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### Religious Conflicts of Levant

Throughout time immemorial, wars have been fought among the human race. Whether they have been immense or trivial, civil or international, technological or barbaric, these wars have been fought for a number of causes. One such cause has been religion. Such has there have been many wars, throughout history there have been many different religious beliefs. Members of these religious groups have historically clashed with those of other religious groups on the basis of belief systems alone. This paper will argue that many national and international conflicts arise as a result of religious and cultural diversity. The central region I will write on is the Levant, which in this paper will be defined as countries in the Eastern Mediterranean and its surrounding areas. This particular area has been plagued by ethnic conflicts and wars fought over ideology. Such struggles include wars waged by the Ottoman Empire, the Crusades, and the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Each of these hostilities has come about or have endured due to religious, cultural, or ethnic motives.

The Ottoman Empire was one of the most powerful states in the world, at one point encompassing portions of Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. It lasted over 600 years, from the 13th century up until it was dissolved in 1922. This Empire, from its beginnings and throughout its history, has fought battles with religious context. Their idea of war was, as John F. Guilmartin puts it in his work, "Ideology and Conflict: The Wars of the Ottoman Empire, 1453-1606":

a rhetoric based on the Koran and elaborated in the sharia, the holy law of Islam. Islamic concepts of war and peace did not clash with pre-Islamic Arab and Turkic ideas, but

served to legitimize them in religious terms. Only one kind of war was recognized as lawful, the jihad, or holy war, conducted to expand the domain of Islam....A permanent state of war was considered to exist between the Islamic state, the daruislam, and the rest of the world. (Guilmartin 725)

Virtually every war or skirmish the Ottoman Empire had with a neighbor was in the name of spreading Islam throughout the world. The very nature of this relationship with ideology yields war. As long as it is neighboring a non-Muslim nation, the Empire will wage war against it, and the more nations it conquers, the more non-Muslim nations it will come across. It is a vicious cycle that perpetuates itself. The Ottoman Empire fought via two methods or concepts of war: official military campaigns sanctioned by its religious authority, and guerrilla-style raids, deemed ghazi warfare, constantly fought against Christian neighbors in order to expand their Islamic state (Guilmartin 726). Both these styles of combat had a religious motive or, at least, the backing of religious authority.

The Ottoman Empire's frequent clashes with Christian countries lead to campaigns across the Mediterranean, Europe, and northern Africa. While these wars may have been fought to expand economic or territorial power, there was always the underlying religious rationalization behind them, "they considered themselves always justified-and always at war" (Guilmartin 726). This validation was present not only against Christian nations, but against other Muslim nations as well. Being an institutionally Sunni nation, the Ottoman Empire was frequently in conflict with Shi'i nations and peoples in the area, especially Persia. The Ottoman's viewed the Shi'i as both a threat to their religious ideals, and to their hold on the land. "These concerns prompted Selim I to invade Persia in 1514 and led to the incorporation of southern Mesopotamia into the Ottoman Empire during the reign of Suleiman I." (Guilmartin 738)

Although both nations are ruled by a Muslim authority, discrepancies in these nations' versions of their faith lead to strife and conflict. While religion may be a cover-up for other motives, such as land and trade acquisition, their ideology allows a route to which justification for bloodshed can occur.

Other wars fought for religious ideals were the Crusades. The crusades were a series of battles and wars, fought from the end of the 11th century till the end of the 15th century. These wars by definition were authorized by the various Popes of the time, and followers all over Europe became Crusaders fighting in the hopes of retaking land in the name of their faith. The First Crusades, sanctioned by Pope Urban II, conquered the city of Jerusalem for Roman Catholic Europe in 1099. For the next 300 years, various Crusades were approved by the Popes and fought by the various kingdoms of the time. The Crusades ended with these Crusades spread across the Levant, and were marked with mayhem, failures, and defeat (Horowitz 177). These failures stretched across 300 years of fighting. However, the Crusades endured, and followers of Church did not stop fighting, giving up their lives in doing so. The Crusades were funded in great part due to these followers and their communities themselves:

Not only did knights have to pay their own way, but they knew that they would likely lose money, and potentially their lives, during the campaign. Crusading represents a large financial investment that required pooling family resources or soliciting the support of lords and religious communities. (Horowitz 177)

Why would whole communities give up their savings for these wars? They weren't making a profit or gaining land themselves by doing so. They were giving up their young men and their fortunes all in the name of religion, for the Church. The Church fundraised these wars through their communities and followers. During the later Crusades, The Church even fundraised by

selling indulgences, guarantees by the Church that one's punishment in the afterlife for their sins would be reduced (Horowitz 179).

