrect statements;
- Be prepared to not have all the answers, but to know where to find answers (Signposts below) and continue the discussion later;
- Feel confident in 'naming' what is going on in the discussion (e.g. 'I think there is a lack of empathy in this room, does anyone agree?' or 'I think we have considered this point of view, can anyone suggest another way of thinking about this?');
- Be vigilant for any signs of name-calling, abuse or bullying, and for any sign of tension between pupils. Any taunting or abuse should be firmly but sensitively dealt with as part of the whole schools' approach to tackling discrimination;
- There are groups/organisations that can support your teaching in this area (see below).

## NEXT STEPS

### Signposts for further reading

It is difficult to recommend a single book on the issue, as most writers are partial to a greater or lesser extent.

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/6666393.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/6666393.stm) BBC overview of the conflict.

### Signposts for further resources

[www.bitterlemons.org](http://www.bitterlemons.org) A website that presents Israeli and Palestinian viewpoints on prominent issues of concern. It focuses on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and peace process. The goal is to contribute to mutual understanding through the open exchange of ideas.

[www.familiesforum.co.uk](http://www.familiesforum.co.uk) More than five hundred Israeli and Palestinian families who have lost loved ones during half a century of Middle East conflict are calling for an end to violence.

[www.fodip.org](http://www.fodip.org) The Forum for discussion of Israel and Palestine is an initiative, seeking to promote and facilitate dialogue between Christians, Jews and Muslims in the UK on the

Israeli/Palestinian conflict. The website contains a more detailed version of the historical background.

[www.teachers.org.uk/node/8688](http://www.teachers.org.uk/node/8688) National Union of Teachers guidance on 'Conflict in the Middle East – issues for schools'; useful focus on whole school issues as well as individual responses.

[www.threefaithsforum.org.uk/Conflict.htm](http://www.threefaithsforum.org.uk/Conflict.htm) The Three Faiths Forum works to encourage dialogue and confront prejudice. Its objective is to build lasting relationships between people of different faiths, cultures and communities in the UK; it also works to the same ends in the Middle East. The website includes helpful resources for schools.

[www.windowsforpeaceuk.org](http://www.windowsforpeaceuk.org) Windows for Peace (UK) promotes dialogue and understanding amongst Jewish, Palestinian and Arab young people. They have produced a dialogue resource pack for use with young people in the UK.

### **Signposts for further action**

Set up a link with citizenship education to illustrate ways of engaging with the issue as citizens (e.g. by setting up a dialogue group on the issue or writing to an MP or looking at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website to find out how the government assesses the situation and any actions it is taking).

## **APPENDIX**

### **Historical Background**

Approaching historical events dispassionately is almost impossible because often one set of historical narratives will deny the narratives of the other. Many people in the Middle East say that the only point of agreement is that the British should take a large measure of responsibility for the present crisis because of their involvement historically.

### **History up to the First World War**

The choice of where to begin the 'history' of the conflict is, in itself, a political and controversial decision. The land in question is a relatively small wedge at the 'meeting place' of Asia, Europe and North Africa and documents and archaeology from as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, describe the movement and settlement of peoples there over the last three and a half thousand years. The Bible contains the narratives and tradition of the 'Hebrew' or Jewish people in that region. The Qur'an, as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, also considers as prophets central figures from the Biblical texts. One such figure is Abraham/Ibrahim whose two sons, Isaac and Ishmael, are described as the ancestors of Jews and Arabs respectively.

By the time of the Roman occupation, forms of Hebrew rule had existed for centuries, with the Temple in Jerusalem as the central focus of Jewish worship. The Romans called the area 'Palestine'. Following a series of uprisings and revolts, the Romans destroyed the

Temple, along with most of Jerusalem and dispersed the population. From that point on, Judaism became a 'diaspora' religion, focused around local communities. In some places and times, these communities flourished but often they experienced persecution as aliens in a mostly Christian Europe. Memories of the Temple and Jerusalem remained strong within the liturgy, as in the Passover prayer 'Next year in Jerusalem!' A few small communities of Jews remained in the land, where they lived peacefully with their Arab neighbours.

