

The Moral Battlefield

Ethics, Psychology, and History of War in the Middle East

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PART ONE: ANCIENT AND CLASSICAL FOUNDATIONS

Part 1.1: The Ancient Middle East

21,289. That is the number of children killed in the Gaza Strip since October 7, 2023. Today, the Middle East is a raging, complex warzone filled with atrocities from all angles - but was it always like this? To answer this question, we must first look back to the third and fourth millennia BCE between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates - Mesopotamia, on the site of modern-day Iraq. These river beds themselves proved to be early sources of conflict as the flat plains between them offered little natural defensive barriers, and dependence on irrigation meant control of water infrastructure was an existential question.

This caused the first organised warfare ever recorded in human history, in 2700 BCE, between the Sumerian city-states of Lagash and Umma. It was also the Middle East's first 'forever war', lasting over a century of small skirmishes before King Eannatum of Lagash led them to victory with a tight phalanx of spearmen, winning control of an irrigation canal that previously marked the border between the two states. However, it would not be the last 'forever war', nor the last conflict in the Middle East fought over natural resources.

Those states could only field armies of around 5000 soldiers each, but they made up for small numbers with early advanced tactics, including phalanx formations, which won Lagash the war, the first bronze helmets dating back to 2500 BCE, scale armour, spears, axes and sickle-swords. Onagers (a reddish-brown species of Asiatic wild ass, the ancestors of zebras) pulled chariots that acted as mobile command centres for the armies. Not all innovations in these early conflicts would be so positive, though, if any aspect of conflict can ever be considered positive in the first place. When cities were conquered, they were demolished as a deliberate form of humiliation, houses were looted, and the people were enslaved, confusing victory in warfare with human superiority from an early stage, something still seen today.

Sargon of Akkad began the period of imperial expansionist policies in the Middle East by the late 2300s BCE, creating the world's first professional standing army (replacing the Sumerian citizen militias and numbering 5400 men, trained year-round, and added to continuously with contingents from conquered cities) and the world's first multinational empire, stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Taurus Mountains of Anatolia, built through 34 wars across half a century. The Akkadian Empire was also a highly efficient bureaucracy, making the dehumanisation of the losing side in wars commonplace through an administrative system that recorded the status of every prisoner of war taken, whether they were enslaved, retained or executed. However, he also made major advancements in weaponry, introducing the composite bow, capable of penetrating leather armour and two to three times more powerful than traditional bows, and developing systematic logistics, including supply depots across conquered territory.

However, the Sumerian and Akkadian enslavement of prisoners of war does not compare to the psychological warfare enacted by the Neo-Assyrian Empire, which spanned across modern-day Iraq, Syria, Israel, Jordan, Iran, Turkey, and Egypt, around 800 BCE. Scholar A.T. Olmstead calls it "calculated frightfulness". It was terror as a weapon of war.

Palace reliefs depicted with devastating accuracy scenes of mass impalement, flaying of prisoners alive and piles of severed heads. The purpose was clear: to convince cities to surrender as, if even the most

fortified cities could not resist, and resistance only brought annihilation, was surrender not the wise choice? This was aided by the military reputation of the Assyrians, who used superior iron weapons, and integrated infantry, cavalry, chariots and the world's first permanent corps of military engineers, who built some of the most iconic siege weapons, including battering rams, siege towers and sappers, that famously took Memphis, the capital of Egypt, in less than a day, where a siege ramp still stands today.

Perhaps an even more shocking tactic was the mass deportation of parts of ethnic groups, with the goal of breaking up solidarity and unity, as well as terrorising populations into submission, and relocating skilled workers to the Assyrian heartland. This included 65,000 people relocated from Iran alone, alongside nearly the entire population of the northern Kingdom of Israel. This event echoes the Nakba of 1948, the mass ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from their homes by the newly formed Jewish state of Israel.

Ultimately, by 621 BCE, a coalition of opposition forces sacked Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, representing the power of accumulated resentment towards tyranny, leading to massive relief across their former empire.

By 500 BCE, Cyrus the Great had founded the Achaemenid Persian Empire on a completely opposing principle - that of tolerance and collaboration. He eliminated the motivation for resistance through accommodation.

When entering Babylon in 539 BCE, he was no conqueror - he was a liberator, immediately freeing exiled and enslaved peoples and declaring freedom of religion. These altruistic policies were recorded in the Cyrus Cylinder, seen today as the world's first charter of human rights, predating the Magna Carta by 1700 years. It stands in the British Museum as a symbol of a Middle East that could have been - one in which leaders treated subjects as their own children, slavery was disallowed, and execution was prohibited for first offences. His empire was divided into satrapies, each with their own laws, language, religions and autonomy, but with standardised gold and silver coinage across the empire, and a postal system at one-day horse-riding intervals.

The Achaemenid Empire lasted almost 200 years, controlling 40% of the world population. The Bible called him "the Lord's anointed". Greek historian Xenophon held Cyrus up as the ideal of wise rulership in his *Cyropaedia* - a book which Thomas Jefferson owned two copies of, and which helped shape the United States Constitution.

This was until the carnage of Alexander the Great's conquest destroyed the Achaemenid Empire in a vast military campaign from 334 to 323 BCE, with his army of only 50,000 men defeating King Darius III of the empire's forces numbering 250,000 at the Battle of Gaugamela. After Alexander's death at age 32, the empire spiralled into chaos, fragmenting into the Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt and the Seleucid Empire, among others.

His military record was one of contradictions - sometimes a noble and respectful warrior with sensitivity towards other religions and cultures, others a mindless beast of brute force as he slaughtered innocents and sold them into slavery. He adopted the court structure of the Persians and encouraged marriage between his men and the native women. Yet he also massacred over 6000 defenders and enslaved 30,000 of the inhabitants of Tyre.

The term 'Hellenisation' was coined by German historian Gustav Droysen to describe the spread of Greek culture, language and traditions across the Middle East by conquest, as Greeks streamed into Alexander's new empire for over a century, becoming the new elite class. Perhaps the most significant consequence of this was the Maccabean revolt of 167 BCE, a successful Jewish uprising provoked by the Seleucid king's forced Hellenisation of their religious practices and desecration of the Jerusalem Temple. This was achieved by 164 BCE and is celebrated today in the festival of Hanukkah.

This marked the beginning of a period of external cultural imposition creating the roots of resistance, and thus the roots of conflict, in the Middle East.

Part 1.2: The Rise of Islam and the Arab Conquests

610 CE. Prophet Muhammad founded Islam, the second most populous religion worldwide today. By 623 CE, the Arabian Peninsula was unified under his faith. Within 100 years, Muslim forces had conquered the entire Sassanid Persian Empire and two thirds of the Byzantine Empire, including Syria, Egypt and northern Africa, crossing the Strait of Gibraltar, and even reaching the borders of France. This was one of the most rapid political transformations in recorded history.

Jihad: to struggle. This Muslim concept encompasses both the internal spiritual struggle of maintaining yourself true to Allah's ideals, and the external struggle against those who would attack Allah or his followers. Classical Islamic rules of war were formalised in the 8th and 9th centuries CE, and were surprisingly similar to Western ideals: noncombatants were to be protected, prisoners to be treated humanely, trees and crops not destroyed, and truces to be honoured. These original Arab conquests were driven by a combination of factors - religious conviction, financial incentives, and the geopolitical opportunity at hand.

The status of Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians under Muslim rule was governed by *dhimmi*, meaning 'protected people' - they were given freedom to practise their religion in exchange for acceptance of Muslim political dominance, payment of *jizya* (a poll tax), and some social restrictions. Despite the significant inequalities present in this system, it was still considerably more tolerant than Western Christian nations at the time, where non-Christians faced conversion or death.

Then came the Crusades: the brutal Western military response to Muslim dominance in the Holy Land. The first was launched in 1095 by Pope Urban II at the Council of Clermont, leading to the capture of Jerusalem (the home of Jesus Christ according to the New Testament) in 1099 in a great massacre of the resident Jews and Muslims, once described as a "juxtaposition of extreme violence and anguished faith". Historian Ibn al'Athir claimed a century later that up to 70,000 people were killed, although the exact number is debated.

