

# Middle East: Palestine

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Palestine is a historic region in southwestern Asia. It is situated at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea and forms part of the larger region known as the Middle East. Strategically located at a crossroads between East and West and near where Africa and Asia meet, Palestine has been the site of countless invasions and movements of peoples. It is, moreover, the land of the Bible and is considered holy by three major religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Few regions of such relatively small size have been so bitterly fought over through the centuries.

The word "Palestine" comes from "Philistine," the name for one of its early peoples. The Roman province in this region was known as Syria Palestina. Palestine's boundaries have varied widely over its long history. Although it once extended over a wider area, it is generally thought of today as the geographical region extending from the Sinai Peninsula on the south to Lebanon and Syria on the north and from the Mediterranean Sea on the west to the Jordan River and the Dead Sea on the east.

The article that follows provides a brief historical overview of Palestine.

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## The Hebrews and Judaism

Palestine has been inhabited since prehistoric times. In about 2000 B.C., the Hebrews, a nomadic people then living in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), began their migration to the land of Canaan, as Palestine was then known. The twelve Hebrew tribes were united under their first king, Saul, to form the kingdom of Israel, and they eventually controlled most of the region. In about 1000 B.C., Saul's successor, David, made the city of Jerusalem his capital. Israel reached the height of its power under King Solomon, son of David, but after his death in 922 B.C., it was divided into two rival kingdoms—Israel in the north and Judah in the south. (The term "Jew," which originally applied only to a Hebrew of Judah, eventually came to be used in referring to any Hebrew.)

Weakened by internal quarrels, the two kingdoms fell prey to stronger neighbors. In the 700's B.C., Israel was conquered by the Assyrians and its people were dispersed. Judah survived until the 500's B.C., when it fell to the Babylonians and many of its inhabitants were forced into exile. The Babylonians were succeeded by the Persians, under whom the Jews were allowed to return, and the Persians by the Greek and Macedonian armies of Alexander the Great. After Alexander's death in 323 B.C., his followers founded kingdoms in Egypt and Syria, which ruled Palestine in turn. Attempts by the Seleucid rulers of Syria to introduce Greek religious practices into the region in 167 B.C. provoked the Jews to revolt. After a long struggle led by Judah Maccabee and his brothers, they re-established an independent Jewish kingdom, which lasted until 63 B.C.

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## Rome and Christianity

From 63 B.C. to about A.D. 630, Palestine was part of first the Roman and then the Byzantine empires. During the reign of Herod the Great, who ruled Judea (the Roman name for Judah) as a Roman protectorate, Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem. It marked the humble beginning of what would become Christianity and eventually spread throughout the Roman world.

Roman rule over Palestine led to repeated Jewish revolts. The first, from 66 to 73, resulted in the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the center of Jewish worship,

along with much of the city itself. A second revolt broke out in 115 and a third in 132. The last, led by Simon Bar Cocheba (or Bar Kokhba), while at first successful, was eventually put down with great harshness. An independent Jewish nation would not appear again in the region for more than 1800 years.

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### The Arabs and Islam

Shortly after 630, a powerful new force erupted out of the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula. The Arabs, united under the banner of Islam, the religion of the Muslims, swiftly conquered Palestine, along with most of the rest of the Middle East. Jews and Christians continued to live in Palestine, but Muslim Arabs became the dominant people of the region. Since Islam shared some of its traditions with the two earlier religions and Muslims believed that their prophet, Mohammed, had ascended to heaven from Jerusalem, Palestine became a holy land for them as well.

For most of the centuries that followed, Palestine remained under the rule of one or another Muslim dynasty. The exception was a period during the 1100's, when European Crusaders ruled Jerusalem and other small states in the region. In the 1500's, Palestine became part of the empire of the Ottoman Turks and remained so until the 1900's.

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### Zionism and Arab Nationalism

In the late 1800's and early 1900's, two nationalist movements—both involving Palestine—began to develop. The first was Zionism, which sought to re-establish a Jewish homeland in the region. From the 1880's on, considerable numbers of Jews from Europe settled in Palestine. A separate Arab nationalist movement, begun not long after, had as its aim independence from Ottoman rule. Arab nationalism was not focused specifically on Palestine, as Zionism was, but considered it part of the larger Arab community.

To this was added the role played by Britain, which sought the aid of both Arabs and Jews during World War I. In 1917, British forces occupied Palestine. That same year the British government issued the Balfour Declaration (named for Arthur J. Balfour, then the British foreign secretary). It pledged support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine while acknowledging the rights of its non-Jewish population. Arab leaders also claimed that Britain had promised to make Palestine part of an independent Arab state. These competing aspirations and claims set the stage for the clash between Jews and Arabs over the region that continues to the present day.

