

Topic #3: The situation in the Levant

I. Background information

The Levant is a geographical area that corresponds to modern-day Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Palestinian territories, Jordan and a part of Turkey. Most of the Levant used to be under Ottoman rule until World War I. In 1916, England and France made a secret agreement dividing the Levant into spheres of influence in case of the fall of the Ottoman Empire. In 1918 after its capitulation to the Allies, the territory was split into the British mandate for Palestine and the French mandate for Syria and Lebanon.

In 1947, after England gave the issue of Palestine and the possibility of a Jewish state over to the UN, a resolution passed stating that a Jewish state would be founded as well as an Arab people state with Jerusalem becoming an international area with a special regime. The day after the British mandate officially ended and Israel declared its independence, the First Arab-Israeli War started. After a year of fighting, Egypt occupied the Gaza Strip and Jordan the West Bank. The war led to a vast resettlement of the Palestinian people and its consequences are still visible to this day.

During the fifties, Israel was attacked multiple times by Palestinian nationalist militants and Egypt put up a blockade in the Suez Canal leading to the Second Arab-Israeli War when Israel attacked Egypt with the help of France and England. In 1967, Egypt retaliated by blocking Israel's access to the Red Sea. These events led to the Six Day War, where Israel took control of the West Bank as well as the Gaza Strip.

During the next decade, multiple Arab and Palestinian groups (namely the Palestine Liberation Organization, PLO) attacked Israel, including the 1972 Olympics massacre, to which Israel responded by attacking the PLO headquarters in Lebanon. A few years later Syria took advantage of the fact that Lebanon had a civil war and invaded a part of Lebanon.

In 1982, after more attacks coming from the PLO in Lebanon, Israel decided to invade and destroy the bases. It withdrew from Lebanon in 1986 creating a buffer zone that lasted until 2000. A year later, in 1987, the First Intifada (Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza) broke out. It continued for the next 6 years, becoming more coordinated.

In 1993, the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) gained the right to govern certain parts of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In 1994, Israel and Jordan signed a peace treaty. In 1999, Israel withdrew from Lebanon and discussed the possibility of a Palestinian state with the PNA; however, the talks failed. As a result, the Second Intifada began, which ended a year later with the promise of Israel withdrawing from the Gaza Strip.

In 2006, a Hezbollah (a terrorist organization operating mainly in Lebanon) cross-border attack started the Second Israel-Lebanon War. Two years later, the Gaza War erupted after the collapse of the truce between Israel and Hamas (an internationally acknowledged Palestinian terrorist group).

In 2011, during the Arab Spring, the Syrian civil war started. The uprising called for Assad's resignation, but the government sent the army to suppress the protesters (and is suspected to have used chemical weapons). The civil war resulted in a widespread refugee crisis that impacted not only the neighbouring countries but European countries as well. Lebanon became one of the major targets for refugees, creating refugee camps that are overpopulated and resemble very poor neighbourhoods to this day.

In 2023, after a Hamas-led attack on Israel and Israel's retaliation, the Israel-Hamas war started. This renewed the Israel-Hezbollah conflict, leading to Israel attacking not only the Gaza Strip where Hamas has its bases, but also Lebanon. Because of the civilian casualties in Gaza, Israel was sent in front of the International Criminal Court. This resulted in the prime minister of Israel and its former minister of defence being issued arrest warrants.

In 2024, the Syrian government fell after an uprising of Syrian rebels. An interim government led by one of the rebels is currently creating a new constitution for the new government. As a result of the uprising, Israel invaded the Golan Heights and is attacking chemical weapons plants in Syria.

II. UN Involvement

The United Nations have been very active in the Levant since their creation. Not only did the UN come up with the two-state solution in 1948, but it has also established 4 different peace-keeping missions in the region as well as mediations. In 1948, the UN General Assembly also passed a resolution about the right of settlement of the Palestinian refugees. In 1967, UN Resolution 242 was adopted after the Six Day War. After the declaration of Jerusalem being the capital of Israel, the Security Council denounced the claim in 1980. The UN has also established a special organization, the UNRWA, for Palestinian refugees.

Outside of the Security Council missions, other UN organizations operate in the area, such as UNICEF or WHO since many of the countries in the region have been accused of not respecting human rights as a consequence of the instability and conflicts.

III. Bloc positions

The whole region is very divided into different parties, often based on religion or the spheres of influence the different countries are part of. Russia, the United States, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey are some of the most prominent countries that have influence in the Levant.

Russia, formerly the Soviet Union, has had a relationship with Syria since 1956, after signing a deal that gave Syria weapons in exchange for communist influence. The USSR, and now Russia, supported the leadership of the Ba'athist party in Syria, which ended in December of 2024.

Saudi Arabia and Iran are contenders when it comes to oil export as well as the Sunni-Shia religious conflict. Saudi Arabia has had close ties with the US and the UK since World War II, which was the case with Iran before the Iranian revolution. Since then, when one of the countries sides in a regional conflict, the other sides against them. For example, during the Syrian Civil War, Iran supported the government while Saudi Arabia supplied the rebels. The two countries keep fighting for regional dominance.

The United States has been a long-time ally of Israel. Its involvement in the region usually reflects Israeli interests. However, they are sometimes critical of certain Israeli actions.

Turkey and Syria have unstable relations notably because of the Kurdish minorities in both countries as well as Turkey currently having tanks in Syria.

IV. Questions to consider

Which of the countries am I backing and which ones am I against?

Does my country have any motives for potentially being involved in the region?

What historical ties does my country have with the different countries in question?

Do my allies have any interests in the region (If I am not directly involved in the region)?

V. Useful links

<https://untso.unmissions.org/learn-more-about-untso>

<https://news.un.org/en/focus/syria>

<https://jordan.un.org/en/about/about-the-un>

<https://www.un.org/unispal/history/>

<https://lebanon.un.org/en>

<http://unscr.com/> - a search engine for UN Security Council Resolutions based on topics

<https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/>