Seven more Crusades would follow up to 1291, with the Crusader states of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, County of Tripoli, Principality of Antioch and County of Edessa existing for varying periods within this. The most significant Muslim response to these invasions was under the leadership of Salah ad-Din (known to the Crusaders as Saladin), who reconquered Jerusalem in 1187 following the Battle of Hattin, when he destroyed remaining Western forces. After the conquest, the residents were treated with relative fairness, where massacre was prohibited and ransom terms offered.

George W. Bush famously called his invasion of Iraq in 2003 a “crusade” by “God’s chosen nation”. The political impact of the Crusades cannot be understated - the fourth saw the fall of Constantinople and with it the Byzantine Empire, and it would remain the foundational instance of Western aggression in the Middle East. It would not be the last.

Part 1.3: The Ottoman Empire and the Armenian Genocide

Spanning over 600 years from 1299 to 1922, the Ottoman Empire was one of the longest lived empires in history, controlling Anatolia, the Levant, Mesopotamia, Egypt, northern Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and southeastern Europe as far as Vienna at its peak. It was governed by the *millet* framework, where non-Muslim communities, e.g. Jews, Greeks, were granted complete legal autonomy in both personal and religious matters, and were permitted to retain their own schools, courts and communal institutions, in exchange for recognition of Ottoman authority and the payment of taxes.

However, it gradually declined through the 18th and 19th centuries thanks to European powers encroaching on Ottoman territory, encouraging nationalist movements amongst its constituent peoples, and continued economic concessions. Eventually, it became known as the “Sick Man of Europe”, quickly losing Greece, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya between 1820 and 1912, eventually getting stripped of its last strongholds in Europe thanks to the Balkan Wars. This produced a sudden stream of Muslim refugees into Anatolia, a demographic upheaval that only served to intensify Turkish nationalist sentiment.

Armenians were a predominantly Christian population primarily located in the east of Anatolia, with a population estimated between 1.5 and 2 million people in the Ottoman Empire by the early 20th century. Their relations with the Ottomans had already been massively strained due to the Hamidian massacres, which killed up to 300,000 Armenians.

24 April 1915: the Ottoman Empire was on the side of Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I, and had just suffered a disastrous defeat against Russia at the Battle of Sarikamish, where 90,000 Ottoman soldiers died. The government blamed it on Armenian traitors. Armenian intellectuals and community leaders were arrested and killed, decapitating their leadership and starting mass deportations out of Constantinople.

They were deported into the Syrian desert without food, water or shelter. Convoys were attacked by Ottoman forces, Kurdish militias, and organised killing squads. Men were separated from their families and shot. Women and children perished from starvation, exposure disease, and murder.

This was undeniable genocide. Up to 1.5 million Armenians died with a further several hundred thousand driven into exile. 33 countries today have formally recognised these events as such, including the United States, France, Germany, Canada and Russia. One that hasn’t is Turkey, attributing the deaths instead to wartime conditions and disease.

This is ‘genocidal denial’, the continuation of oppression through suppression of truth and refusal of accountability. The failure of nations to respond to the Armenian Genocide proved a precedent for further, even larger, genocides. In August 1939, Adolf Hitler wrote “Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?” as reassurance to his Nazi loyalists of the lack of consequences if they

would face for the Holocaust. Perhaps this is a lesson we must learn, to call out genocide collectively and truly take action to end this campaign of suffering in the Middle East.

PART TWO: COLONIALISM AND THE MODERN STATE SYSTEM

Part 2.1: World War I and the Remaking of the Middle East

In October 1914, the Ottoman Empire formally allied itself with the Central Powers - Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy. This decision was driven by the Russian Empire's ambitions surrounding Constantinople and the Turkish Straits; in March 1915, Britain had signed a secret agreement with Russia, agreeing that they could annex Constantinople (which was the Ottoman capital).

By 1916, Britain had suffered major strategic losses at the Gallipoli Peninsula and in Mesopotamia, and desperately needed support to take on the Ottoman Empire. In an exchange of 10 letters known as the Hussein-McMahon Conference, Sharif Hussein bin Ali of Mecca offered support against the Ottomans to the British Empire, in exchange for a promise to recognise the independence of Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, and the remainder of the Arabian Peninsula. Britain refused to accept such a precise definition due to conflicting commitments, but McMahon eventually agreed to recognise all the territory except that which wasn't "purely Arab".

Hussein was never informed of the Sykes-Picot Agreement (see below) so launched the Arab Revolt in June 1916 under the assumption that the British Empire could guarantee his future independence. When rumours of the agreement reached him in 1917, the British denied the reports, dismissing them as Ottoman propaganda designed to fracture the alliance.

On May 16, 1916, British and French diplomats, led by Sir Mark Sykes and Francois Georges-Picot secretly agreed to the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which would split the Arab lands under the rule of the Ottoman Empire between British and French influence after the conclusion of WWI. This would lead to the division of Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine into various British and French administrations, with the UK receiving modern-day southern Israel, Jordan, southern Iraq, and some port areas, and France with southeastern Turkey, northern Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Palestine was to be under international control. Russia and Italy (after its defection to the Allies) also agreed to take some territory.

This represented to the Arabs, after the publication of the deal, the largest Western colonialist betrayal to them - we agreed to partition their homeland as they lost their lives in droves to help us win the war. It stands as yet another symbol of the destabilising impact of the West on this already divided region.

On June 10, 1916, Sharif Hussein bin Ali launched the Great Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire, in response to the outcome of the Hussein-McMahon Conference. He received support from other Arab leaders and from the British, led by T.E. Lawrence. They harassed the Hejaz Railway, preventing thousands of Ottoman troops from being deployed elsewhere. In January the following year, Arab forces captured the port city of Wejh in just one day, becoming their logistical and operational base. They followed this victory with wins in Aqaba in July 1917, and Damascus in 1918.

This was militarily valuable as it opened a second front against the Ottomans to support the British, but came at great cost to the Arabs, with their promised reward - recognition of a unified Arab state in the Middle East - never to come to fruition. This was due to the British having by this point made three

separate deals surrounding the future of the region post-WWI - the Hussein-McMahon Conference's agreement to recognise a unified Arab state, the Sykes-Picot Agreement splitting Ottoman territory between British and French spheres of influence, and the Balfour Declaration.

On 2 November 1917, the British issued a public statement during WWI, declaring their support for the establishment of a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine, an Ottoman region with a minority Jewish population. Here is the Balfour Declaration:

"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 objective, 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."

This text was contained in a letter from the Foreign Secretary, Arthur James Balfour, to Lord Walter Rothschild, a leader of the Jewish population in the West. At the time, almost 90% of Palestinians were Christian and Muslim Arabs, numbering over 700,000 Ottomans. In comparison, only 60,000 Jews lived there, only 39,000 of which were Ottomans. However, the declaration explicitly ignored giving the political rights it promised to Jews to the majority Arab population, instead only referring to civil and religious rights.

The author himself was explicit about this: "Zionism [the belief that a Jewish homeland should exist in Palestine], be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs and future hopes of far profounder import[ance] than the desires and prejudices of 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land."

However, at the time this was written, it was calculated that only 1% of the world's Jews had signified support of Zionism, meaning Britain was making a promise to a tiny fraction of Jews at the expense of the 700,000-strong Arab majority.

This declaration would perhaps end up as one of Britain's most unforgivable strategic decisions in recent centuries, as it led to decades of avoidable instability and death in the region that continues today.

Part 2.2: Zionism and Palestine

Zionism - the support for the existence of the state of Israel in Palestine. This movement can, regrettably, be traced almost entirely back to the history of European antisemitism. In 1850, Jews made up only 4% of the total population of Ottoman Palestine - these demographics would soon undergo a major upheaval.

Born on May 2, 1860, Theodor Herzl was an assimilated, secular, German-speaking journalist with little connection to Judaism. During the 1890s, he came to believe that emancipation had failed because it had led to economic competition between Jews and Gentiles, generating antisemitism. He concluded that although they had been liberated from the physical ghetto, racism now confined them to a ghetto whose walls were invisible but present nonetheless.

