Understanding the Many

Middle East Conflicts

A few clues for people who want to work for Peace, but aren’t sure where to start

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Monitoring the News

What we read and hear in the media today regarding the Middle East is often confusing. Besides that, it’s frequently wrong, incomplete, and/or one-sided. The media don’t have a death-wish, so they respond to their advertisers and others who have influence on their bottom line. These influencers include governments and government agencies, religious groups, and lobbies such as AIPAC (the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, a political action committee that claims to speak for American Jewry), the military-industrial complex, and the NRA. When we read or hear news, we need to be aware that it has already been filtered for us.

So, as people interested in the peaceful resolution of conflict, how are we to respond, and how are we to understand “the truth behind the story,” when the mass media continues to feed us falsehoods, partial truths, and less than sufficient information on this complex region? That is the question that I will try to deal with in this article.

Let me introduce myself. My name is Barbara Taft. Since the mid-1960s, I have put the issue of peace in the Middle East at the top of my priority list. Why? For many complex reasons. My paternal grandfather was an Orthodox Jewish rabbi in the Ukraine, and some of my relatives went to Israel shortly after its creation in 1948. Those relatives came back to the U.S. disillusioned, noting that the political State of Israel was “a disappointment,” and that it had no resemblance to the Biblical “Promised Land” to which there would one day be an ingathering of the Jewish people. It took me a few trips to the region to fully grasp the complexities of this conundrum. I certainly didn’t understand it when I first heard the comments about the new state.

In college, I met Arab students from all over the Middle East. Among them were Palestinians whose lives were at that time (the early 1960s) continuously disrupted by the existence of the State of Israel. During that time, I went to many events and, at one film showing, I saw a movie that included a newsreel segment that had given me nightmares when I was a toddler. You see, my father was a heart patient, and was bedridden. Our family had gotten a small black-and-
white television so that he could watch news and other programs. One night, I heard my father say, “Oh, those poor Palestinians,” as he watched the news. He seemed to be holding back tears. I looked at the screen and saw people trying to cross a river (which I later learned was the Jordan). Some were carrying furniture, bedding, etc., on their backs, while others were carrying women or children. In the few seconds while I watched, the fleeing refugees suddenly turned their heads, looking back wide-eyed and terror-stricken. I can still picture their faces to this day. It frightened me.

I was probably only two or three years old, but the image has stayed with me. I was 19 when I again saw that same film footage, which I remembered because it has been a recurrent dream or nightmare throughout my life, and I finally learned why the people had turned their heads in fright. The next scene, which I had not seen on the original broadcast, showed what they were seeing. Homes were being blown up behind them. In the showing at my university, the announcer noted that some of their family members had refused to leave and were still in those homes. Surely, they were dying in the explosions. This filled in a blank for me, and it helped me to understand my father’s reaction in what must have been 1948 or 1949. The town was Jericho.

In 1966, I got my Bachelor’s degree in Journalism. I had signed up to spend the next year as a VISTA volunteer. VISTA is a part of the War on Poverty, and it stands for Volunteers in Service to America, also known as the “domestic Peace Corps”. At the end of the year, I would begin a trip around the world, at first traveling with my mother, visiting international student friends throughout Europe, and then my mother’s relatives in Greece. She was from Lesvos, an island visited by Saint Paul, but which may be better known today as a major place offering relief to refugees from the wars in Syria and elsewhere.

We left for our trip in mid-August of 1967. After visiting 17 countries in Europe, and spending a couple of weeks with my maternal relatives in Greece, it was time to move on. We flew into Tel Aviv and had a brief visit in what had by then been Israel for nearly 20 years. I still recall visiting Nazareth, where we stayed at a convent run by French nuns. I heard women’s screams and wailing during the night. In the morning, I asked the nuns about it. In hushed tones, they told me that Israeli soldiers were going into homes, arresting the men, and sometimes
raping the women left behind. The nuns had received several of these women and their children in recent weeks. I was beginning to see why my dad’s relatives had chosen not to stay in “the Jewish state”.

After leaving Israel, my mother and I flew to Nicosia, Cyprus, where we were told that the Americans were being evacuated due to fighting between the island’s Greeks and Turks. My mother refused their offer to hold the plane for us and evacuate us as well. We spent three days there amid the tension, and then it was time for us to part. She headed back to Greece for a longer visit with the relatives, and I went on alone, first flying to Beirut, Lebanon.

**Talk of War and Peace in Beirut**

On arrival, all of the passengers ahead of me encountered thorough checks of their baggage, conducted on the tarmac. We were coming from a “war zone,” and the Lebanese were being cautious. Lebanon prided itself on being free of conflict at that time. I happened to be the last person off the plane and I clearly recall being asked for my passport. When I showed my U.S. document, the inspector asked, “Coming from where?” I replied, “Cyprus,” and he then asked his next question. “Are you carrying any weapons?” It caught me off guard. I laughed and said, “Do I look like I’m carrying any weapons?” At that, he, too, laughed, and waved me past. I was the only passenger whose luggage wasn’t checked.

For the next three evenings at my Beirut hotel, I was invited to join a group of other travelers, and a few locals, for discussions over mezze, that wonderful Middle Eastern meal of appetizers and dips. I found myself participating in a sort of round-table discussion, focusing mostly on the Six-Day War between Israel and several Arab states, that had taken place a few months previously. That had happened in June, and it was now November, enough time for the dust to have settled and people to have heard or seen enough to form opinions. The conflict had led to an increase in the number of Palestinian refugees who were living in the crowded refugee camps of Lebanon. The West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and Syria’s Golan Heights had all been taken. The map of the Middle East had again been changed, as Israel swallowed up additional territory.
Participants in these evening discussions included a couple of journalists from other Middle Eastern countries, at least one Lebanese journalist, and a Syrian man whose daughter had served in the Syrian military during the fighting, among others. Since Lebanon had remained neutral in the conflict, these gentlemen (and a couple of women) spoke freely while there in Beirut. I was able to learn how people in the region felt about what had happened, and to learn a great deal about both the conflict and how the existence of the State of Israel in the midst of the Arab world was perceived. Although there was plenty of negative sentiment, mostly over the disruption of Arab lives, there was also a great deal of sympathy for what the Jewish people had suffered at the hands of the Nazis. It was emphasized that it seemed unfair for the Jewish people to punish the Palestinians and other Arabs for what had been done to them by the Europeans.

Another consequence of the Six-Day War affected me personally. While I was still in Europe, I noted that I was running short of pages in my passport to receive visa stamps. I went to the U.S. Embassy in one of the countries where we were traveling to get new pages inserted. It was noted by someone there that I already had visas for Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and Iran in my passport. The U.S. Embassy stamped my passport to say that it was not valid for travel in the Egyptian Arab Republic or the Syrian Arab Republic, thereby cutting off my land route to the other parts of the Arab world to which I had planned to travel. I had intended to fly into Cairo, visit there, and then go on to the other nations via land transportation. The stamp in my passport made that portion of my journey impossible.

After a short stay in Beirut, I flew on to Cairo, where I was allowed to disembark the plane, but not to leave the airport. I waited until the next flight for my onward destination was ready to depart. I flew on to Accra, Ghana, without being able to travel to the areas I had very much wanted to see, or to visit with friends living in the area. It was extremely frustrating, but there was nothing I could do to change my situation. This restriction was one of the main reasons that I was strongly motivated to go back to the region. I felt I had been cheated out of the chance to visit friends and to see first-hand what was happening in their nations. But it took me another 15 years before I was able to return and to delve into what had been described as “the mysteries of the Middle East”.

Opportunities to Return, and to Learn
Beginning in 1983, I went on an additional nine trips to the region, mostly with peace delegation/study tour groups. Many of these were sponsored by the Resource Center for Nonviolence in Santa Cruz, California. In all, I have spent about two years in the Middle East. I have visited Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel, the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights, and Egypt. In those visits, I have been privileged to meet more than 200 prominent representatives of governments, non-governmental, religious, and secular groups, as well as medical personnel, university professors and students, journalists, politicians, peace activists, Israeli settlers, local leaders, and human rights workers, among others. Having heard from people with divergent points of view, I am constantly reminded that there are as many viewpoints as there are people who espouse them. I find myself trying to understand each viewpoint, whether or not I agree with the person who is putting it forth.

