

Film Guide

SEARCH FOR DESTINY

PART V

The Middle East lives in the presence of immense history; its looping timeline continues because history is too well known. Central to its history in the 20th century is the Jewish search for destiny in a homeland where Jews could live as Jews, free of persecution, and the Arab quest for the opportunity to live as an independent people. The apparent stability of the land was destroyed by the British in their promotion of Arab independence (i.e. rebellion against the Ottoman Turks) and promise of a Jewish national homeland (again, at the expense of the Ottomans, and designed to lure the US into Britain's war) during World War I, promises and promises deliberately unfulfilled by the British at the end of the war. Palestine had been inhabited by Christian and Muslim Arabs for fifty generations; but the British subverted their promises and sowed the whirlwind during the war and afterwards. The puppet Anglo-Arab monarchies were eventually largely replaced by coups and people's revolutions; the Holocaust and the opinion of the rest of the western world forced Britain to capitulate in 1948 and to independence for Israel. But the fighting that followed ended not in treaties but truces, and the 1967 Six Day War saw Israel attack its surrounding enemies before they could themselves attack. Israel however by its gaining of the historical area of Biblical Israel had also gained a hostile population of a million Palestinians. Those of the ultra orthodox Jews living in Israel refused to countenance yielding any of those lands to the Arab neighbors, and a Palestinian resistance, the PLO, sprang up under the leadership of Yassir Arafat. The 1970 death of Nasser led to the succession of Anwar Sadat as leader of Egypt; his 1973 Yom Kippur attack on Israel was ultimately not a military success, but it demonstrated that Israel had no monopoly on military science. The Arab world was electrified. OPEC began to wield its considerable economic weight. Sadat in 1979 negotiated the Camp David Peace Accords in the US, but he was regarded as a traitor by Muslim fundamentalists and was assassinated. Israel invaded Lebanon in pursuit of fundamentalist terrorists, launching a decade of civil war in that tiny country. Iran had been invaded by both Britain and Russia during World War II; its shahs ruled as military dictators, gradually secularizing and westernizing society. Rule was brutal and harshly authoritarian, but western governments sought it as an ally against the Soviet Union, and provided aid and weapons to the shah's regime. The attempts of Mossadegh in the 1950s to free Iran from its semi dependency had been thwarted by the CIA, but all along there had been fierce resistance from the Islamic leadership. Alone of the Middle Eastern countries Iran embraces the Shiite form of Islam, and its people are not Arabs. In 1979 the shah finally was forced to flee as the ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile to head a fiercely fundamentalist Muslim government. The extended hostage crisis ensued and brought about the end of Carter's leadership of the US. Iraq's Saddam Hussein launched a war to seize Iranian land and a 10-year war between the 2 countries followed, with most western powers supporting Iraq. The 1980s saw the rise of the Palestinian movement Intifadeh ("the shrugging off") in the Israeli-occupied lands, with calls for jihad (holy war) and the rise of militant Hamas terrorists. In Libya power fell in the hands of an officer, Qaddafi, whose personal charisma was reinforced by strict dictatorship in a dark reminiscence of Nasser's Arab nationalism. Americans perceived him as anti US and attempted to kill him. In 1990, Iraq's Saddam occupied Kuwait, an artificial state created by Britain at the end of World War I, perhaps to deny Iraq outlet to the Persian Gulf. The Saudi rulers appealed for aid, and western states led by the US again rushed military might to the area; the Gulf War ensued. Saddam is another dark side of the heritage of the historical force that once was "Nasserism", trying to enlist Arab support and shatter the alliance facing him by linking an offer to withdraw from Kuwait with a demand that Israel withdraw from the occupied territories. Defeated militarily, he remains yet in power. In the Middle East history mixes with today and tomorrow; it is a place of many dreams and more nightmares, of difficult questions and no answers, with few authentic heroes. Part of its tragedy is that it remains a place where greater outside forces play out their search for destiny; the Bible speaks of a final battle at Armageddon, a place not far from Jerusalem, a final symbol for mankind's search for destiny.