He published *Der Judenstaat* ('The Jewish State') in 1896, a booklet advocating for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in either Ottoman Palestine or in Argentina, arguing that the solution required

international cooperation, and the support of wealthy Jews. In late August 1897, the first Zionist Congress was held at Stadtcasino Basel, attended by 280 delegates from 17 countries, mostly from central and eastern Europe and Russia, with some from western Europe and the USA. They brought voices from every corner of Judaism - from Orthodox Jews to atheists and businessmen to students. They adopted the Basel Programme, declaring the aim to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine that was secure under international law. They also founded the World Zionist Organisation, with Herzl serving as its first president for seven years until his death in 1904. He is the only individual named in Israel's Declaration of Independence.

The primary driver of Jewish migration to Palestine in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was the continual persecution of them across Europe. They migrated in waves, known as *aliyot* (singular *aliyah*), meaning 'ascent'. The first *aliyah*, occurring between 1882 and 1903 brought 25,000 Russian Jews fleeing the Tsar's pogroms, which were initiated by the blaming of Jews for the assassination of Tsar Alexander II. 40,000 more migrated during the second *aliyah* from 1903 to 1914, most of which were socialists and oversaw the construction of Tel Aviv, the modern day capital of the State of Israel. They also founded collective agricultural settlements surrounding the city, known as kibbutzim.

From 1919 to 1923, the third and fourth *aliyot* brought 35,000 more Jews from the Soviet Union, Poland and the Baltics, and 82,000 from the Baltics from 1924 - 1931, respectively. At this point, Jews now represented 17% of the population in Palestine, numbering over 170,000.

The rise of the National Socialist German Workers' party in Germany and the accelerating persecution of Jews thanks to their rampant antisemitism sparked the fifth *aliyah* from 1929 to 1939, bringing an astonishing 250,000 Jews, to Palestine, reaching a population of 630,000 out of 1.9 million by 1947.

The Holocaust

6 million. That is the number of Jews killed by the evil ethnic cleansing policies of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party. It is both the defining tragedy of the Second World War and simultaneously the singular factor that led directly to the establishment of the State of Israel

1933. Hitler ascends to the Chancellorship of Germany, and concentration camps begin construction.

1935. The Nuremberg Laws stripped Jews of citizenship and made intermarriage between Jews and others illegal.

1938. Kristallnacht - thousands of Jewish properties and places of worship attacked or burned, thousands of Jews beaten, abused and murdered, and thousands more arrested and deported to concentration camps.

Of these, more than 40,000 were constructed between 1933 and 1945, including 30,000 slave labour camps, 980 concentration camps, 1000 prisoner of war camps and 6 extermination centres - Auschwitz, Treblinka, Belzec, Sobibor, Chelmno, and Majdanek. All in occupied Poland, all centres designed for organised mass murder. At Auschwitz alone, nearly 80% of the 1.1 million victims were murdered in gas chambers upon arrival. In the midst of WWII, the Nazis happily slaughtered more than 100,000 innocent people every week in these death camps.

This was systematic extermination on a scale and efficiency not seen before or since.

Two thirds of the European Jewish population had been murdered, including 1.1 million children. The Holocaust had destroyed all credible alternatives to a Jewish state, which would have the military and political capacity to protect its people against antisemitism and extermination. It also generated immeasurable guilt amongst Western nations, particularly Britain and the United States, which had both rejected mass Jewish immigration during the 1930s and 40s, sending boats back to their deaths in mainland Europe.

The Balfour Declaration may have been the commitment, but the Holocaust was the political will to deliver it, something which likely would have never outweighed Arab opposition without it.

And, thus, another evil of Adolf Hitler.

Part 2.3: The Independence of the State of Israel

In 1922, the League of Nations (the failed predecessor to the United Nations) formally awarded Britain the Mandate for Palestine, endorsed by that year's British census, which counted 84,000 Jews and 660,000 Arabs in the territory. The Mandate obligated Britain to develop self-governing institutions for the existing population and yet Britain was torn between this as well as the Balfour Declaration and the Arab majority, which remained wholeheartedly opposed to mass Jewish immigration.

After the Arab Revolt of 1936-39 against the idea of a Jewish state in their land, a policy reversal was forced. The 1939 White Paper limited Jewish immigration there to 75,000 over 5 years, after which it would cease without Arab consent. This policy came into effect just as the Nazi's persecution began. Ships coming to dock in Palestine were turned away by British forces and returned to Europe. The moral obscenity of this timing only served to inflame tensions between Zionists and British rule.

By April 1947, facing a possible three way conflict between Jewish paramilitaries, Arab forces and its own military, Britain referred the question of Palestine to the United Nations and revoked the Mandate.

The UN Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) drafted the United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine on 3 September 1947 and this was adopted by the General Assembly on 29 November 1947 as Resolution 181. 33 nations in favour, including the US, Soviet Union and France. 13 against, including all Arab states. 10 abstentions, including the UK. The plan would have established the Jewish state on an area approximately 14,100 square kilometres, 56% of the land. It was to be inhabited by 500,000 Jews, 400,000 Arabs and 92,000 Bedouins. At the time, Arabs were still two thirds of the Palestinian population. Jews only controlled 7% of the land. Jerusalem was to be under international administration.

The morning after the resolution was passed, a brutal civil war erupted between Jewish paramilitary forces and Palestinian Arab irregular fighters. This was the first Arab-Israeli war. In less than 6 months from December 1947 to May 1948, Zionist armed groups had expelled 440,000 Palestinians from 220 villages before a single Arab soldier had entered Palestine. The Arabs had little training and were quickly repelled, whereas the Jewish paramilitaries, primarily the Haganah, alongside the Irgun and Stern Gang, were considerably better organised, trained and supplied.

On 10 March 1948, the Zionists adopted Plan Dalet, executed to conquer Palestine in preparation for the formation of a Jewish state. This plan was requested by the Jewish Agency leader and later first Prime Minister of Israel David Ben-Gurion. Expulsions of Palestinians from their homes became systematic as Israeli forces went on the offensive.

Benny Morris, one of Israel's 'New Historians' with markedly different perspective to those of 1948, wrote in 'The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem: 1947-1949' that Plan Dalet was "a strategic-ideological anchor and basis for expulsions by front, district, brigade and battalion commanders", providing "post facto a formal persuasive covering note to explain their actions."

Ben-Gurion refrained from directly ordering any expulsions, instead preferring Haganah to simply 'understand' what he wanted - an Israeli intelligence report from June 1948 shows that at least 73% of the expulsions were caused "directly by the Israelis".

On April 9, 1948, the Irgun and Stern Gang, supported by Haganah, attacked the village of Deir Yassin near Jerusalem, which was a part of Palestine, and killed at least 107 Palestinian Arab villagers, including women and children. The massacre was carried out despite a non-aggression pact. The British government's own account submitted to the UN on 20 April was damning:

"The deaths of some 250 Arabs, men, women and children, which occurred during this attack, took place in circumstances of great savagery. Women and children were stripped, lined up, photographed, and then slaughtered by automatic firing."

This was, quite simply, an evil act.

By mid-May, up to 300,000 further Palestinians had been expelled from their homes, in part due to the expulsions, in part due to heightened fear for their lives after Deir Yassin. This event also helped convince leaders of neighbouring Arab countries to get involved militarily when Israel declared independence on May 15, 1948.

After this, major Palestinian cities fell quickly: Tiberias on April 18, Haifa on April 22, Safed on May 10, and Jaffa on May 13. Before the war, Haifa - Palestine's largest mixed city - had a population of 74,000 Jews and 70,000 Arabs. 15,000 Arabs were displaced in just 2 days from April 21-22 with only 4000 remaining by May.