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, industrialisation and change led to growing opposition to the old empires in many parts of the world and to a desire for national unity and autonomy based on language and culture. The unification of Italy and of Germany, and national independence movements such as those in the Balkans, were paralleled by Zionism, the movement whose ideal was the establishment of a national homeland for Jews. The Middle East at that time was ruled by the Ottoman Empire, many of whose inhabitants were similarly struggling for independence. The centuries preceding this had seen the wars of the Crusades, rule by Egyptian Mamluks and the Abbasid Islamic Caliphate. The population was mostly Arabic speaking – Muslim and Christians – and there were also some communities of Jews, which increased in size from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## History in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw increased persecution of Jews in Eastern Europe and a wave of Jewish immigration into Britain and the USA. The British government promised representatives of the Zionist movement that it would work towards the establishment of a Jewish national homeland in Palestine (in the *Balfour Declaration*). Simultaneously, British and French government representatives promised (in the *Sykes-Picot agreement*) to work for the independence of the Arab nations. However, after the war and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Britain and France took over the area under 'mandates' from the League of Nations.

Young idealistic secular Jews began arriving in Palestine, keen to found utopian agricultural communities. Their approach, background and lifestyle contrasted dramatically with that of the dominant population – agriculture-based Palestinian families, organized locally and with traditional family leaders.

The systematic attempts by Nazi Germany to murder all Jews in Europe added fuel to demands for a country where Jews could be safe. In practical terms, thousands of Jews were left traumatised, without families and homeless in 1945; the possibility of living in a safe haven with other Jews offered a lifeline. The British government, with the Mandate over Palestine, resisted Jewish immigration, largely because of Arab concern. However the number of Jews there grew and the desire to establish the homeland resulted in armed resistance and acts of terrorism against British military rule. As a response to the injustices faced by Jews in Europe during the Holocaust the United Nations partitioned Palestine into Jewish and Arab regions.

## History since 1948

Jewish authorities were generally in favour of the idea of such a partition, despite the fact that Jerusalem remained outside the suggested Israeli border. There was staunch opposition from Arab inhabitants of the land and neighbouring countries, with some parties looking to take control of land and resources that had been ruled by Britain. At this time an estimated 900,000 Jews lived in Arab states across the Middle East. The British left the region, without any real resolution to the situation, in the early hours of 14<sup>th</sup> May 1948. The Jewish authorities therefore declared the establishment of the state of Israel; this is now commemorated as Independence Day by Israel, but as the 'Nakba' or 'catastrophe' by Palestinians.

Neighbouring Arab countries declared war on the new state. In the ensuing conflict, Palestinians fled from or were driven from their homes, in many cases thinking they would be back within days or weeks, locking their homes and taking the keys with them. These were violent times; the massacre at Deir Yassin is particularly remembered by Palestinian Arabs. Seeking safety in neighbouring Arab countries, such as Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, as well as in Gaza and other local areas, these Palestinians and their descendants have largely retained the status of refugees ever since. The majority of Jews from other parts of the Arab world also left their homes over this period and many fled to Israel. In the ensuing decades, a number of wars and violent conflicts with Arab neighbours took place. In these conflicts, Israel was fighting for its existence since defeat would have brought an end to the state.

By 1964, the Arab inhabitants had developed a real sense of Palestinian political identity, given voice through the Palestine Liberation Organisation. Tensions between Israel and its neighbours rose, culminating in 1967 in the build up of military forces on Israel's borders, setting off the Six Day War, with Israel pitted against Egypt, Jordan and Syria. The Khartoum Resolution later that year expressed the sense of Arab unity against a negotiated settlement.

Israel then took possession of the Old City of Jerusalem, East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights. The Sinai was returned to Egypt in 1979, while the West Bank remains under Israeli military occupation. The acquisition of Jerusalem was of special significance to Jews throughout the world. The United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 242 calling for withdrawal from all territory occupied in war and stating the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force; this has formed the basis of subsequent peace negotiations. During the Cold War years, Israel was supported by the USA, and Arab states by the USSR.

