Sometimes the difficulties between Israel and the Palestinians seem never ending. During the 1990s great diplomatic strides were made to resolve their difference, but since then the situation has deteriorated. The recent Israeli attack on ships trying to break the Gaza blockade has raised international emotions, but those emotions comprise short-term reactions to events rather than long-term attempts at solutions.

Helen Thomas’s recent remarks that the Jews should leave Palestine provide an example of the outrage many have felt, but it is an outrage that fails to realize leaving is not an option.

So why are Jews in Palestine, a.k.a. the Land of Israel, anyway?

Jews were living in the Land of Israel, as far as historians can determine, by about 1250 B.C. But then in 70 A.D. and then again in 135 A.D., some 1,385 years later, the Roman Empire banned Jews from living in Jerusalem and its surrounding province. (1,385 years is a long time; longer than there has been an English language.) Some Jews continued to live elsewhere in the land, but over the centuries, they disappeared from the area under pressure from Christian and Muslim immigrants, invaders and conquerors.

So from about 70 A.D., most Jews have lived outside their homeland without self-governance. In other words, they have lived in someone else’s country being ruled by a government in which they had no say. These countries were dominated by members of a single religion, usually Christianity or Islam.

In these circumstances, Jews were sometimes allowed to live more or less in peace and sometimes not. Sometimes they were subject to discrimination, other times they were the object of pogroms, riots, lynchings and burnings. Many countries kicked them out: England did so in 1290 and Spain followed suit in 1492.

Not until the 18th century did any country give Jews even the right to vote, although discrimination continued. In the United States, Jews were refused housing, jobs and admittance to education and universities simply on the basis of being Jewish.

As the 20th century approached, many Jews found this situation intolerable and a mass movement arose that believed Jews should return to their original land, from which they had been banished nearly two millennia earlier. This movement, called Zionism, inspired many hundreds of thousands of Jews to emigrate to the territory then known as Palestine.

Then came World War II and the mass killing of Jews by the German Nazis. In less than a decade, more than six million Jews were murdered; they were simply rounded up, herded into pens (called “camps”) and then killed.

The Zionist response to this was three-fold. First, they declared an independent Jewish state named Israel. Second, they called on all Jews to leave the (untrustworthy) countries in which they lived and "return" to Israel where they would be safe from predation. Third, they declared "never again.” Although originally meant as a comment about the Holocaust, this watchword became the symbol of Israeli toughness. The country would never back down in the face of aggression again. Jews would not depend on the charity of others for protection, but would protect themselves.

The Zionist pioneers who emigrated to Israel in the early 20th century were in many ways like the Pilgrims. They were escaping religious persecution by fleeing to another land. In both cases, the problem was that the land was not empty; people already lived there. In America, the pioneers pushed the native tribes further into the interior, spread fatal diseases to them, or simply killed them. Over time, the natives disappeared from the daily consciousness of America’s European immigrants and their descendants.

In Israel, the Palestinians have not disappeared. As Jewish pioneers arrived in the new state, various attempts were made to partition the Israelis from the Palestinians, usually behind borders drawn by military force. This notion of partition, promoted by the United Nations in the 1940s, failed during the 1967 Six-Day War when Israel conquered the Palestinian side of the partition.

That set up the present situation. Palestinians of course want independence and self-governance, but often at the expense of the Israeli state-as the hard-line rhetoric of "drive Israel into the sea" indicates. But the ancestors of the Israeli Jews lived outside the land for nearly 2,000 years. They know from experience it is not safe for them out there. So they stay and fight, continuing to struggle with the Palestinians. "Never again," they believe, will Jews be without protection.

Flesher is director of UW’s Religious Studies Program. Past columns and more information about the program can be found on the Web at www.uwyo.edu/relstds. To comment on this column, visit http://religion-today.blogspot.com.