On 14 May 1948, David Ben-Gurion declared the independence of the State of the Israel after the expiration of the British Mandate. 11 minutes later, the US had recognised them. The following day, they were attacked by five Arab countries - Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

The Secretary-General of the Arab League, Azzam Pasha, had declared, "It will be a war of annihilation. It will be a momentous massacre in history that will be talked about like the massacres of the Mongols or the Crusades." The reality did not match the rhetoric, as the military coalition was hampered by structural weaknesses, including the failure to cooperate on military planning, intelligence sharing and operations between Egyptian and Jordanian leaders. Despite Egypt alone fielding 40,000 soldiers, they were hindered by poor equipment quality and logistics.

However, Israel's security was primarily thanks to an arms deal signed with Czechoslovakia on January 14, 1948, which initially included 200 MG 34 machine guns, 4500 rifles and 50.4 million rounds of ammunition. By October, the arms deal had delivered 34,500 rifles, 5515 machine guns, 900 heavy machine guns and 500 pistols, as well as tens of millions of rounds of ammunition and aircraft.

This occurred despite a Western military embargo designed to maintain their neutrality, however this hurt the Arabs more than the Israelis as they couldn't replenish their equipment, although the Israelis had

constantly incoming equipment thanks to the Czech arms deal. They were also able to strengthen their forces during numerous UN-brokered ceasefires, where they increased their army from 60,000 to 100,000 men, and purchased tanks, artillery and aircraft from foreign countries. The Israeli Defence Force (IDF) streamlined its communications between Tel Aviv (the capital) and front-line commanders. However, the Arab armies remained disjointed and failed to cooperate, only consolidating their minor gains individually.

By the end of the war in 1949, the scale of the *Nakba*, meaning 'catastrophe' in Arabic, became clear - 700,000 Palestinian Arabs were expelled from their homes or fled, and Israel seized control of 774 Palestinian villages and towns, including 531 that the Zionists completely destroyed. More than 70 massacres were committed, killing at least 15,000 Palestinians.

The Israeli government set up a Transfer Committee to oversee the repopulation of captured Palestinian settlements with Jews, and to prevent Palestinians from returning to their homes. The site of Deir Yassin was converted into an Israeli psychiatric hospital.

Roughly 1% of the Jewish population was killed, with up to 20,000 Arabs perishing compared to 6000 Jews. The armistice lines - later known as the Green Line - gave Israel control of approximately 78% of Palestine, considerably larger than the 56% allocated by the UN. The Gaza Strip was placed under Egypt and the West Bank under Jordan. No Palestinian Arab state remained.

Ultimately, the *Nakba* was ethnic cleansing committed by the newly formed State of Israel, a fact proven by Israel's own 'New Historians' in the 1980s by accessing Israeli military and government archives. Benny Morris, a self-described Zionist, concluded that "attacks of the Haganah and IDF, expulsion orders, the fear of attacks and acts of cruelty on the part of Jews, the absence of assistance from the Arab world and the Arab Higher Committee, the sense of helplessness and abandonment, orders by Arab institutions and commanders to leave and evacuate - in most cases was the direct and decisive reason" for the Palestinians' displacement. Another Zionist 'New Historian', Ilan Pappé, goes further, arguing the evidence suggests ethnic cleansing occurred.

A UN Commission of Experts concluded that ethnic cleansing was "a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas." This definition appears to align precisely with the actions of the State of Israel during the *Nakba*.

In December 1948, the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 194, declaring that "[Palestinian] refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return." In May the following year, Israel was admitted as a UN Member State on the condition of its carrying out of Resolution 194, which it has never done.

Before this, on 17 September 1948, members of the Stern Gang assassinated the UN-appointed mediator, Count Folke Bernadotte, as well as a French officer. Bernadotte, who was a member of the Red Cross during WWII and helped save thousands of Jews from the Nazis, was murdered in order to block a UN plan to place Jerusalem under international administration and efforts to repatriate Palestinian refugees, of which there are nearly 6 million today. No one was ever charged for the murders and the Israeli government granted amnesty to all members of the Stern Gang shortly afterward.

PART THREE: THE COLD WAR MIDDLE EAST

Part 3.1: Israel and the Arab States

The closest the post colonial era Middle East had to a unifying figure was perhaps Egypt's president from 1954 to 1970, Gamal Abdel Nasser. On July 26, 1956, he nationalised the Suez Canal Company after the US and Britain withdrew promised funding for the Aswan High Dam. In 1875, as a result of a significant financial crisis in Egypt, the government was forced to sell off its shares in the company, including 44% of them (worth almost £400 million today at the extraordinarily cheap price they were sold for) to the British government, giving them de facto control over the canal.

As a result, the nationalisation was unacceptable to Britain and France (who had also purchased shares in the company). They conspired in secret with Israel, signing the Protocol of Sèvres on 24 October 1956, a plan for their upcoming invasion of Egypt. Israel was to invade the Sinai Peninsula, and Britain and France would both issue an ultimatum to both sides to withdraw from the area, knowing Egypt would refuse, giving them the cover to intervene as peacekeepers with the goal of toppling Nasser and retaking control of the canal.

However, British Prime Minister at the time Anthony Eden denied the existence of the document and attempted to have all British copies destroyed. A photocopy managed to survive and was published in 2010.

Britain and France would then be absolutely humiliated as both the United States and Soviet Union, in a rare moment of union, pressured all three countries to withdraw. Khrushchev, leader of the Soviets at the time, threatened to use nuclear missiles against western Europe, and the US threatened to crash the pound. The PM, with his health and reputation crashing, resigned the following January.

This was one of the final acts of significant European imperialism in the Middle East, and was seen as a death blow to Britain and France's status as superpowers, now at the whim of America. Nasser became considered a heroic figure in the Arab world, as he had defied the colonialists and succeeded.

The US-Soviet rivalry in the Middle East during the Cold War would intensify massively after the Soviets lost Egyptian support after Nasser's death. Their goal was a united Soviet front in the region; one way they sought to achieve this was by passing a warning to Egypt in May 1967 that Israel was massing troops on the Syrian border. This was completely false, but quickly caused Nasser to mobilise his forces, expel UN peacekeepers from the Sinai Peninsula, and close the Strait of Tiran (situated between the Sinai and Arabian Peninsulas) to Israeli ships.

These actions provoked Israel to launch a preemptive strike on 5 June 1967 that destroyed the Egyptian air force before it had ever taken off. The following conflict lasted a mere 6 days, becoming known as the Six Day War. Israel's imperialism drove them to capture the Sinai and Gaza Strip from Egypt, as well as the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria. The original UN Partition Plan had allocated only 56% of Palestine to Israel, but they now controlled a staggering 78%. Over a million Palestinians came under Israeli occupation.

In November, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 242, calling upon Israel to immediately withdraw from the occupied territories in exchange for peace, but, of course, this was never

implemented and Israel received no punishment for their complete ignorance of the impartial body that previously secured their existence. The Palestinians, however, were not even mentioned in the resolution besides a footnote about a “refugee problem”.

Israel retained all of their occupied lands and does to this day.

On October 6, 1973, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur, the third Arab-Israeli war began. Egypt and Syria launched a surprise coordinated attack on Israel, leaving them on the back foot. Egyptian forces crossed the Suez and broke through the supposedly impenetrable Bar-Lev Line. Syrian soldiers stormed the Golan Heights.

The US president at the time, Nixon, ordered the imminent airlift of weaponry and supplies to Israel. However, OPEC - the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries - placed an embargo on the US's oil purchases and on those of any other nation aiding Israel. Exports were cut by 5% monthly, which quadrupled the oil price from only \$3 to \$11 per barrel, sending Western nations into a recession, impacting ordinary Americans and Europeans materially for the first time due to their seemingly unconditional support for Israel.

However, out of the conflict came a remarkable diplomatic achievement spearheaded by Anwar Sadat, who had spearheaded the attack from the Arab side. In November 1977, he flew to Jerusalem and directly addressed the Israeli leaders. Then, in September the next year, US President Carter brought Sadat and the Israeli Prime Minister to Camp David for thirteen intensive days of negotiations, personally bridging the conversation between their two rooms, as the two leaders refused to sit together. Signed on September 17, 1978, the Camp David Accords established the means for Israel's withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula in exchange for recognition by Egypt and diplomatic relations. The final treaty was signed in March 1979 - the first between Israel and an Arab state, and one that has never been violated.