## **The current situation**

The situation remains a stalemate. Over the years there have been attacks by Palestinian militant groups on Israeli and Jewish targets, both within Israel and abroad. Until recently,

there were many deaths through terrorist acts such as suicide bombings in Israeli cities (approximately 1100 since 2000; figures vary). Israeli Jews have a collective memory of recurrent persecution; their safe haven often appears a fragile concept, in constant danger of imminent destruction.

The Israeli government took the decision to build a 'security barrier' - in some places a high, thick wall, in others a fence - in order to prevent potential bombers getting from the West Bank and Gaza into Israel. This has brought about some reduction in suicide bombings but has resulted in severe economic deprivation. Palestinians in the West Bank suffer from having land taken because of Israeli decisions on security, including a great amount of agricultural land farmed by Palestinian families for centuries. In some areas, 'settlements' are built for Israeli Jews on Palestinian land. These settlements are then protected by Israeli security forces that restrict movement by Palestinians in neighbouring villages. There are numerous 'check points' within the West Bank where Palestinians are required to endure long waits, refusals to pass and humiliations. The actions of Israeli security forces have been criticised as being more about humiliation of Palestinians than real security. There are possibilities of redress through the Israeli courts, but Palestinians have said that in practice they do not have much faith in the Israeli legal system and access can be difficult.

Gaza is separate from the West Bank, with its borders between Israel and Egypt heavily policed; currently only basic goods are being allowed through. Gaza is controlled by Hamas (who won the 2006 elections in Gaza), an organisation that many governments, including Britain, regard as terrorist and is seen by many to be both militant and extreme. Hamas's charter states that it is committed to the destruction of Israel. Hamas has inflicted missile attacks on southern Israel. In December 2008, Israel launched a heavy military offensive in Gaza, which they stated was to stop the rocket attacks. Operation Cast Lead or the Gaza War was widely condemned internationally as hugely 'disproportionate', resulting in considerable Palestinian loss of life. Approximately 6000 Palestinians have died since 2000 (figures vary).

In Israeli cities such as Tel Aviv-Jaffa and also in East Jerusalem, Palestinians are often expected to prove ownership of their homes, even if these have been in the family for many generations. This leaves them vulnerable to land seizure. Planning permission for Palestinian building and extending in places such as East Jerusalem is a contentious issue and all unofficial or legally unproven work is subject to demolition. This is a constant source of tension.

Israel suffers the continuing insecurity of knowing that there are countries, such as Iran, which says that it is committed to Israel's eradication. Support for Israel is still strong in the USA, which acknowledges its democratic and western-looking regime. There are also strong pro-Israel lobbies in the USA – both Jewish and also from those Christian groups who believe that the State of Israel will play a vital role in the apocalyptic events of 'the end of time'. However, the USA has also repeatedly called on Israel to cease its building of settlements.

The long periods of hostility have hindered economic development; the Palestinian standard of living is significantly lower than that of Israel. Israel has a system of proportional representation that gives major influence on government to small parties and makes it difficult for any party to feel a confident grip on power or to take measures which might arouse strong opposition. The Palestinians have a very small measure of self-government but it has severely restricted powers to change anything; successive governments have been said to have squandered international goodwill through corruption. This has given many Palestinians little faith in their own governments and political processes, and the hopelessness of their situation has allowed militant groups to take control of the power vacuum. There are considerable problems between Hamas and Fatah (which has official 'control' over Palestinian affairs in the West Bank). A significant number of Palestinians live in camps with schooling and health care provided by the UN.

Since the 1990's, peace negotiations based on a two state solution have been said to have been undermined by a number of factors. These include the building of new Israeli settlements on Palestinian land and the continuing hostility of Hamas (its failure to keep order and security, and its extremist supporters in neighbouring countries). Problematic issues include the status of Jerusalem, the question of the return of Palestinians to their pre-1948 family homes and guarantees for Israel's security. Demands for Israel to relinquish ground captured in 1967 would include Jerusalem, and the Western Wall, and all but the modern western approach to the city.

Courageous individuals exist on each side, who strive to work for a just, secure, and peaceful future, while often dealing with insecurities and prejudices of their own. Although often facing more hostility from their own side than from across the boundaries, and acknowledging that the path is generally a risky one, they work tirelessly in different ways to shift perceptions and bring about change.