After having made several trips, and having spoken to many groups in an effort to help people understand what is happening in the region, I began to get one particular question quite frequently. I was asked if I had an advanced degree, such as a Master’s or a Ph.D in political science or a related field. Finally, since many people had asked, and others had suggested that I should obtain such a degree, I went back to graduate school. I had studied other subjects in between, but I decided to dive into the area of political science, and I obtained a Master’s in that subject, with most of my work being done in the area of international relations, and with an emphasis on the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. I completed my thesis on the subject, “Nationalism, Legitimacy, and Sovereignty: The Case for Palestinian Statehood”. In the thesis (which can be found online by searching for the title or looking under my previous married name, Barbara Oskoui), I make the case for a two-state solution. I am proud of the fact that I used sources that are not only Arabs, but also Jewish, as well as outlining the facts that can be found in researching history and international laws in regard to the region.

My bottom line, both in the thesis and in my writing and speaking, is that I/we need to listen, and to respect the feelings of all of the people involved. Rather than supporting “one side” in the conflict, I have tried to support the side that
will lead to a peaceful resolution of the conflict. That pertains to all of the many conflicts currently raging in the region. The feelings of all of the peoples involved need to be considered. I’ve found that the single most common motivation for conflict is fear. It generates strong, and sometimes unreasonable, emotions. So, as peacemakers, our goal should include diminishing the levels of fear in the parties. This requires working diligently, and honestly, to help people to break down the walls that separate them, and to build bridges that provide opportunities for them to get to know one another as human beings.

I often quote my late friend, Karim Khalaf, the last elected mayor of Ramallah, in the West Bank. Karim, a moderate, was one of three mayors targeted by the Israeli extremist group, Terror Against Terror (or TNT), which planted bombs in the cars of two mayors and at the garage of another in 1980. Karim’s legs were severely damaged in the explosion and, despite the fact that he was the victim of terror, the Israelis put him under “town arrest” in Jericho, where his family owned a vacation home. He died of a heart attack in 1985. In spite of what had happened to him, he often said that these Israeli terrorists were not typical of the Jewish people. He told us, “There are many good Jews in Israel,” and reminded us that, “When peace comes, it won’t just be peace for the Jews, or just peace for the Arabs; it will be peace for everyone”.

That should be our goal. Nothing more and nothing less. Which brings me back to where I started. We need to educate ourselves, to hear all sides, and this requires us to hear and read the alternative press, as well as to listen to some of the many voices out there that have a story to tell. The various conflicts in the Middle East region are complex, but the basic issues can be understood. What follows is my simplified way of helping you to untangle some of the complexities of the region. I will provide some resources at the end that may further guide you in your struggle to understand this area of the world.

Although my last trip to the region was in 2009, when I led a Friendship Tour for the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, visiting Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel, and the West Bank, I have remained in contact with Jews, Christians, and Muslims living in the region. I also serve as co-chair of the U.S. Middle East Committee of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), which has sections in Israel, Palestine, and Lebanon. I read hundreds of
pages about the region on a weekly basis, and have viewed films and news reports of what is happening there regularly. I get my news from a variety of sources, and that is what I hope you will do also.

I don’t claim to have all of the answers, but I hope this summary of current situations in major Middle East hot spots will help you to untangle the complexities of the region. Once that happens, I hope you’ll join me in my activist quest to make the Middle East—a land holy to Jews, Christians, and Muslims—a more peaceful place for all of its inhabitants.

Israel/Palestine: The Roots of the Conflict

The conflict in the land that once was known as Palestine is actually more recent than many sources would have you believe. Its roots can be traced to the First Zionist Congress, in 1897, convened in Basle, Switzerland. Those who try to tell you that the conflict goes back even further are trying to confuse you with what can best be described as “fake history”. Some will say it goes back to the exile of the Jews from the land centuries ago, and to the longing of the Jewish people to return to the Promised Land. Others will trace the conflict to Biblical times, and will tell you that the Jews and the Arabs have never gotten along. But a thorough reading of existing documents about the region will tell you otherwise. You should know that modern day Zionism, perhaps better described as “political Zionism,” has been opposed by significant numbers of Jews worldwide since its inception. To understand better about this, visit the website of the Neturei Karta movement at http://www.nkusa.org. They are the Orthodox Jewish group you may have seen at peace demonstrations holding signs calling for Middle East peace and saying that the modern State of Israel does not represent them.

Neturei Karta offered in 1989, during the Madrid round of peace talks on Israel and Palestine, to speak for the Palestinians. There had been some talk of not allowing the Palestine Liberation Organization (the PLO, which was then the government in exile of the Palestinian people) to participate in the direct talks.

Neturei Karta believed that it was necessary for all parties to be present at the talks, and they were in touch with the leadership of the PLO. Their offer was conditionally accepted. Had the PLO been excluded, it would have been quite
interesting to see these Orthodox Jews, in their long coats and with their forelocks hanging down before their ears, speaking on behalf of the Palestinian people.

That First Zionist Congress is often forgotten, or neglected. Perhaps that’s because Palestine wasn’t the only location offered as an option for the state’s establishment. Many of those in attendance had other ideas. The offer of land in British Uganda (which is geographically mostly in Kenya today), or elsewhere in East Africa was acceptable to many who were there. But the historical roots of the Jewish people in Palestine, even though they went back thousands of years, during most of which time the Jews constituted but a small minority in that land, got overwhelming support. It was important to many Jews living in Europe and elsewhere to feel safe. They can’t be blamed for that. The creation of a Jewish state where they would be safe from pogroms, expulsions, oppression and hatred made sense to the attendees.

A few years later, the Nazi movement and the resulting Holocaust brought this issue to the forefront. Terrified Jews fled Europe for any safe haven. For many, Palestine was the preferred destination, especially since, following the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, there had been a British letter known as the Balfour Declaration, which indicated that there was no opposition to the creation of a state for the Jewish people in Palestine. Here are the words of that letter, written in 1917 by Arther James Lord Balfour to Lord Rothschild:

Dear Lord Rothschild,

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 the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours 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.

Yours sincerely,

Arthur James Balfour

Unfortunately, in their zeal to establish their “national home,” the other part of the document was largely ignored. The existing Arab communities were soon decimated.

Pronouncements by the Zionist leadership that the refugees from the Holocaust were going to “a land without people for a people without land” were patently false. The land was already inhabited. In fact, in the early 1900s, the total population of Palestine consisted of approximately 6-7% Jewish, 92% Arabs, and 1% “other”. By the 1930s, the Jewish population was between 30-32%, largely the result of illegal immigration and ignoring of the quotas that had been set. Following World War II, with a huge influx of refugees having arrived from Europe, and hostilities breaking out in isolated instances, a formal declaration of war was made in 1948. This war was called by the Jewish people their War of Independence, but it was called by the Arabs the *nakba*, an Arabic word which can best be translated as catastrophe.

Approximately 750,000 Palestinian Arabs then became refugees. Most could trace their ancestry back several generations and had evidence that their families had lived in the same towns and villages for centuries. Despite possessing ownership documents and many having taken their house keys with them, believing they would soon return home, the sad truth was that the Great Powers had, in an attempt to provide safety and a solution to the refugee crisis created by the Holocaust, created a second refugee crisis. They had called for the establishment of two states, one Jewish and one Arab, with a *corpus separatum* (a separate entity not under the control of either nation) in Jerusalem. In actuality, only one of those states came into being, the Jewish one, which took on the name of Israel. And it established itself on land that had been in Arab hands for centuries.
Both Christian and Muslim Palestinians fled in 1948. Many from the northern Galilee region headed to Lebanon. The border closed, and they were unable to return home. Others fled east to East Jerusalem and to Jordan, which became the custodian over the eastern side of the city and the surrounding area known as the West Bank. Still others fled to the narrow southern coastal territory known as the Gaza Strip, which was to become associated with Egypt. The United Nations hastily built refugee camps, and established an organization to take care of the thousands of traumatized, frightened, and starving Palestinian refugees. The name of that agency was the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees, or UNRWA. It continues to serve those refugees and their descendants today, but the United States recently withdrew most of its funding for the agency. With medical care at a crisis level in the refugee camps and food insecurity rampant, this is a new tragedy that has befallen the Palestinian refugees.