However, this agreement was ultimately a strategic coup for Israel, who had successfully removed the Arab world's most powerful military force from the equation, peacefully neutralising them. The Palestinians received nothing besides promises of “autonomy discussions”. Israel gave up the Sinai but nothing else - deemed a traitor by Egyptian Islamists, he was assassinated in 1981. Despite him previously being deemed a terrorist by the West following the King David Hotel bombings, when he led a Zionist mission to destroy the British headquarters in Palestine, killing over 40 Britons, he later won the Nobel Peace Prize for the Camp David Accords, showing that peace to the international community meant peace and security for Israel, not for the Arab world.

Part 3.2: The Devastation of the Cold War Upon Democracy

It is ironic that a country today deemed the number one state sponsored source of terror by the most powerful country on Earth, only became that way because of the actions of the country they are now at war with. It is justice in its most brutal form.

Oil had always been a point of contention in the Middle East - it was the lifeblood of the post-WWII global economy as major nations continued to industrialise, and the citizen use of cars exploded.

In 2021, the UK Labour Party conference voted to make it party policy to nationalise energy, including energy companies, despite opposition from party leader Sir Keir Starmer. For Britain's second largest

party in government at the time to overwhelmingly support such an action must imply its relative normality and an acceptability as a policy.

In 1953, Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh attempted the same thing: to nationalise Iran's oil industry. Previously, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, later renamed British Petroleum, held exclusive rights to extract and sell this oil, with Iran receiving excruciatingly little profit.

Saudi Arabia had just negotiated a fifty-fifty profit split with its American partners, leading Mossadegh to attempt a similar deal for Iran. Britain was primarily alarmed by the simple precedent of oil-producing nations rebelling in this way in the future, not at the simple loss of profit.

As a result, Prime Minister Winston Churchill had personally appealed to US President Eisenhower to involve the CIA in a British plot to remove Mossadegh from power, labelling him (falsely) as a communist threat. Operation Ajax succeeded on August 19, 1953, overthrowing Mossadegh, who was placed under house arrest, and governmental power was centralised under the Shah (meaning 'King' or 'Emperor') Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. This was the first time the CIA had overthrown a democratically elected government but would prove not to be the last.

The Shah, however, proved to be a brutal dictator, with his private police (the SAVAK), which were established in 1957 using CIA and Mossad intelligence, became one of the most feared intelligence agencies in the world, with systematic torture and murder of political opponents to the Shah, who spent billions on US weaponry whilst the Iranian people suffered.

The United States had traded democracy for obedience, preferring reliable anti-communist partners to stable democracies that followed the will of their own people. This policy was formalised in the Eisenhower Doctrine in 1957, offering Middle Eastern governments support if they felt threatened by communism as a cover for maintaining their own political dominance at the expense of the nations they helped.

Part 3.3: The Iranian Revolution

In 1963, the Shah began the White Revolution - a Western-backed modernisation project that included landlords being compensated for their land by shares of privatised state-owned factories, the expansion of road, rail and air networks, dam and irrigation projects, work to eradicate common diseases like malaria, promotion of industrial growth for workers, the enfranchisement of women, nationalisation of forests and pastures, and literacy and healthcare for rural areas. These reforms were overwhelmingly voted for in a national referendum with 5,598,711 for and only 4115 against.

However, these rapidly drove millions of rural workers into urban slums, and those that did receive redistributed land often received not enough to live off. These issues as well as the traditional beliefs of the mosque led the Islamic clergy to begin a resistance.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was exiled in 1964 due to his vocal criticism of the Shah's policies, leading to anti-government protests in October 1977, developing into mass civil resistance by communists, socialists and Islamists. During this time, Khomeini was broadcasting his ideology first from Iraq then from France with sermons smuggled into Iran on cassette tapes designed to pass the SAVAK's sensors. In August the following year, Islamic militants set the Cinema Rex in Abadan on fire, killing around 400 people, an event the Shah used as a means to enforce crackdowns on the protests.

By January 1979, the Shah had left Iran for exile, leaving his duties to the Regency Council and opposition leader, who almost imminently called for Khomeini's return. Khomeini accepted the invitation and arrived back in Iran on 1 February, where several million people greeted him as he entered Tehran.

In 10 days, the monarchy had been overthrown as the army declared neutrality, refusing to fire on its own people, and Khomeini had appointed himself Supreme Leader. A referendum was held in March, in which 98% of the public voted to transition the country into an Islamic republic. One authoritarian regime had replaced another.

On November 4, 1979, 66 Americans, including diplomats and civilians, were taken hostage by Iranian students, who stormed the US Embassy in Tehran, demanding the Shah be extradited from the United States, where he had been taken by President Carter for cancer treatment. The embassy was known to the students as the 'Den of Spies', as it was utilised by the CIA in the overthrowing of Mossadegh in 1953.

The hostages were held by Iran for 444 days, and only released on the first day of succeeding president Reagan's term - 20 January 1981. This was intended as a final public humiliation of the incompetency of Carter, and set a trajectory for tense US-Iran relations for the next half a century.

Saddam Hussein - President of Iraq - saw an opportunity in the chaos caused by the takeover of the Iranian government to become the dominant power in the Persian Gulf. He was also afraid of Iran's radical Shia Muslim ideology being pressed upon the Iraqi people and of it motivating Shia Muslims to overthrow the Sunni Muslim Iraqi government.

Iraq invaded on 20 September 1980, and what followed would become the deadliest war fought between the regular armies of developing nations in history, with at least 500,000 deaths. Saddam thought it would last mere weeks, when it ended up lasting eight years, becoming a grotesque stalemate.

Iran's defensive strategy under Operation Undeniable Victory was focused on masses of infantry sent across open ground into Iraqi positions, crossing no man's land between miles of trenches compared to the western front of WWI. When Iran began running out of soldiers, they sent children instead; in March 1984, eastern European journalists reported seeing tens of thousands of children roped together in groups of 20 to prevent them from retreating, walking straight into Iraqi fire.

Iraq's response was chemical weaponry, used from 1983 onwards, including mustard gas and nerve agents, deployed on a scale not seen since 1918. The Reagan administration in the United States had heavily supported Iraq throughout the war, despite knowing of their use of chemical weapons, and even provided intelligence from satellites that indirectly supported their use, described by a former official as a "wink and a nod".

Both sides simultaneously attacked major civilian populations - Tehran, Tabriz, Isfahan and Shiraz in Iran as well as Baghdad, Kirkuk and Basra in Iraq - destroying civilian infrastructure and damaging citizen morale. They also attacked oil tankers in the Persian Gulf, striking over 450 merchant vessels over the war.

On March 16, 1986, Iraqi aircraft dropped mustard gas and nerve agents on the Kurdish town of Halabja, killing 5000 civilians and permanently injuring up to 10,000 more. Iraq's own citizens were now paying with their lives for perceived sympathy with the enemy.

Eventually, the war ground to a halt in August 1988 thanks to a UN-brokered ceasefire without a single border change carrying an economic cost for the region of \$1.19 trillion. Iraq now had the world's fourth largest army and uncontrollable debts, a combination that would quickly produce the Gulf War.

Ultimately, the Cold War only served to further devastate the Middle East: Iranians knowing the country responsible for installing their torturers then called their revolution a threat to the world order; chemical weapons used in droves, scarring and mutilating innocent civilian populations; and the people of the region reduced to a "problem" to be dealt with rather than as the goal itself.

PART FOUR: THE RISE OF POLITICAL ISLAM

Part 4.1: The Gulf War

After the Iran-Iraq war, Saddam Hussein's Iraq was left in unpayable debt of \$37 billion to other Gulf states and Hussein needed these loans to be forgiven if there was to be any chance of rebuilding the country's shattered economy. These included \$14 billion due to Kuwait.

As a result, Saddam accused Kuwait of exceeding OPEC quotas for oil production, thus dropping the global oil price to \$10 per barrel, causing Iraq a loss of \$7 billion in revenue annually, as well as accusing them of slant-drilling into the Rumaila oil field across the border between the two countries, stealing oil from the Iraqi government.