In his article, Michael Horowitz comments on the length and costs of the Crusades, attributing its longevity almost entire onto the religious fervor behind it. As previously stated, the Crusades were full of costs and failures. In the 13th century, it was estimated The Crusades cost King Louis IX, one of the wealthiest leaders in Europe, six times his annual income. As Horowitz states, "these high costs meant that individuals had little direct material incentive to participate in Crusading." (Horowitz 182-183). The astronomical differential between cost and gain seems to convey that following through with the war was illogical at best. Though much like the knights of the Crusade, cost did not matter when fighting for the Church. Horowitz goes on to summarize the words of other historians in stating that without its spiritual component, the Crusades would never have lasted as long as it had (Horowitz 183). Religion, in this case, was the tinder and fuel for the fire of war, both initiating the first campaign and sustaining the rest of the wars for the centuries to come. Without the machinations of the Church, countries wouldn't have fought and sacrificed so much, for so long.

Lastly, one conflict that is seen by many to be never-ending and is still present today is the Israeli-Palestinian struggle over control of historical Palestine. Since the Israeli state came into official being in 1948, multiple Arab-Israeli wars and conflicts have broken out. This includes the Israeli War of Independence in 1948, the Suez Crisis in 1956, the Six-Day war in 1967, the Yom Kippur war in 1973, the 1st Lebanon War in 1982, and the first Intifada in 1987. Despite the Oslo Accords being reached by the Israelis and the PLO, tensions remained high and peace was difficult, leading to the 2nd Intifada in 2000 (Brittanica 1). There is still much strife and continual conflict between Israel and its Palestinian and Arab neighbors leading into the

2000s and 2010s. Currently, Israel is in conflict with Hamas in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. How is it that there is so much perpetual conflict in the area, with no end in sight? Scholar Alexis Heraclides explores the issue in her article, “Conflict Resolution, Ethnonationalism and the Middle East Impasse.” Her piece focuses on two ethnic movements behind the conflict, the Zionist and Palestinian movements. The Zionist movement prior to the creation of the state of Israel believed in creating a mono-ethnic Jewish state using whatever means necessary (Heraclides 203). Currently the Israeli side of the conflict involves it holding onto its very identity as a Jewish state. Giving up land and concessions to the Palestinians is seen as a threat to this identity (Heraclides 204).

A popular movement in Israel is Zionist revisionism, which puts stock in the belief that the obtaining of the land is the sacred responsibility of the Jews, an idea which certainly does not help the negotiation process (Heraclides 209). On the Palestinian side, the conflict has led to the birth of the “Palistinian ethnic identity” (Heraclides 207). Palestinians want the land they believe is rightfully theirs and is fighting against what they believe is an occupation by Israel (Heraclides 204). Both nationalities think that they have a right to the land, and negotiations to split or share the land have been less than fruitful because as Heraclides puts it, “each party’s right to the land of Palestine is based on the negation of the other side’s claim. To accept that the other party had a case is tantamount to rejecting one’s own right to the land” (Heraclides 206). Both sides cannot come to a compromise because whichever side is willing to come to the table first is essentially admitting that they are at fault; they do not have as much right to the land as the others. These two ethnic communities, with their specific religions, history, and cultures, would rather fight than give up their claim. And while religion may not necessarily be the main motivation behind this war, as Heraclides warns, although “Islamic fundamentalism has made only modest inroads

in the Palestinian nationalist ranks....one can predict that Palestinian Islamic fundamentalism is bound to draw in tandem with the rise of Jewish Fundamentalism” (Heraclide 209).

Religious and ethnic identity have been spurring on wars since the beginning of time, especially in the Levant. They were the backbone to almost every war the Ottoman Empire fought, as they were on the side of Islam against the world. Religion helped carry the Crusades, a string of failing and costly wars, into being a centuries-long affair. Cultural identity, national ethnicity, and religion all play a crucial role in the never-ending strife between Israelis and Palestinians over a tiny strip of land. It seems the main lesson one can take from this war-torn region, is that until people see themselves as part of one community, instead of different faiths or cultures, conflict will continue for the rest of time.

## Works Cited

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