The Occupation and its Fruits

In 1967, the Six Day War took place, and Israel became the occupying power over the West Bank, Gaza, and Syria’s Golan Heights. International law is clear that an occupying power cannot move its own population into any territories that it occupies during war, nor can it change the character of said territories. By the building of dozens of settlements (which are better described as colonies or cities) in the Occupied Territories, and moving thousands of its own population into Jews-only housing in those settlements, Israel has been clearly in violation of international law. Thousands of Palestinians have been deprived of their land, as well as their civil and human rights, by the imposition of hundreds of laws that limit every aspect of their lives. For example, there is a law that makes it illegal for Palestinians to grow the herb thyme, which is popular with oil as a spread on pita bread for breakfast. At the same time, the uprooting of families from their homes and land, which have been replaced with housing exclusively for Jews, has led to widespread unemployment, overcrowding when they are forced to live with family members elsewhere, and the insecurity of not knowing if the same thing will happen to them again in the future.

More Recent History: Growing Fear and Distrust

The existence of the settlements, which command every hillside and loom over the remaining Palestinian villages and towns, and the imposition of hundreds of restrictive laws on the Palestinian population has inevitably led to that
population committing acts of defiance against their occupiers. On my first few visits in the region, I was told that there were few, if any, weapons in the hands of Palestinians. One Palestinian attorney told me that there was “probably an old rifle in the house somewhere”. He said his father had used it to shoot rabbits. His father had died two decades before. Other Palestinians managed to get explosives and to do a great deal of damage by planting home-made bombs on buses, in cafes, and elsewhere.

We need to recall that the recent Jewish refugees were reminded by these actions of their fears while in Europe, especially during the Holocaust. They did whatever they could to protect themselves from this new threat. As restrictions on Arabs became tighter, and the possibility of arrest, mostly of young men, but also of women and children, rose, there was a corresponding level of fear among the Arab population. Instead of trying to find ways to reduce these confrontations, each side increased its level of what it considered to be defensive behavior. As a means to defend the Jewish population, the Israeli government decided to build what is known in Israel as the”Separation Wall (or Fence)”, but to Palestinians as the “Apartheid Wall”. The Wall may have reduced the number of bombings that the Israelis have experienced since its construction, but it has also prevented Palestinian children from reaching their schools, adults from getting to their jobs or to medical care, as well as many families from getting to their relatives’ homes that happen to be on the other side of the barrier. One other consequence of the Wall is that it has reduced opportunities for Israelis and Palestinians to meet one another, which reduces opportunities for reconciliation.

Despite this, ongoing contacts between Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews are still taking place. Still, the majority on each side only knows the Other as an enemy. The only time they meet is during confrontations, with armed Israelis enforcing the laws of the State of Israel. Fear and distrust run rampant.

The Current Situation

You have probably heard that Israel “withdrew” from the Gaza Strip in 2005. But Gaza has been under siege most of the time since then. It has been described as “the world’s largest open-air prison”. The United Nations predicts that it will be uninhabitable by the year 2020. That piece of information has appeared in the mass media, but what you don’t see too often is that the majority of Gaza’s
predominantly refugee population is under the age of 19. Nor do you read about
the fact that Gaza is under a total siege by Israel, with access from land and sea
closed off. Gaza is a very small area, and one of the few things that it has
enjoyed is a beautiful coastline that was once a thriving resort and the frequent
destination for wedding parties. Fishing has for centuries been both a source of
livelihood and of protein for the diets of its residents. But Israel has tightened
the restrictions on how far out the Strip’s fishermen can travel from the shore of
this coastal enclave, which has devastated the fishing industry. If you venture
too far out, you run the danger of being fired upon by the Israeli patrols. Some
have been shot at, while others have actually been shot, some even dying from
their wounds.

You’ve probably also heard that Hamas is firing rockets into Israel. I did
extensive research on this subject, and I can tell you that there is very little truth
to this. I am the co-author of a booklet produced for WILPF called “Hamas at the
Peace Table: Why?” It came out in 2015, and in it I indicate that, “Although
Hamas accepted the two-state solution and has ceased attacks against Israelis
except when attacked inside Gaza, Hamas has not recognized Israel.” I also
learned that it is some of the smaller, more militant factions that have fired the
rockets into Israel. Most of these rockets are poorly made and, although they
cause fear in the Israelis living in settlements and towns near Gaza, driving them
into air raid shelters, they have inflicted very little damage. Hamas has, in fact,
worked to prevent these groups from firing the rockets, knowing that there will
inevitably be retaliation, and that Israel’s fire-power is quite destructive. There
are no air raid shelters in Gaza. Israeli attacks on Gaza have destroyed schools,
mosques, homes, portions of university campuses, and hospitals. Gaza City
itself is full of rubble from these attacks. Gazans have generally been unable to
return fire in any measurable way.

Also destroyed has been the power-generating plant, which has made it difficult,
if not impossible, to provide electricity, clean water, and many other essential

services. Since the Israeli blockade of Gaza makes it impossible to bring in such
forbidden articles as cement for construction, replacement parts or new medical
equipment for hospitals and clinics, and many types of medicines, as well as a
long list of foodstuffs, Gazans subsist on a minimum of what the rest of the
world takes for granted. With food being in such short supply, many of Gaza’s
children are undernourished. And, since the majority of the population is
children and youth, this amounts to a human catastrophe. Even when food is
available, it often becomes impossible to heat it due to the lack of power sources.
In several bombing campaigns since Israel officially “evacuated” Gaza, Israel has destroyed hundreds of buildings, killed hundreds of civilians, including children, and injured thousands more. Most recently, in the spring of 2018, Palestinians in Gaza were involved in what they called The Great March of Return. Marking 70 years since the creation of the State of Israel, numerous civil society groups decided to march peacefully toward the “border fence” that separates them from the Jewish state. Hamas was involved, but not the primary group organizing the march. There was also a sort of festival accompanying this march, which took place on consecutive Fridays. The majority of the marchers were young people, and they generally stayed within the area beyond 200 yards from the fence. Farmers who had previously tried to tend their crops closer to the barrier had been shot. But a few ventured closer. They carried Palestinian flags and banners proclaiming that they wanted to go home.

Among their numbers were journalists, wearing vests clearly marked “PRESS,” and medical workers and volunteers, dressed in white and also indicating that they were medical personnel. Several members of the press were shot by Israeli snipers, and two were killed. One young female medical volunteer was also shot and killed. Prior to the march, Israel put out a call for snipers and sharpshooters to appear at the border in order to shoot at the protesters. According to press releases put out by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office, these demonstrators posed an “existential threat” to the State of Israel. Well, that may be true, because if they were to return home to pre-1967 or pre-1948 Palestine, which is now ostensibly Israeli land, it would upset the demographic balance. Israel calls itself a democratic state, but the population of Palestinian Arabs in the land it now claims, if the refugees are included, most likely exceeds that of the Israeli Jews living there, meaning it can’t long remain both Jewish and democratic, as the Palestinians are given few, if any, rights in the state.

A few months prior to the Great March, a 16-year old named Ahed Tamimi, living in a West Bank Palestinian village called Nabi Saleh, made headlines when she was arrested for slapping a Israeli soldier. Her mother was also arrested for supporting her, taking pictures, and speaking out. They took a plea deal. But only part of the story came out in the Western media. We need to look back at what happened before the slap. The incident began when Ahed’s cousin was shot in the head by Israeli soldiers. He survived, but is missing a large portion of his skull. On the day of the slapping incident, soldiers were attempting to enter the Tamimi household, and Ahed was resisting. She feared that they would use
her family’s home to shoot others who were protesting the attempted takeover of her village by the Israeli state. When she resisted, a soldier grabbed her and they tussled, during which time he hit her, although not very hard. She slapped him in return. All of this was caught on film. The plea deal that Ahed accepted is that she would be in “administrative detention” for six months. That status is renewable for six month increments, until whenever the Israelis decide they will finally release a prisoner. Ahed spent her 17th birthday in pre-trial detention.