By 1990, Iraq had officially threatened military action and they moved 30,000 troops to the Iraq-Kuwait border on July 23rd, with Iraq attempting to defend against a perceived anti-Iraqi conspiracy, with Kuwait and Iran strengthening relationships and the Syrian government having a diplomatic visit to Egypt. Another decisive factor, stated by Saddam during a CIA interrogation in the early 2000s following his capture, was a heated debate between the Kuwaiti emir and Iraqi foreign minister, where the emir threatened to "turn every Iraqi woman into a \$10 prostitute" by bankrupting the country.

Eventually, Iraq demanded \$10 billion of compensation for Kuwait mining from the Rumaila oil field; Kuwait offered a mere \$500 million, leading Saddam Hussein to declare war on 2 August 1990. At the beginning of the invasion, Iraq was the world's fourth largest military, with a standing army of 955,000 following the war with Iran, and Kuwait's military of 16,000 men were on leave at the time.

Iraqi soldiers crossed the border at midnight in two prongs, one headed straight for the capital, Kuwait City, and the other going east to cut it off from the south. In 12 hours, Kuwaiti resistance had collapsed and the royal family had fled, granting Saddam control of Kuwait. He initially designated governmental control to the ironically named 'Provisional Government of Free Kuwait' before later declaring his cousin as governor on August 8.

The Iraqi military looted \$1 billion in banknotes from Kuwaiti banks and made their dinar equal to the Iraqi dinar, so their currency was only worth one twelfth of its original value.

Within hours, the UN Security Council had passed Resolution 660, condemning the invasion and requesting the withdrawal of Iraqi troops, and the Arab League called for a regional solution to the conflict. Further UN resolutions placed economic sanctions on Iraq, and authorised a naval blockade to enforce these sanctions.

The United States had, at first, been indecisive, before UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher famously called upon President George H.W. Bush “not to go wobbly”, reminding him that Saddam would have control of 65% of global oil supply.

On the 29th November, Resolution 678 was passed by the Security Council, authorising Member States to use “all necessary means” to expel Iraq from Kuwait if Saddam did not withdraw their troops by 15 January the following year. This was a declaration of war disguised as a noble usage of international law. Over the next months, President Bush had assembled Operation Desert Storm - a coalition of 35 countries and nearly 700,000 American troops approaching a force of a million soldiers. This was the largest military alliance since WWII.

The deadline passed without Saddam’s compliance, leading to one of the most intensive aerial bombardments in history as coalition aircraft flew over 100,000 sorties, dismantling Iraq’s air defences, command structures, communications, bridges, power stations and water treatment.

The Iraqi Air Force was destroyed in hours, with the remains fleeing to Iran. The war was the first to be broadcast live on CNN, reducing the dying Iraqis to mere targets to the general populace. This echoes the recent social media propaganda pushed by the Trump administration during their war with Iran, framing the firing of real missiles as video games and dehumanising the targets.

Saddam attempted to fracture the coalition by dissuaging Arab states, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, who would refuse to fight on the same side as Israel, by firing around 42 Scud missiles at Israel, hoping for retaliation. Uncharacteristically, Israel did not, holding the coalition together.

After a month, on 24 February, the ground invasion began, lasting only 100 hours, with Iraqi forces surrendering en masse, many to journalists and unmanned drones, as they had been demoralised, starved and pounded by missiles for that past month. They quickly retreated and the retreat became a massacre - on the night of the 26 February, as Iraqis fled Kuwait City northbound along Highway 80, coalition aircraft bombed the front and end of the column, trapping the rest and then destroying them. This road became known as the ‘Highway of Death’, a several mile stretch of incinerated vehicles and charred bodies, described by American pilots as a “turkey shoot”.

These images proved to be so disturbing that they directly led to Bush’s decision to end the war the following day.

As they withdrew, Iraqi forces set fire to over 600 Kuwaiti oil wells, causing them to burn for months until November 1991, blackening the sky, poisoning the air and consuming millions of barrels a day - it was the worst deliberate environmental disaster ever recorded.

On 28 February, a ceasefire was declared, with 300 coalition troops dead, less than half of which were American, and up to 50,000 Iraqi deaths. Bush had publicly called for the people of Iraq to “take matters into their own hands”, again echoing Trump’s calls for the Iranian people to rise up against their Islamic regime this year. The people of Iraq did rise up in March, with Kurds in the north and Shia Arabs in the

south causing 14 of 18 provinces to fall out of the control of central government. The US then took the moral choice to sit back and do absolutely nothing as Saddam mobilised the Revolutionary Guard and attack helicopters he had left to massacre tens of thousands of his own people, filling mass graves and causing two million Kurds to flee to Turkey and Iran.

Then, on 6 August 1990, comprehensive economic sanctions placed on Iraq that remained in place until 2003, did not have their intended effect in destabilising Saddam's government, instead affecting the ordinary citizens, collapsing the healthcare system, destroying infrastructure and producing widespread malnutrition and disease.

A damning 1999 UNICEF study estimated that around 500,000 Iraqi children under the age of 5 had died as a direct result of these measures. The US Secretary of State famously declared, when confronted with that figure, "I think this is a very hard choice, but the price - we think the price is worth it." She was, quite frankly, a sociopath.

One final, perhaps ironic, lasting effect of this war was that it left American troops permanently stationed in Saudi Arabia, on the soil of Islam's holiest sites, a presence that would not be welcomed by one Osama bin Laden.

Part 4.2: Oslo and the Death of Peace

1993: in total secrecy, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators met in Oslo, Norway, with the sponsorship of the Norwegian government. Reportedly, even the Israeli Prime Minister was unaware of them in their earliest stages.

On the 13th of September, on the South Lawn of the White House, as US President Bill Clinton spread his arms over them, the chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organisation and the Israeli PM shook hands, signing the Declaration of Principles - the Oslo I Accord.

The PLO acknowledged Israel's right to exist and renounced terrorism and Israel recognised the PLO as the legitimate representative of Palestinians, with the establishment of a Palestinian Authority to govern parts of the West Bank and Gaza over a five year period.

The Oslo II Accord followed in 1995, dividing the West Bank into three zones - Area A under full control of the Palestinian Authority, Area B under joint Palestinian and security control and Area C (over 60% of the territory) under Israeli control. The accord did not think to mention halting the illegal expansion of Israeli settlements in occupied territories and, during the peace process itself, the settler population in the West Bank and Gaza Strip doubled, consuming ever more of the land and lending weight to the conviction among the Palestinian people that Oslo was not a path to freedom but rather a sophisticated instrument of occupation.

On 4 November, 1995, any hope of a peaceful resolution was quite literally murdered as Israeli PM Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated, not by a Palestinian but by a right-wing Jewish extremist who believed Rabin had betrayed Israel by ceding land in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Those in Israel who wanted peace quickly became the minority and, in 1996, one Benjamin Netanyahu was elected for the first time.

The final collapse of the peace process came at the Camp David Summit in July 2000, where US President Bill Clinton brought PA chairman Yasser Arafat and Israeli PM Ehud Barak to negotiate for one

last time on a settlement. The negotiations failed miserably, as Barak's offer left much of Arab majority East Jerusalem under Israeli control, offered a Palestinian state on fragmented territory and disregarded the millions of refugees.

The failure was primarily placed on Arafat by Western media, strengthening the Israeli narrative that Palestinians did not want peace.

On 28 September, an Israeli Likud leader was escorted by over 1000 armed police to Temple Mount, the third holiest site in Islam, to declare, "The Temple Mount is in our hands and will remain in our hands." Protests erupted the next day, which were met with tear gas, rubber bullets and live fire, beginning the Second Intifada. At least 47 Palestinians were killed in the first five days.

Over the next half a decade, the uprising claimed the lives of 1000 Israelis and 3000 Palestinians, with Palestinian militant groups, including Hamas, carrying out dozens of suicide bombings in Israeli cities on buses, in cafes and at Passover. Israel responded by reinvading cities of Area A it had handed over during Oslo, dismantling the Palestinian Authority.