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### The British Mandate

After World War I ended in 1918, the Ottoman Empire was broken apart, its core becoming the republic of Turkey. Palestine itself was placed under British administration in 1922 as a mandate of the League of Nations, the forerunner of the United Nations. The mandate also included land east of the Jordan River, where Britain established the state of Transjordan (now Jordan) in 1923.

Arab opposition to Zionist aims led to violent incidents in the 1920's. These grew worse during the 1930's, as increasing numbers of Jews, fleeing Nazi persecution in Europe, arrived in Palestine. Britain was increasingly hard-pressed to contain what had become an Arab rebellion. In 1939, just before the outbreak of World War II, the British government proposed the creation, within ten years, of an independent Palestine,

composed of both Arabs and Jews but maintaining an Arab majority. Jewish immigration was to be limited and would end entirely within five years, unless approved by the Arabs. Both sides rejected the plan.

The murder of millions of European Jews by Nazi Germany during World War II intensified Zionist efforts to win a Palestinian homeland. After the war's end in 1945, the Jewish population swelled with the arrival of concentration camp survivors. Because of the immigration restrictions imposed by Britain, many of these refugees were smuggled into Palestine by Jewish underground groups, some of which used guerrilla warfare, sabotage, and terrorist tactics against the British forces.

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### Partition

In 1947 the British, unable to find a solution acceptable to both sides, turned the issue of Palestine over to the United Nations, which voted to partition the region into separate Jewish and Arab states. Jerusalem was to be an international city, administered by the United Nations. The Jews of Palestine and Zionists elsewhere generally accepted this decision. Palestinian Arabs and Arab nationalists almost universally opposed it.

As the British prepared to depart, the new Jewish state of Israel was proclaimed on May 14, 1948. It was invaded almost immediately by armies of neighboring Arab countries, beginning the first Arab-Israeli war. When the war ended in 1949, Israel had not only successfully defended itself but had won additional territory as well. During the fighting, Transjordan occupied the West Bank, the region west of the Jordan River (subsequently changing its name to Jordan), and Egypt took over the Gaza Strip. Both were areas that had been allotted to a Palestinian Arab state. The war left Jerusalem divided between Israel and Jordan. Large numbers of Palestinian Arabs fled from Israeli to Arab territory, particularly the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

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### The Palestinians. Efforts Toward Peace

The question of a Palestinian Arab state has remained one of the main causes of hostility between Israel and the Arab countries. Three more Arab-Israeli wars followed—in 1956, 1967, and 1973. During the 1967 war, Israel gained control of the West Bank, all of Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, and the Sinai peninsula of Egypt, as well as Syria's Golan Heights. Israel's occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip brought large numbers of Palestinian Arabs under its control. Israel returned the Sinai following a peace treaty with Egypt concluded in 1979. The treaty also discussed, in general terms, the possibility of a Palestinian Arab state in the West Bank and Gaza, but there was no agreement on how the state would be set up and governed.

Palestinian Arab nationalism, meanwhile, found expression in militant guerrilla organizations. Most were included in an overall body, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), headed by Yasir Arafat. The PLO was eventually accepted by Arab countries as the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people" and was granted observer status by the United Nations. Although the diverse groups had different aims, most shared the goal of replacing Israel with a predominantly Arab state. Their activities included widespread terrorism, often carried out far from Palestine itself, and raids against Israeli settlements. Israeli opinion on the Palestinian question has been mixed. Some Israelis have been willing to trade territory for peace; others have opposed a Palestinian Arab state, fearing that it would mean the elimination of Israel.

In 1987, Arabs in the Gaza Strip launched an uprising against Israeli occupation that

soon spread to the West Bank. In 1993, Israel and the PLO signed a historic agreement giving Arabs self-rule in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank city of Jericho. In 1994, Jordan signed a peace treaty with Israel. In 1996 the Arabs elected a self-rule Palestinian National Authority (PNA), headed by Arafat. By 2000, under a series of accords, the PNA controlled nearly 43 percent of the West Bank, an area containing about 60 percent of that region's Palestinian inhabitants. But the September 2000 deadline for a final accord was not met, chiefly because of disagreements over who would control Jerusalem. Palestinian and Israeli Arabs then launched a new uprising against Israel. As the death toll mounted, the focus shifted from achieving a lasting peace to preventing a war.

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