Things Peace Activists Can Do
Currently, partially as a result of Ahed Tamimi’s case, there is a bill in the U.S. House of Representatives, sponsored by Congresswoman Betty McCollum (H.R. 4391) opposing the use of U.S. tax dollars for Israel’s military detention and mistreatment of Palestinian children. Several groups are campaigning to get their members of Congress to sign on to the bill. U.S. citizens, ask your Rep.

We need to keep in mind that each side in this dispute believes itself to be threatened in some way by the other. However, we need to be diligent in seeing that the U.S. does not provide the weaponry to any state that might use it to oppress or kill the population it controls. We need to see that everyone is able to travel freely, to own property, and to achieve their highest human potential. This is best achieved when fear is not present. Too often, leaders encourage the people they represent to fear the Other. This does a dreadful disservice to the people they claim to be protecting. Instead, they should work on alleviating fear. One way that fear is alleviated is to facilitate ways for people to meet which are not confrontational in nature. If people meet and get to know one another as human beings, they usually realize that they have much more in common than they think.

While walls separate people, it is easier to imagine that the unknown person on the other side has evil intentions. This is certainly true in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The Separation Wall has created a huge obstacle to people getting to know one another. It may have stopped most of the suicide bombings and other attacks the Israelis had experienced from the frustrated Palestinians who lived under occupation, but it has only made the animosity and the frustration deeper on the Palestinian side, while at the same time magnifying the sense of fear among the Israelis. It is important for us to continue to support the groups that, even though Israel has outlawed most contact between Arab and Jew, continue to meet their counterparts from the other side. These groups function despite the
risk involved for both sides. While walls separate people, it is easier to imagine the possibilities for peace if we support organizations working to build bridges.

At the end of this booklet, there is a resource list, plus a list of groups engaged in working for peace, justice, and reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians.

Lebanon

I’ve already mentioned that thousands of Palestinians fled to Lebanon in 1948, when the State of Israel was created. Although some of the nations which received refugees from Palestine gave them citizenship, Lebanon has not done so. The majority of these refugees and their descendants remain in several refugee camps in various parts of the country. They live in squalid conditions, with little space to move, barely any electrical power, and very few clinics to help them when they get ill. In addition to their lack of citizenship status, they are restricted from taking certain higher-paying jobs. This is not totally the result of animosity toward them, but it is based on certain realities that make Lebanon unique among the world’s nations. Often neglected in the international press, the facts listed here may help you to better understand and interpret the news you get from Lebanon. Everyone in that nation is a victim of both historical and current events.

For a lengthy part of its history, today’s Lebanon was merely the coastal part of an entity known as Greater Syria. Separated from modern-day Syria by the Shouf Mountains, another primary difference, and one which led to their separation into two nations (Lebanon and Syria), is the fact that at the time of that split and the creation of Lebanon’s Constitution, the majority of people residing in what became Lebanon were Christian (predominantly Maronite Catholics), while the majority in Syria were Muslim.

When the Ottoman Empire broke up, after 400 years of rule, the mandate for both Syria and Lebanon went to France. Following the Mandate period, it was agreed that two nations be formed, and that each move forward to establish its own form of government. Lebanon chose to organize its government on the basis of a sectarian system. Census figures were used to determine which of the religious sects had the largest population. At that time, it was the Maronites, so they were rewarded with the Presidency. The next largest group at that time
was Sunni Muslim, and they were given the role of Prime Minister. Other
groups, which included Shi’a Muslims, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, and
others, were awarded roles, listed in the Constitution, according to their relative
population in the country. But the census taken at the time of the establishment
of the country became inaccurate within a few years. And therein lies one of the
most disturbing things about Lebanon. They wrote into their Constitution a
system that was doomed to failure.

For several years, it was an adequate way to govern the country. However, it
failed to take into consideration that Muslim families tend to be larger than
Christian ones, and that would lead to the situation where there would soon be
more Muslims in the country than Christians. And those Muslim citizens, even
though a majority, did not have as much power as the Christians. It was quite
inevitable that this would happen, and that those in power did not want to give
up their enviable position. This led to a power struggle. The Muslims
outnumbered the Christians and would not be satisfied with being ruled by
them. This factor has had an effect on the treatment of Palestinian refugees.
When they arrived, it was obvious that the majority were Muslim. Adding them
to the general population and granting them citizenship was not something that
the Christians in power wanted to do. It would have upset the power structure,
which was already precarious. Denying them citizenship helped maintain the
sectarian system of government, at least for a while longer.

But this was not the only reason for making Lebanese citizenship difficult, if not
impossible for the Palestinian refugees to obtain. The one that is most frequently
broadcast, both by Lebanese officials and by many of the refugees themselves, is

that it has always been assumed that the status of refugee was a temporary one,
and that the Palestinians would one day return home. If they had become
citizens of another nation, they might be said to have given up their claim to be
citizens of Palestine.

The Massacres at Sabra and Shatila

By the early 1980s, the situation had become treacherous in Lebanon, with
various factions jockeying for power. Believing that Palestinian fighters were
playing a role in the ensuing chaos, which had included bombings and fighting
that seemed to be moving from town to town and neighborhood to
neighborhood, especially in the South and in Beirut, a deal was struck to
evacuate all of the Palestinian fighters from Lebanon. This was done with great fanfare, and with guarantees of safety for the remaining women, children, and the elderly. Those who stayed behind in the refugee camps would still have United Nations support, and although they would be lonely for the young men who had left, they had no reason to worry excessively.

At the same time, Israel had invaded Lebanon from the South, ostensibly due to shelling across the border that they were certain was from Palestinian weapons. Despite promises that they would not go as far north as Beirut, they entered the city anyway. The events of that time period are described in all their gruesome detail by British correspondent Robert Fisk, in his book, *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War* (1991). Factions were fighting factions, while various religious sects each had their own militias, and outside parties were helping to supply fighters and weapons. In the midst of the chaos, many were venting their anger toward the Palestinians, saying that the Israelis would not have invaded if these refugees had not been present. Fisk found himself an eye-witness to the unraveling of an entire nation.

The story of Lebanon is a complex one. Once known as “The Paris of the Middle East,” it is now a shadow of its former self. The situation of the Palestinian refugees remains precarious in terms of health, sanitation, education, and employment. Several of Lebanon’s Presidents and Prime Ministers have been assassinated, or have had attempts made upon them. Other political leaders have suffered a similar fate. Everywhere you look in the country, buildings are pock-marked from bombs and bullets. Even trees have been shot and totter between life and death. Missiles which were fired from ships have also left their mark. Whenever the nation is at peace, it is a nervous peace.

But the most memorable stain on the nation’s history relates to the killing of Palestinian women, children, and the elderly in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila. Over 800 bodies were taken out after two days of shooting. The massacre was carried out, according to all reports, by the Maronite militias, perhaps following government orders. Member of the Israeli Defense Forces (the IDF, or Israeli Army) stood guard at the entrances to the camp, letting no one in and no one out. They claim not to have realized what was taking place inside. There is much written about this incident, so I will not elaborate.

**New Wave of Refugees**
In addition to the various militias that represent each religious faction, other groups have made their presence known in Lebanon, either militarily or politically. In recent years, the most prominent has been Hezbollah (the Party of God), a Shi’ite militia that most people say is supported by Iran. Their actions are of special interest to the Christian power structure in Lebanon, and also to Israel, their southern neighbor. Hezbollah had its birth in Syria, where the fundamentalist version of Shi’ite Islam has taken root. The influx of such a fundamentalist version of Islam has not only been disconcerting to those who had hoped for peace in Lebanon, but it is also perceived as a threat to Israel, and the Lebanese don’t want a repeat of the incidents of the 1980s, when the IDF made its presence felt. Thus far, a new Israeli invasion has not yet taken place.