From 2002, Israel began construction of the West Bank barrier, a concrete wall annexing significant parts of the West Bank, and was called a security necessity by Israel and an apartheid wall by Palestine.

The dream of coexistence was dead.

Part 4.3: 11 September 2001

In 1979, the Soviet Union had invaded Afghanistan, seeking to prop up a failing communist regime. The United States poured billions of dollars through Operation Cyclone via Pakistan's intelligence services, into arming and training the mujahideen, Islamic fighters waging war against the Soviet occupation.

One wealthy foreign volunteer drawn to the cause was a young Saudi millionaire called Osama bin Laden, who recruited Arab fighters for the conflict.

A decade later in 1989 the Soviets withdrew, and so did America, leaving Afghanistan to civil war and the eventual rise of the Taliban. In 1988, bin Laden founded al-Qaeda.

Angered by the continual presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia, which he regarded as the defilement of Islam's holiest lands by infidel occupiers, as well as their seemingly unconditional support for Israel and its role in the deaths of children in Iraq thanks to devastating economic sanctions, bin Laden twice issued fatwas declaring war on the US in 1996 and 1998, when al-Qaeda bombed US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing over 200 people.

11 September 2001: 19 al-Qaeda hijackers seized four American passenger aircraft, flying two into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre, which both collapsed soon after, and a third striking the Pentagon with the fourth successfully grounded by its passengers in a Pennsylvania field. 2977 people were killed from over 90 nations, making it the deadliest terrorist attack in history and an absolute tragedy.

However, what followed In President Bush's War on Terror, would perhaps be even worse. He called it a war of "good versus evil", of the "civilised world" against barbarism. These were stark, Crusader-like

words that led to Operation Enduring Freedom on 7 October 2001 - the coalition invasion of Afghanistan with the goal of destroying al-Qaeda and toppling the Taliban regime that had sheltered bin Laden.

The regime had fallen by December, but bin Laden escaped through the mountains of Tora Bora into Pakistan, where he evaded capture for a decade until US Navy SEALs killed him on 2 May 2011.

The American invasion of Afghanistan would become the longest war in US history, lasting 20 years and costing hundreds of thousands of lives and trillions of dollars, only to end with the Taliban returning to power exactly as they had left it.

The United States had constructed an apparatus of indefinite detention without trial at Guantanamo Bay, where “enhanced interrogation techniques” like waterboarding and other methods long regarded as torture were sanctioned. They operated a network of “black site” prisons and “extraordinary rendition”.

Part 4.4: The Invasion of Iraq

“Are not Arabs and Iraqis terrified? Do not Arab and Iraqi women weep when their children die? Does not bombing strengthen their determination? What fools we are to live as if war is a computer game for our children or just an interesting little Channel 4 news item.”

These are the infamous words of Tony Benn MP as he spoke against war with Iraq. He was right.

In President Bush’s State of the Union address in January 2002, he named Iraq, alongside Iran and North Korea, as part of an “axis of evil”. His administration pressed for war based on two claims: that Saddam Hussein’s Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction that posed an imminent threat, and that his regime was linked to al-Qaeda. Both claims were false, and this was agreed upon by most of the intelligence community at the time.

On 5 February 2003, US Secretary of State Colin Powell made a speech to the UN Security Council, holding aloft a small vial of white powder to represent anthrax - used as a biological weapon - and presented fake diagrams of mobile biological weapons laboratories.

Without any authorisation and with opposition from France and Germany, the US assembled a “coalition of the willing” led by UK Prime Minister Tony Blair to invade Iraq on 20 March 2003. The first few weeks were dubbed “Shock and Awe” as they were designed as a deliberate and overwhelming display of force. Baghdad fell on 9 April, and the toppling of a statue of Saddam Hussein was broadcast worldwide.

On 1 May, Bush stood beneath a banner reading “Mission Accomplished” and declared the war over. No weapons of mass destruction were found. The occupying troops committed “de-Baathification” with the purging of hundreds of thousands of officials, teachers and administrators from public life, and dissolving of the army, leaving half a million armed and trained men unemployed on the street.

Years of civil war followed between Iraq’s Sunni and Shia Muslim populations. Saddam Hussein was captured in December 2003 and executed three years later. In 2004, photographs from Abu Ghraib prison emerged, showing American soldiers torturing, humiliating and abusing Iraqi prisoners, who were naked, stacked in pyramids, hooded and wired, and threatened with dogs.

Estimations of the death toll vary from 200,000. In total, including indirect deaths, some estimates reach a million. US General Tommy Franks, when asked about Iraqi casualties, replied “We don’t do body counts.”

al-Qaeda arose from the rubble in Iraq, led by the fanatic Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who savage campaigns after the US withdrawal in 2011 and amid the collapse of Syria, became the Islamic State - ISIS - a terrorist organisation whose theatrical cruelty would horrify even the likes of al-Qaeda.

The war in Iraq was a war of choice founded upon lies. It left behind far worse than al-Qaeda.

PART FIVE: THE MODERN STATE OF DEATH

Part 5.1: The Syrian Catastrophe

On 17 December 2010, in the provincial Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid, a simple fruit and vegetable seller called Mohamed Bouazizi, humiliated by an officer who confiscated his cart and slapped him in the face, doused himself in petrol outside the governor’s office, and set himself alight, dying of his burns a few weeks later.

This was a man with nothing left and this was an act that ignited protests across Tunisia, causing President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to flee to Saudi Arabia in just a month. This was the beginning of the Arab Spring - a wave of pro-democracy protests that swept across the Arab Middle East in 2011, fighting against decades of authoritarian rule, economic stagnation, mass unemployment, and suffocating state control.

In Egypt, hundreds of thousands gathered in Cairo, and after just 18 days and after the army fired into the crowd, Mubarak’s regime collapsed on 11 February.

However, the Arab peoples quickly learnt that toppling a tyrant was not the same as building a democracy. The Muslim Brotherhood was elected in Egypt in 2012, only for a military general to seize power in a coup in 2013, massacring thousands of protestors and imposing a far worse regime than Mubarak’s. Only Tunisia emerged with a functioning democracy.

In Libya, Gaddafi was killed by a NATO-led coalition authorised by the UN Security Council to protect civilians, and quickly became a regime change war. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton laughed “We came, we saw, he died,” which was perhaps a remark made too soon as Libya descended into civil war, a haven for smugglers, jihadists and human traffickers.

Protests in Syria began in March 2011, when a group of schoolboys was arrested and tortured for spray-painting “It’s your turn, Doctor,” on a wall, aimed at President Bashar al-Assad, who was a British-trained ophthalmologist. Peaceful protests were met with live fire, sliding Syria into a devastating civil war. Iran and their terrorist group Hezbollah poured soldiers in to save Assad, and Russia intervened in September 2015 with the bombing of rebel cities; rebel groups received arms and money from the US, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

Assad emptied prisons of jihadists whilst filling them with peaceful protestors, in order to present the entire opposition as terrorists. He used barrel bombs - oil drums packed with explosives and shrapnel - rolled out of helicopters onto neighbourhoods. In August 2013, he crossed Obama’s “red line” - a sarin

gas attack that killed 1400 people, many children, filmed convulsing on the ground. Obama proceeded to do nothing.

Over half a million Syrians died, the majority by their own government, and 13 million more (over half the pre-war population) were displaced, 6 million of which fled abroad.

This was until, in November 2024, rebels led by Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, led by a man who once fought for al-Qaeda in Iraq, launched a massive offensive, taking Damascus on December 8, and Assad fled to Moscow.

Part 5.2: Rise and Fall of ISIS

Born in the insurgency against the American occupation of Iraq, the Islamic State was then brought to the edge of extinction by the US, before reemerging as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. The rule of Iraq's Shia PM al-Maliki, who persecuted the Sunni Muslim minority, meant many ordinary people began to see jihadists as better than Baghdad; the implosion of Syria offered an ungoverned space to seize territory, where they took Raqqa city in 2013.

In June 2014, ISIS fighters routed several divisions of the American-trained Iraqi army and captured their second largest city, Mosul, home to almost 2 million people. Soldiers, unwilling to die for al-Maliki's government, abandoned billions of dollars of American weaponry to the jihadists.

