

Egyptians, Americans and Perceptions of Israel

Objectives

- Students will be able to compare and contrast American and Egyptian attitudes toward the State of Israel.
 - Students will be able to analyze why Israel is a polarizing topic.
 - Students will compare and contrast news and articles from American and Arabic sources.
 - Students will synthesize events in the past 50 years that have brought us to this point.
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Materials

Student Handout: **Perspectives on Israel**

Note to the Teacher

American foreign policy wonks have often emphasized the importance of winning the “Arab street.” The question is, how well are we doing? What are the major sources of contention between Americans and Arabs (specifically Egyptians) that keep us at arms length from each other? In this lesson, students will read about American encounters with Egyptians and why Israel was the biggest sticking point in finding common ground.

Key Questions

- How do Americans and Egyptians think differently about the State of Israel?
 - What events shape Egyptian perceptions of the State of Israel?
 - Why do Egyptians say things like, “we like Americans but we hate your government?”
 - What are the media sources that inform the citizens of the US and Egypt about the state of Israel?
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Perspectives on Israel

America and Israel

After the tragic events of 9/11, United States citizens have identified even more closely with Israel, a country that experiences terrorism. To a casual observer, the 9/11 terrorists and the suicide bombers that have attacked Israel seem to be different symptoms of the same problem: radical Islam that is willing to do violence in the name of God.

We think of Israel as our ally in the Middle East. We believe that our objectives in the Middle East align us with Israel. Israel is the leading military force in the region. Despite this fact, Americans often comment that “Israel has the right to defend itself.” Americans would understand the presence of Israeli troops in Palestine as one way in which Israel defends itself.

Egyptian Perspectives

Egypt has had a longstanding conflict with Israel. Egyptians harbor bitterness over a war fought with Israel over 20 years ago. Egyptians tend to sympathize with the Palestinian cause. Egyptians would see the presence of troops in Palestine as an unjustified occupation of a foreign territory. They would see the Israel’s violence against the Palestinians as excessive, brutal and an example bully. Egyptians would also believe that Israel stole the land that currently constitutes Israel. Both Egyptians and Palestinians identify themselves as Arabs.

The Great Divide

As a group of Americans traveling to Egypt in the summer of 2007, we fully expected to be talking about the American Military presence in Iraq. Our troops occupied Iraq and the war was not going well. Although our hosts considered the American occupation of Iraq an American mistake, they were much more interested in talking about the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

During our first week in Egypt we met with a group of college students and faculty at South Valley University in Quena, Egypt. As we listened to a panel of faculty members, we soon noticed a pattern in their message: we like you as Americans but we hate your government. We blame your government for the atrocities of Israel. As the speakers went on blaming our country for the deaths of Palestinians, their criticism began to feel more personal. We began to feel like we needed to defend our country in the conversation. Eventually, our ears became jaded to what began to sound like an unsophisticated view of the State of Israel.

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**The Great Divide
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When we finally had a chance to speak we sounded defensive. Some of our group came from strong military families and had served in the US military. Their patriotism would not allow the US to be criticized without a fight. Many of us felt like we were being blamed for the actions of Israel. As the conversation continued, it became more and more heated. Each side raised its voices and pointed fingers at the other. By the end of the conversation, many of us felt that the argument could not be resolved. This was the first of many frustrating conversations to come about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. How did a conversation that started so friendly? How have both sides' attitudes toward the state of Israel been shaped? How did we arrive at this frustrating point?

The Historical Background

The State of Israel was formed in 1948 to the dismay of many of its Arab neighbors. Through various military campaigns Israel has expanded its borders to stretch from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River and Lebanon in the north to Egypt in the south. Since its inception the US has supported Israel. The US was the first country to recognize Israel in 1948 and Israel receives the most US aid of any country. US foreign policy in the Middle East has recognized Israel as a strong ally for the past 60 years.



As you can see from the map, Israel occupied a major part of Egypt from the 1967 Six Day War. The Peace agreement was signed in 1979 by Egyptian leader Anwar Sadat and Israeli leader Menahem Begin. The occupation ended in 1982 well after both sides signed a peace agreement which ended the occupation of Egypt. The US helped negotiate the peace between Israel and Egypt. Although this peace treaty ended hostilities between Egypt and Israel, it did nothing to end the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. It is the Israeli occupation of Palestine that Egyptians feel passionate about.

The divide in the way Americans and Egyptians think about Israel is deep and wide. While Egypt shares a border with Israel, Americans are geographically removed from the situation. Our media sources also convey different ideas about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. For instance, Al Jazeera, an Arab news source refers to Palestinians who blow themselves up to kill Israeli as “Martyrs” why most American news sources call them “suicide bombers.” With such different concepts of the conflict the question for our group became, where do we find common ground?

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Creating a Dialogue

After our group had this heated encounter with our hosts at South Valley University, both sides saw little hope in convincing the other of their view. I was ready to call it a day, load up on the bus and head back to the hotel. It was then that our Egyptian leader instructed us to find someone from the “other side” and have a conversation with them. We paired up and began talking. It was truly amazing how this changed the tone of our conversation. Instead of it being one side against the other, it we actually began to listen to one another. Our words were more considerate and we began to understand the reasons behind what people were saying.

Perhaps one way to understand why our conversations were so strained in the first place would be to examine our information sources. Media sources tend to both inform and reflect the cultures in which they operate. To further study this issue, try reading coverage on the same story from an Arab source and an American source.