But another, equally destabilizing “invasion” has taken place. Thousands of refugees from the war in Syria have streamed across the mountain border into Lebanon, further straining the economic abilities of the government, social service agencies, and private citizens to be able to help. As much as possible, Lebanese people and their government have attempted to make these new refugees welcome. Although the refugees have also streamed into European and North African nations, the fact that they were not always welcomed has helped the various neighboring Arab states to feel their obligation to help. Syrian refugees are adherents of various branches of Islam, as well as several Christian denominations. Thousands of these people have streamed into Lebanon, further straining a social service system already at its breaking point. Some have been placed in already-crowded existing refugee camps, while others have found a place to stay with relatives or friends, or even with strangers. Because of the haphazard way in which they have been accommodated, there is no accurate count of how many have arrived. In order to be counted, one must register with the United Nations. Since so few have actually done so, there are many guesses as to how many are currently present in Lebanon. Estimates are that at least one in every three persons in the country is a refugee, a figure which includes both the newly-arrived Syrians and the Palestinians, many of whom have now been in the country for 70 years.

This situation adds a great deal of stress to the already precarious economic and social fabric of Lebanon. Although there are many other problems faced by Lebanon, the largest one is the strain of caring for so many wretched souls. Our
role in this region, at this time, is to be supportive of humanitarian efforts to care for the massive number of refugees who have presented themselves at Lebanon’s doors. Failing to do so could lead to economic and social disaster, something which Lebanon has already experienced more than its share of throughout its history.

**Syria – A Disaster with no End in Sight**

Probably the most difficult current conflict in the Middle East to understand is the one taking place in Syria. At the time of this writing, scant information is coming out of the area, few journalists remain there, and conflicting reports make it impossible to know which faction or factions to support. There is plenty of blame to go around, and one of the few things that all seem to agree about is that the fighting in Syria can best be described today as a proxy war.

Although I have visited Syria several times, I must admit that the current situation there is difficult for me to understand. Much of what is taking place is simply a tragedy that is exacerbated by the belligerent presence of several other nations. Although many pieces of information are available about the situation there, most of it is difficult, if not impossible, to verify at this time. What I’m going to provide, therefore, is a little bit of history, followed by some information on the roots of the conflict, and a little bit about some of the “players” in this deadly game. I caution you, as the reader, to gather information from a variety of sources, as I try to do, and to be fully aware that each source not only has his or her own bias, but is also finding it difficult to unravel the complexities of the situation in Syria, which is in near-constant flux.

The modern history of Syria is that of a majority Muslim nation long led by rulers from a minority faction. For many years, Hafez al-Assad, the strongman President, an Alawite, kept control of the many factions operating in his country. Alawites are a somewhat obscure minority within the Shi’ite faith. Syria, restless at best, was unified in its opposition to the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights in the 1967 Six-Day War. The Golan Heights is where Syrian and Israeli troops face off across a border that separated members and friends of yet another religious minority group, the Druze, from family members in a few neighboring villages that exist in the mountainous region. Just before the current hostilities began, I had heard that Israel was interested in working on a negotiated
settlement of their dispute with Syria, and perhaps in returning much of the land they had occupied for so long. This was welcome news.

But on the heels of that hopeful news came reports that oil had been discovered in that same mountainous region. Neither of these news stories had time to be confirmed, and it was difficult to find details of either report. The next news was that a drought was causing food insecurity throughout Syria. To many who report on the region, this problem was the one that precipitated the current crisis.

Political Stance

Under Hafez al-Assad, various factions of the Palestine Liberation Organization (The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, or PFLP; The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, or DFLP; and the PFLP-General Command) were allowed to have offices in various parts of Damascus, the nation’s capital. It was common to see armored vehicles with machine guns sticking out of their windows, and with watchful guards protecting the leader of one or another faction as he traveled through town. In the past, when we met with these leaders to find out what they were thinking and doing, it always made me nervous to be sitting in a small room with several young men carrying rifles or machine guns.

With the death of Hafez al-Assad, the country had undergone a crisis of leadership. Assad had two sons, the elder one of whom, Basel, had been the logical choice to replace him. But he died in an auto accident. The other son, Bashar, was an ophthalmologist, and had no interest in ruling the country, or so he said. He resisted for some time, but finally agreed, reluctantly, to serve. He had staunchly refused for months to give up his profession. With no interest, and no experience, in politics, it took several months to convince him that the country needed him as a leader. He was elected President in 2000.

But once in power, Bashar al-Assad found himself coming under fire from all directions. Among the changes that had taken place during his father’s rule was an increasing presence of pro-Iranian Shi’ite adherents. From the early 1980s through the early 1990s, murals several stories high could be seen on buildings. At first, these had depicted Hafez al-Assad. But then they began to show the faces of the Iranian Ayatollahs. The fact that these conservative Iranian clerics had been so well accepted in Syria was troubling for the new leader of that country. The polarization of Syria’s population presented additional problems for this untried ruler. His rule was marked by appeasement of the various
factions, and by compromise. He was trying to protect himself from several
opposition factions, but hardly succeeding. Whereas Hafez al-Assad was often
depicted as a fearless and decisive leader, Basher seemed to be living in fear. But
when he was opposed or pushed into a corner, he lashed out. He was
determined to never be wrong, which gained him many enemies. He cracked
down and then created a military siege on Arab Spring protestors.

When confronted with demonstrations asking for relief from the consequences of
the rapidly increasing drought situation, his response varied from that of denial
to a blaming of the victims. Calls for his removal, street-rioting, and the pitting
of faction against faction ensued. It was religious group versus religious group,
faction against faction, and the rich against the poor. Old animosities were
revived, as new ones were created. It went from people versus the Assad regime
to the power of the government against the people.

Here is where it all becomes confusing. Sometimes it can be determined that the
destruction in certain towns or cities was caused by Syrian government forces,
simply because of the fact that no other faction had possession of such an ability
to destroy. More recently, though, the participation of Russia, the U.S., Israel,
Iran, and perhaps other nations, in support of various factions, or the
government, has made it difficult to assign responsibility or blame.

What we do know is that several major cities have been reduced to rubble, with
innocent civilians falling victim to shelling, being trapped for weeks in bombed
out buildings, dying from their wounds or, even worse, from starvation. The
“lucky ones” managed to escape and join the stream of thousands of refugees.
For them, the trauma is continuing, as they cross mountain ranges on foot, fight
for food, shelter, and clothing, encounter rejection or hostility at various borders,
or risk drowning in their attempts to find a safe haven. More is known about the
refugees than can be discerned about the nation whose condition has forced
them to become stateless nomads.

Although there are many examples of conflicting news from Syria, I will just cite
one here. Let it be a warning to you to not believe everything you read about
Syria. Some day, what has been happening in Syria may be untangled, but for
now, our duty as peacemakers must be to stay neutral, and to ask our own
governments to stop funneling arms into the area. It only serves to escalate the
tragedy, when what is needed is de-escalation, peace, and reconstruction.

The example of conflicting news from Syria pertains to the “aid group” known as
the White Helmets. You can go online and find film footage of rescues this
group has purportedly made, bringing injured people out of buildings turned to
rubble. But, although it appears that they are doing heroic work, other reports
on this group indicate that the film footage has been faked, and that the group is
only a propaganda tool of one of the factions. Who are we to believe? Who are
the “good guys” here? It’s impossible to know. Some of the latest reports would
indicate that they are involved in committing atrocities, as are many factions.

I wish I could give you more accurate details, but there are a few things that we
can know. First, the civilians caught in this tragedy are the real victims. Most of
them are ordinary people, trying to live normal lives. The trauma they have
experienced will leave lasting scars, both physically and mentally. So, what can
we, as peacemakers, do about Syria?

First and foremost, we need to do what we can to assist in refugee resettlement.
We need to urge our own governments to welcome those traumatized by this
tragedy. The second thing we should all be doing is to call on our own
governments to stop pouring armaments into Syria, regardless of which side
they support. This only makes the situation worse. We should remind our

leaders that the future of Syria should be determined by its own citizens, not by
outside players who are using the country as a battlefield in which to fight their
own enemies. Finally, we should urge the United Nations and each member of
the UN to work toward bringing the parties to the peace table. The wounds in
this land are deep. It will take a concerted effort to even begin to heal them.