On June 29, 2014, the leader of ISIS declared himself "Caliph Ibrahim", successor to the prophet and leader of all Muslims, and the group was renamed again simply the Islamic State.

At its height, the group controlled an area the size of Britain across Iraq and Syria, ruling 8 million people, and generating billions of dollars from oil and taxation. It was a functioning proto-state, with a bureaucracy, a currency, courts, schools and a sophisticated propaganda system, convincing foreigners that a utopia was being built, drawing them in.

In reality, ISIS was a barbaric and fundamentally evil organisation that live broadcast the beheading of Western hostages and aid workers, immolated a captured Jordanian pilot in a cage, mass executed Syrian soldiers and Iraqi Shia recruits, bulldozed bodies into pits. They committed undeniable genocide against the Yazidis, a religious minority in northern Iraq that they deemed to worship the devil. Men were massacred, thousands of women and girls were forced into sexual slavery, bought and sold in markets with price lists.

A US-led coalition of nations launched Operation Inherent Resolve, providing air power and special forces whilst ground fighting was undertaken by Kurds, the Iraqi army, and Iranian-backed Shia militaries. The Kurds managed to defend the border town Kobani in 2014-15, beginning to turn the tide, but victories came at a cost. The battle to retake Mosul was 9 months long and killed thousands of civilians used as human shields.

The last of ISIS's territory fell in March 2019 in the Syrian village of Baghuz, and the leader committed suicide in October, killing himself and 3 of his children.

ISIS had been defeated once before, in 2008, only for it to reemerge stronger than before. Thousands of its fighters remain at large in Iraq and Syria. Perhaps it is not gone forever.

Part 5.3: The Occupation

It started in June 1967: the longest military occupation in the modern world, outlasting the lifetimes of many of those living under it.

Despite the Fourth Geneva Convention explicitly prohibiting an occupying power from transferring its own civilian population into the territory it occupies, successive Israeli governments have believed themselves to be above international law as they actively encouraged and facilitated a relentless enterprise of settlement onto the occupied West Bank, pushing Palestinians out of their homes. From a few thousand settlers in the 1970s, the Jewish population in the West Bank grew to an astonishing 450,000 by 2020, with hundreds of thousands more in East Jerusalem, which was annexed by Israel away from the Palestinian Authority.

These settlements are fortified hilltop towns connected by Israeli-only roads, drawing on water and resources denied to their Palestinian neighbours, and governed by Israeli civil law for settlers and harsh military law for Palestinians, who are tried in military courts with a conviction rate exceeding 99%, having their homes demolished, olive groves uprooted, and villages displaced. This is a continuation of the horrors of the 1948 Nakba - now an apartheid according to the Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

Area C - 60% of the West Bank - contained all the settlements and most of the land, water and freedom of movement, whilst Palestinians were confined to crowded, disconnected enclaves in Areas A and B.

In July 2024, the International Court of Justice historically ruled that Israel's occupation was illegal, and demanded they retreat "as rapidly as possible".

The Palestinian Authority was now a corrupt, incompetent body largely seen as a puppet of the occupation, with its President Mahmoud Abbas now governing into his ninth consecutive term without elections. Palestine was fractured, with the West Bank under the PA, Gaza under Hamas, and East Jerusalem under Israeli rule.

Part 5.4: Genocide

On the morning of October 7, 2023, under the cover of a barrage of rockets, thousands of Hamas fighters burst through the fences of the Gaza Strip on motorcycles, in pickup trucks and on paragliders, falling upon the towns of southern Israel and slaughtering 1200 people, many of them civilians: families murdered in their homes, elderly and infants killed in kind, 360 youths dead at Nova music festival, and 251 hostages dragged back into Gaza. It was the deadliest day ever for the State of Israel.

Israel then launched the most devastating military offensive in their history, vowing to destroy Hamas and recover the hostages. The Israeli Defence Minister announced a "complete siege" - "no electricity, no food, no water, no fuel". "We are fighting human animals and we act accordingly."

Now: over 73,000 dead, the majority women and children. Entire neighbourhoods flattened, Gaza's homes, hospitals, schools and universities damaged or destroyed, the population herded from one supposed "safe zone" to another that was then bombed. Israel's blockade of humanitarian aid produced mass starvation, with famine meeting that of Iraq's worst years under sanctions.



Despite the apparent ignorance across the west, the legal and moral reckoning for Israel has been the most severe for any Western ally, with a court case brought before the ICJ in December 2023 by South Africa, alleging genocide. The court ruled it “plausible” that Palestinian's rights to be protected from genocide were being violated by Israel, ordering them to allow the delivery of humanitarian aid.

In November 2024, the ICC issued arrest warrants for Benjamin Netanyahu and his former defence minister, alongside Hamas leaders.

And the US, the founder and guardian of the “rules-based international order”, supplied the tens of billions of dollars of military funding that made it possible, vetoing resolutions at the UN.

Israel's war crimes are immeasurable:

- Indiscriminate air strikes on densely-populated civilian areas, resulting in massive civilian casualties
- Starvation used as a weapon of war by blocking humanitarian aid and destroying agricultural areas, bakeries and water infrastructure
- Schools, places of worship and residential buildings with no military targets in the vicinity targeted
- Healthcare system's collapse from destruction of hospitals, ambulances and medical facilities
- Repeated forced displacement through evacuation orders
- Prisoners of war subject to executions, torture, sexual violence, and even used as human shields

And, finally, accusations of genocide, that Israel is attempting to destroy the Palestinian people, which appears quite likely to have been their end goal since 1948.

Part 5.5: The American Humiliation

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran's primary method of pursuing its regional goals has been through its 'Axis of Resistance' - Iranian proxy groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza, the Houthis in Yemen, and various Shia militias in Iraq and Syria. Iran continued to project regional power through these proxies and their steady enrichment of uranium as Israel waged a years-long covert campaign of assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists and sabotage of Iranian facilities.

After October 7, 2023, Hezbollah attacked the northern Israeli border in support of Gaza, the Houthis bombed Israeli cities and attacked vessels in the Red Sea (a key shipping lane), and Iraqis struck American bases.

In April and October 2024, Iran and Israel exchanged direct strikes for the first time in their history - a line that was not to be uncrossed. In a coordinated attack in September, Israel detonated thousands of explosive payers in Lebanon, wounding Hezbollah and killing their leader in a massive air strike, beginning the crumbling of Iran's axis as Syria fell in December.

In June 2025, Israel launched a massive strike on Iran that began the Twelve Day War, striking nuclear facilities, missile sites and regime infrastructure, killing senior commanders and nuclear scientists. On June 21 and 22, the US launched Operation Midnight Hammer, directly entering the war, using B-2 stealth bombers to drop "bunker-buster" bombs on Iran's fortified nuclear sites at Fordow, Natanz and Isfahan as President Trump declared them "obliterated," despite intelligence services reporting only a few month setback. Iran retaliated with a strike on the American Al Udeid air base in Qatar.

In February 2026, Israel and the US struck Iran again, with the goals of obliterating the nuclear programme that was obliterated last summer, and opening the Strait of Hormuz that was already open. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was killed in an air strike on the first day, but he was quickly replaced just days later.

By April, a ceasefire was declared, set to be extended in the coming days in a memorandum of understanding that could include the US paying Iran \$300 billion in compensation, dressed up as aid. This war has, frankly, been an embarrassment for the United States, as they have lost hundreds of billions of dollars of equipment and a dozen soldiers whilst accomplishing nothing, besides bombing a school, killing 160 schoolgirls and blaming it on Iran.

PART SIX: WHAT A MESS

What a mess, indeed. It is apparent that, besides the brief relief of the Achaemenid Empire, ruined by Alexander the 'Great', the Middle East has always been and likely always will be a complete mess, thanks to raging competition over resources and it being the centre of three of the world's largest religions. Now, it is a place where Palestinians' are subject to genocide and the US is being humiliated. Who knows what it will be like in the future, besides the obvious precondition for the region of death and destruction?