Iraq and Afghanistan

If you were looking for two nations that have historically been at opposite ends
in terms of the economic or educational spectrum, you would be hard put to find
better candidates than Iraq and Afghanistan. Until the First Gulf War erupted in
Iraq, that nation enjoyed a high level of education and some of the best medical
care in the world. Despite being headed by a notorious dictator, Saddam
Hussein, arts and culture flourished in the land, which had numerous museums
dedicated to history, art, and culture. Proud of its heritage as the land known in
history as Mesopotamia, Iraqis basked in the title of “The Cradle of Civilization”.

What has happened since then is hardly civilized.

Despite religious differences (the population includes a few Jews, plus Christians, and both Shi’a and Sunni Muslims), there were few faith-centered conflicts prior to the First Gulf War, and it was not uncommon for husband and wife to each profess a different religion, or for people to live in mixed-religious neighborhoods. All of that came to an abrupt end following the incidents in the U.S. that the world has come to call “9/11”. Following the suicide missions of that day, which are known to have been carried out primarily by Saudi nationals, the U.S. “retaliated” by falsely accusing Iraq of the crimes, and launching a bombing campaign under the title “Shock and Awe” against that nation. Continuous pummelling of the previously advanced nation over several years has reduced it to a shell of its former self, while at the same time dividing its population, largely along religious lines.

At the same time, the events of 9/11 were traced to a little-known group, led by a rebel from Saudi Arabia named Osama bin Laden. Along with an organization called the Taliban (which means “the students”), bin Laden and his followers, who were believed to be hiding in Afghanistan, also became targets of U.S. bombing. Not knowing where to find them, the bombing can best be described as indiscriminate, and hundreds—or perhaps thousands—of innocent Afghani civilians were killed or maimed as a result. You have probably heard that, in its zeal to prevent these unknown enemies from gathering in sizable groups, the U.S. has bombed several wedding parties, killing the bride, or the groom, and several guests. This is tragedy heaped upon tragedy.

But Afghanistan was no stranger to conflict. Due to its location at a major crossroads on the trade routes linking Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, skirmishes and wars have been an essential part of the nation’s history. Although the educational level in the country was low, and the Taliban had prevented most girls from receiving any schooling at all, the fierce fighters of Afghanistan, known as the peshmerga, had not been conquered, even during multiple invasions and occupations, including a lengthy campaign by the former Soviet Union, which was unable to prevail over these brave defenders of their homeland.

There is much that I could write about Iraq and Afghanistan, but I’m going to refrain from doing that. You should have been able to follow incidents in the news going back to shortly after 9/11. Reporters have been on the scene in both
places, and they have done a decent job of reporting. As in so many places in the Middle East, various political and religious factions have engaged in atrocities, civilians have been caught up in the strife, and the cycle of violence seem never-ending.

However, as news from other places has overtaken what has become everyday news about Iraq and Afghanistan, stories of those two nations have moved from the front pages to the back. Only a few of the incidents in these countries are sufficiently significant any more to be front-page news. But they are no less tragic for the victims. We can’t let those unfortunates slip from our consciousness. The U.S. and its coalition has rained destruction on large parts of both countries and, although Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and now Donald Trump have all pledged to remove U.S. troops from their soil, those soldiers remain, and the destruction continues.

Again, there are some things that we can do. We need to urge our lawmakers to get the military out of these areas where they only compound the destruction. Once out, we need to take responsibility for the damage done. These nations need to be rebuilt. The U.S. and other coalition states should probably agree to pay reparations. But nothing can repair all the damage that has been done. The dead will not come back to life, and their relatives will continue to suffer the pain of their loss. The animosity which the Western nations are responsible for bringing on themselves due to the indiscriminate targeting of civilians will be a lasting legacy of these conflicts.

As peacemakers, we should work with groups that are doing peacemaking and reconciliation work in these two countries, even as the fighting continues. And we should always remember that the people there are real human beings who have suffered much at the hands of our government, and not only their own. As we move away from conflict there, we must see that the people who are forced to remain are not forgotten.

Jordan

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is situated to the east of Palestine/Israel, to the south of Syria, the west of Iraq, and the north of Saudi Arabia. The royal family of Jordan had its origins in Saudi Arabia, and the nation has several unique features among the states of the world. Largely a desert kingdom, it functions in many ways as a democracy, although the royal family maintains a
leadership role. The current King, Abdullah, who succeeded upon his father’s death in 1999, is married to a Palestinian, while his father was last married to a Syrian-American whose father was CEO of Pan American Airways. That King, Hussein, had witnessed the assassination of his own father, who was praying in a mosque in Jerusalem while the West Bank (of the Jordan River) was still part of Jordan, a situation which ended with the 1967 Six-Day War, in which Israel became the occupying power there.

As a result of the hostilities in Palestine in 1948, thousands of refugees had fled to Amman, Jordan’s capital. That number swelled when, in 1967, the loss of the West Bank to Israel led to a new influx of refugees. By the early 1980s, the population of Amman’s largest refugee camp (Beqaa Camp) had swelled to just under one million persons. By that time, the number of refugees had just begun to exceed the number of Jordanians in the Kingdom. Being a minority group in your own nation is not common among the world’s states. Unlike Lebanon, Jordan conferred citizenship on the Palestinian refugees, and they were allowed to work in all sectors of society, including the government.

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More Refugees

During the fighting in Iraq, streams of refugees crossed into Jordan, where they, too, were welcomed. On one of my visits to the region during that time period, I was told that there were so many school-aged children among the refugees that the Jordanian government had had to build more than 200 additional schools to accommodate them. They came in several waves, their numbers increasing as bombardments of their cities became more intense. One of Jordan’s responses to this was to make every effort to move Palestinians out of the camps where they had been residing for years, so that the newly homeless Iraqis could move in.

But it didn’t end there. The latest round of Middle East fighting, that taking place in Syria, brought yet another wave of refugees. Already struggling under the weight of so many traumatized, penniless people, the Jordanian economy has felt the pressure. Although the Jordanian government is one of the most stable in the region, recent demonstrations have centered on the financial difficulties resulting from welcoming so many refugees.
King Abdullah’s government remains one of the most stable in the region, but by welcoming so many refugees, and treating them in a way that required straining the state’s treasury and other resources, his regime may have reached a crisis point. If we want to help see that this oasis of peace remains available for those in crisis, be they Jordanians or refugees from elsewhere, we need to lend our support to the regime. One effort that will help to underwrite the expenses incurred in supporting large numbers of refugees is to support international bodies that lend support for these emergencies. And we must note that there are still more than a million Palestinian refugees in Jordan. The recent move of the United States to stop paying its portion of support to UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine), which provides food, medical, and educational support for Palestinian refugees, has made it essential for nations hosting these persons to pull money from their budgets to make up for the shortfall. We should urge the U.S. government to restore these payments.

It doesn’t matter which nation is playing host to the refugees or from which country they have come. We should do all within our power to see that adequate care is available for their food, shelter, clothing, and other needs, including both physical and mental health. We can all ask our governments to fully fund the various public and private agencies that provide these services. Again, we may not be able to heal all of the wounds, but each step toward the stability of these traumatized persons is a step toward the possibility of peace in the future.

**Egypt**

Most of us were excited when we watched the news of the Arab Spring. Inspired by the self-emolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor who was thwarted at every turn simply for trying to support his family and decided to kill himself in protest, Tunisians took to the streets in peaceful protest and managed to change their government. Egyptians were also inspired. Their country was poor, and the government of Hosni Mubarak had become more and more oppressive over the years. Perhaps they could achieve another miracle.

Thus began the Arab Spring. But today’s Egypt is in perhaps worse condition than it was at the start. How did this happen? And is there any hope?

To better understand the Egyptian situation, a little history is in order. But we don’t need to go back to the time of the pharoahs. We can begin in 1956, when strongman Gamal Abdul Nasser became President. Egypt was a poor country then, as now, mostly desert, but in possession of popular tourist sites. Income
from that industry helped shore up the economy, along with oil revenues, and some income from other metals. Egyptian cotton was famous worldwide. Nasser died in 1970, and was succeeded by Anwar al-Sadat.

Even before Nasser’s rule, like other countries in the Middle East, Egypt was profoundly affected by the creation of the State of Israel. Some Jews had lived in Egypt for centuries, but to have an entire nation of Jewish people at their doorstep was not something that seemed to be desirable. Egypt was one of the primary states that formed the coalition trying to prevent the new Jewish state from acquiring even more land than the United Nations had granted them. They tried to aid the Palestinians in the 1948 war. Like other states bordering Israel, they found themselves playing host to a sizable number of refugees.

The refugees arrived at Egypt’s borders carrying their meagre belongings. Many had crossed the Sinai desert and were barely alive. Others came by sea. They hauled themselves ashore in Gaza, or further south near Alexandria. Gaza was a remote part of Palestine that came under the jurisdiction of the Egyptians. The Six Day War in 1967 was a disaster. The united Arab armies were no match for the State of Israel, which was backed by the military might of the United States.

By late 1970, Nasser was dead and Anwar Sadat had been seated as President. The nation was chronically in debt. An experiment in cooperation with Syria, which ran from 1958-1971, whereby the two nations had united under the title of United Arab Republic, was doomed to failure. Part of this was the result of the fact that they had no contiguous borders.

Sadat led Egyptian troops in the October War, known in Israel as the Yom Kippur War (because it had been launched on that Jewish holiday). Again, the U.S. supported Israel. Despite the fact that the U.S. was not only a friend, but a primary sponsor of the Jewish state, Sadat worked hard to maintain good relations with that Superpower. Many Egyptian citizens never reconciled to that fact. And when Sadat made his peace with Israel, opening Egypt’s borders to tourists from that enemy nation, many Egyptians never forgave him.

Sadat was assassinated in October 1981. His successor was Hosni Mubarak. At first, he seemed to be a mild-mannered, pleasant man, who many felt would simply be a figure-head. But he surrounded himself with military personnel and he did little to nothing to solve the nation’s monetary woes. As often happens when a country is poor, citizens take solice in their religion. In the case of Egypt,
that religion was Islam. The primary group was Sunni, and clerics stepped up to lend their support.

The Muslim Brotherhood

Most of what you read or hear in the media about the Muslim Brotherhood is not accurate. Much of it is put out by the Egyptian government under the current leader, Abdel Fatah el-Sisi. Other information that is available in the media is put out by the Israelis, who claim that there is a link between the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, which they classify as a terrorist organization. Hamas was the last duly elected government of Palestine (see the booklet, Hamas at the Peace Table: Why? of which I am the co-author), while the Muslim Brotherhood began as a transnational Sunni Islamist organization. It was founded in Egypt in 1928 and combines political activism with Islamic charity work, such as building hospitals. The group wants to instill the Koran and Sunnah as “the sole reference point for …ordering the life of the Muslim family, individual, community, and state”. That is not related to the goals of Hamas, and suggestions that the two groups are linked cannot be proven.

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Much of the reason for Egyptians’ embracing the tenets of the Arab Spring, such as non-violent civil disobedience, can be attributed to the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood. The organization espouses peaceful means to the ends they hope to achieve.

The population of Egypt is about 69.29 million people. The River Nile helps to make large swaths of land fertile, but in spite of that, most of the population is concentrated in two major cities, Cairo and Alexandria. People move from rural areas to the cities hoping to find employment. But what they usually find is a high cost of living, including expensive and crowded housing, an overburdened infrastructure, and a high rate of unemployment. That makes the country a prime location for unrest.

Hosni Mubarak’s government had imposed new taxes, cracked down on dissent, and jailed opposition leaders by the time that the Arab Spring broke out in Tunisia. Recognizing common cause with the Tunisian people, and hoping to relieve themselves of the yoke of Mubarak’s rule, a series of open meetings took place in various parts of Egypt. Prominent among the participants were members and leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood. Also taking leadership roles were university students, intellectuals, and ordinary workers. Together, they
devised a plan to stage demonstrations in opposition to the status quo, and to Mubarak’s rule.

**Tahrir (Liberation) Square**

One of the places in Cairo which has long been a gathering spot for Egyptians is Tahrir Square. Featuring a large open space, with several streets radiating out from it, the area was perfect for large-scale demonstrations. People knew there were risks associated with going to Tahrir Square in response to the call. No one was more surprised than the organizers when thousands of people, representing all walks of life, showed up on the first day. Government troops cracked down on the demonstrators for the first few days, but they persisted. Some were merely harassed, while others were beaten and arrested. But later, the troops seemed actually to support the demonstrators.

The demonstrations had begun on January 25, 2011. They continued for 18 days. As a result of the protests, Hosni Mubarak was removed from office on February 11, along with his National Democratic Party (NDP). The repression and violence that had been meted out by the Army came to an end. There was an election, from which Mohamed Morsi emerged the winner. He took office on June 12, 2012, but was overthrown on July 3, 2013. Members of the armed forces worried, they said, that his history, which included working for the Muslim Brotherhood, would lead to further chaos. They toppled him.

Despite the fact that the elections had been deemed fair and democratic, Morsi was overthrown by military coup, after which former Egyptian Armed Forces Commander Abdel Fatah el-Sisi became President. Although he has stated that he will step down soon and allow new elections, he has not yet moved to do so. Meanwhile, he rules with an iron fist, and his authoritarian style has resulted in many arrests of those whose demonstrations for democracy had seemed so hopeful during the Arab Spring.

The chaotic state of the Egyptian government under el-Sisi has increased the misery of ordinary Egyptian citizens. His autocratic rule has suppressed dissent and depressed the economy, a large portion of which is dependant on tourism. There is very little that peacemakers can do. But we should note that el-Sisi is one of several autocratic rulers who have been embraced by U.S. President Donald Trump (including Duterte in the Philippines, Putin in Russia, Kim in North Korea, and others). Perhaps the best we can do is to urge our leaders not to encourage this type of leadership.
Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Yemen

For many years, Saudi Arabia was best known for its oil wealth. More recently, it has made headlines for its just-ended ban on women’s driving. The nation is one of the few remaining kingdoms in the world, and monarchy is a family business there. Saudi Arabia has been ruled by aging royalty, all members of the house of ibn Saud. Many in the West believe things are getting better because a new generation of Saudi leadership has begun to come into power, represented by Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman, known as MbS.

It’s difficult at this point to determine whether bin Salman is the reformer he has claimed to be. On the one hand, he has moved forward with the plan to allow women to drive. However, more than a dozen women who protested months ago in an attempt to be allowed to do so were arrested on bin Salman’s watch. Although some of them have been released, others remain in custody and may be prosecuted for treason, which seems to be a rather extreme charge.

Even though bin Salman is trying to court nations in the West, and put on quite a charm offensive while visiting the U.S., certainly winning favor with Donald Trump, his motivation seems to have been to obtain support for the ongoing hostilities his nation is conducting against the tiny nation of Yemen.

Very little in the Western (especially the U.S.) press has provided background on this conflict. Many of you have heard that Saudi Arabia is bombing Yemen’s capital, Sana’a, and that there has been a complete closure of all ports of entry, which means that food and medical supplies have not been allowed into the country for most of the last several months. But you have probably not heard the whole story. The sanitation system has been destroyed, and the United Nations reports that thousands of people, mostly children, have died of cholera and other diseases. Food supplies have dwindled to a point where starvation is widespread. The majority of people caught up in this war are civilians. They have nowhere to flee, because the borders are closed.

But what is the fighting about? How and when did it start? The answer is related to a small group known as the Houthis. You may have heard the name, but very few news articles have explained who they are. To understand that, and how Saudi Arabia got involved in fighting them, we need to go back to the 1990s, when Saudi Arabia opposed the unification of what had been the two Yemens into a single country. By 1994, the unification had taken place, with
Saudi Arabia siding with the southern secessionists during their civil war. The Saudis funded schools and hospitals that were Wahhabi-run. Wahhabism is the strict fundamentalist form of Islam espoused by Saudi Arabia. (Many say it is Wahhabism that led to the extreme views of Osama bin-Laden, but that is a matter for debate.)

Yemen’s President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, ruled for more than three decades, and he resisted democratic reforms. There was widespread corruption and many human rights abuses took place. Under pressure, Saleh fled, yielding power to his Vice President, Abd’ Rabbu Mansour Hadi. He was to hold office for two years, but then he failed to yield power. In 2014, he suspended fuel subsidies, which was a disaster for poor citizens. The Houthis, a Shi’a rebel group from the north of Yemen, felt especially marginalized and began to stage protests. The government cracked down on the Houthis and their supporters.

The rebels launched a military campaign in the north, and lent support to the deposed President Saleh. They were able to take control of the capital, San’a. Hadi fled to Saudi Arabia, asking that nation for support. The Saudis, never that friendly with the Houthis (some of whom constitute a minority tribe in Saudi Arabia, as well), began providing Hadi with air support. At the same time, Saudi Arabia accused Iran of backing the Houthis financially. There is a great deal of animosity between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi’ite Iran. The bombing has gone on since March 2015. More than half of the civilians of Yemen are now considered to be “food insecure,” according to UNICEF, and Saudi Arabia continues to bomb and to maintain its siege.

This situation is made worse by the fact that the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a group of five small nations, each ruled by an emir, or prince, have joined Saudi Arabia in its attacks. And the U.S. has provided re-fueling and other logistical support, and perhaps weaponry, to that coalition. This is counter to several international treaties and covenants to which the U.S. is a signatory. It is also a violation of the terms of the Leahy bill, which prohibits the use of U. S. funds, or the provision of weapons or material aid to any nation which uses that assistance to harm civilians. Our work should be to ask our government not to support Saudi Arabia and its allies, the UAE, in their ongoing actions which are having such a devastating effect on Yemen’s civilians. We can also point out the unfairness of using Yemen as a staging ground in a proxy war between Saudi Arabia’s Sunni leaders and Iran’s Shi’ites.
Bahrain

It’s name means two seas, and this nation is all but an island. It is known for its beauty. But it is another predominantly Shi’ite nation, which means that Saudi Arabia thinks of it as being naturally pro-Iranian and, therefore, they feel it is important to see that the Sunni family (the Khalifas) heading Bahrain’s repressive monarchy stays in power. In 2011, a popular uprising rose up against King Hamad. Although the Saudis, and the Khalifa family, depicted it as a Sunni/Shi’a conflict, it was more of a pro-democracy movement. After centuries of repressive rule, many citizens hoped for a more democratic government.

The demonstrators gathered at an encampment in the center of the capital, Manama, at a traffic circle known as the Pearl Roundabout. Several thousand people participated, a large turnout for a country with only a 1.1 million

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population. Again, Saudi Arabia and the UAE sent troops to quell the rebellion, entering via the King Fahd Causeway. They stormed the Roundabout. More than a thousand protesters were arrested. Many were beaten or tortured. Public gatherings were banned, but periodic demonstrations have taken place since the original protests. More than 150 protesters have been killed, while thousands of others were injured. The protesters have been unable to unseat the Khalifa family.

Here, as in the situation in Yemen, we recognize the elements of a proxy war, again Saudi Arabia vs. Iran, or Sunni vs. Shi’a. Although insufficient evidence exists for the participation of Western nations in supplying support functions to the military, this is something we need to be alert to in future incidents.

Iran: The Non-Arab Player

I’ve left Iran until the end, even though it has been mentioned in several of my previous entries. I’ve done so for several reasons. Iran is unique among Middle Eastern states. Its population is not Arab. Iranians, or Persians (from their old designation as Pars people), are an Indo-European race. Their language is also Indo-European, rather than Arabic. That language, Farsi, uses the Arabic alphabet, plus four additional letters that don’t exist for the Arab nations.

For many years, most of the Arab states adhered to the tenets of Sunni Islam, while having small minority populations of Shi’ites. But Iran has been majority Shi’a for centuries. Since the Iranian revolution in the late 1970s, which
overthrew the Shah of Iran, the country has been ruled by extremely conservative mullahs and ayatollahs (both types of religious leaders). This has led to conflict with Iran’s Arab neighbors, most notably Saudi Arabia.

Because the U.S. was friendly to the Shah’s regime, and even helped to overthrow the first and only democratically-elected leader in Iran’s recent history, Mohammed Mossadegh, in the 1950s, Ayatollah Khomeini dubbed the U.S. “the Great Satan” after the overthrow of the Shah. The relationship between Iran and the U.S. has been just as rocky as that between Saudi Arabia and Iran. There is still a high level of animosity on both sides that has not abated since the Iran Hostage Crisis that occurred during the Carter Administration.

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Two U.S. “allies” have been urging the U.S. government not to trust Iran, even as that nation has changed over the years. The first of these two is Israel. As of this writing, it is known from various sources that Israel is the only nation in the Middle East to possess nuclear weapons. According to reliable sources, Israel has somewhere between 200-400 nuclear warheads. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has frequently denied that Israel is a nuclear power, but almost as frequently, he has threatened to unleash them on Iran.

You might ask why. It goes back to the question of fear. The Israelis fear that all of the Arab states, and Iran, want to “push them into the sea”. Their fear is demonstrated by their insistence that they need to have quantitative and qualitative superiority over all these other states. They insist that no other state in the region will ever acquire nuclear weapons.

Ironically, the first call for a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East came from Iran and Egypt. This was during the reign of the Shah. This fact is often forgotten. Recently, accusations have been flowing freely. Iran is known to have enriched uranium, but it is not yet in possession of the grade of uranium, or the amount, to produce even one bomb. And yet, both Saudi Arabia and Israel have been beating the drums of war in order to convince the U.S. government to pull out of the Iran nuclear agreement that was signed during the Obama administration.

Unfortunately, they have been successful. Despite the fact that inspectors and the majority of the signatories to the Iran nuclear agreement are certain Iran did not violate it, the U.S. has reneged on its participation in the pact. It was signed during the Obama administration, but abrogated by Trump, who seems to want
to reverse all of the good things that happened on Obama’s watch. The negative effects of that decision have already begun to be seen.

First, with the U.S. not honoring its commitment to this international pact, the Iranians have stated that they cannot trust the U.S. and its word. That affects all of us, as it reflects on the entire nation and its credibility. In addition, since the start of the inspection regimen, Iran has been declared to be in compliance. This means that inspectors could find no evidence that Iran was producing weapons grade nuclear materials. Now, with the U.S. withdrawal, Iran will no longer be subject to these inspections. Many say that Trump has given Iran a green light to proceed with a nuclear weapons program.

On the other hand, although there is always a risk that such a program could begin, past statements from the Iranian leadership, both religious and secular, have always indicated that nuclear weapons are not acceptable under Islamic law. They have claimed that their uranium enrichment program is only for peaceful domestic energy purposes. I hope that’s true. But the U.S. move to disengage means that the inspection program could come to an abrupt end, and Iran’s anger at what the U.S has done could lead it to consider a nuclear weapons program, which has not existed before.

In another aspect of this situation, along with ending the U.S. role in the Iran nuclear deal, Trump has imposed even harsher sanctions on Iran, as well as on nations that do business with that nation. This has led to shortages and rising prices within Iran. Ordinary citizens have begun to suffer, and demonstrations have already begun.

One of Iran’s primary revenue sources is oil, and Trump has imposed higher tariffs on Iranian oil, as well as punishments for nations involved in trading in this commodity with Iran. One of the immediate consequences of this action is that oil has become less available on the international market. The price of oil and gasoline products has already gone up as a consequence. Of course, U.S. allies in the Gulf region, such as Saudi Arabia, can increase their output, thereby offsetting the loss of Iranian oil, but also increasing oil revenues to these nations. We can see how Saudi Arabia and the UAE can profit in two ways from Trump’s actions. They are able to both diminish the power of their enemy, Iran’s government, and also to realize a significant profit at Iran’s expense.
And, finally, Israel has been sabre-rattling as regards Iran. They have reminded the world that they destroyed Iraq’s Demona reactor by bombing it, and have threatened to do the same to Iran. In fact, they have threatened to use their own (theoretically non-existent) nuclear arsenal against that nation. This entire series of actions has made the Middle East region, as well as the entire world, a less safe place for all of us.

What can we do? We need to contact our government officials and remind them that the millions of people in Iran are not our enemies. We must call for the U.S. to either opt back into the agreement or work diligently to create a new agreement for nuclear inspections in Iran. Given that the government of Iran no longer trusts the U.S. as a valid or honest negotiating partner, such an agreement will be much more difficult, if not impossible, to obtain.