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NARRATIVE HISTORY

Israel and Palestine: A History of Land, Identity, and Conflict

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<https://publicpast.org/ppi/v1i1/nh/01>**ABSTRACT**

The Israel-Palestine conflict is one of the most debated and misunderstood in modern history. Rooted in competing national movements, colonial decisions, and decades of failed diplomacy, it has shaped the lives of millions of people across generations. This article traces the full arc of the conflict, from the late Ottoman era and the rise of two nationalisms, through the wars of 1948 and 1967, the Oslo peace process, and the deepening crisis of recent years. It presents the core arguments, historical grievances, and fundamental questions that remain unresolved, without taking sides.

KEYWORDS

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The Land at the Center

The territory at the heart of this conflict is a narrow strip of land along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Known variously as Canaan, Judea, Palestine, and the Holy Land, it holds

deep religious significance for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Jerusalem, located near its center, contains holy sites sacred to all three faiths: the Western Wall, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and the Al-Aqsa Mosque complex.

For centuries under Ottoman rule (1517 to 1917), the region was home to a mixed population of Arab Muslims, Arab Christians, and a smaller Jewish community, all living under a single imperial administration.

Late 19th Century: Two Nationalisms Emerge

The late 1800s saw the rise of two distinct national movements that would eventually collide.

Zionism emerged among Jewish communities in Europe in response to centuries of persecution and antisemitism. Theodor Herzl, a journalist who witnessed the Dreyfus Affair in France, argued in 1896 that Jewish people needed a state of their own to achieve safety and self-determination. Palestine, the ancestral homeland of the Jewish people and the site of ancient Jewish kingdoms, became the focal point of this movement.

Arab nationalism was also growing across the Ottoman world during this same period. Arab communities in Palestine increasingly developed a distinct Palestinian identity, tied to the land they had farmed and inhabited for generations. For them, Palestine was not an empty territory; it was home.

The British Mandate Era (1917 to 1948)

World War I reshuffled the map of the Middle East. Britain captured Palestine from the Ottoman Empire and was granted a mandate to administer it by the League of Nations in 1920.

Britain made commitments that would prove deeply contradictory. The **Balfour Declaration** of 1917 expressed British support for "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people" while simultaneously stating that "nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine." These two commitments were never successfully reconciled.

Jewish immigration to Palestine increased substantially during the 1920s and 1930s, accelerating dramatically as Jews fled persecution in Europe and, later, the Holocaust. Arab Palestinians resisted this demographic shift, fearing displacement. Violence between Jewish and Arab communities escalated. Britain found itself unable to satisfy either side and handed the problem to the newly formed United Nations.

1947: The UN Partition Plan

In November 1947, the United Nations proposed dividing Mandatory Palestine into two states: one Jewish and one Arab. Jerusalem would be placed under international administration.

The Jewish leadership accepted the plan. Arab leaders, both in Palestine and across the region, rejected it, arguing that it was unjust to partition a territory without the consent of its Arab majority. The plan was never implemented.

1948: War, Independence, and Catastrophe

On May 14, 1948, Jewish leaders declared the establishment of the **State of Israel**. The following day, neighboring Arab states (Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon) launched a military intervention. The resulting war lasted until 1949.

Israel survived and expanded beyond the boundaries originally proposed by the UN partition plan. In the process, approximately 700,000 Palestinian Arabs fled or were expelled from their homes. Palestinians call this event **the Nakba**, an Arabic word meaning "the catastrophe." Israeli historians and Palestinian historians continue to debate the exact circumstances of this displacement, including the degree to which it was planned, ordered, or resulted from the chaos of war. For Palestinians, the Nakba remains a defining wound in their national memory.

The Arab states that had intervened retained control of certain territories: Egypt held the **Gaza Strip**, and Jordan held the **West Bank** and East Jerusalem. No Palestinian state was established.

1967: The Six-Day War and Occupation

In June 1967, another major war erupted between Israel and its Arab neighbors. In six days, Israel captured the **Sinai Peninsula** and **Gaza Strip** from Egypt, the **West Bank** and East Jerusalem from Jordan, and the **Golan Heights** from Syria.

This war fundamentally altered the political geography of the region. Israel now administered territories with a large Palestinian Arab population. The **UN Security Council Resolution 242**, passed later that year, called for Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories and the right of all states in the region to live in peace. Its language was deliberately ambiguous and has been interpreted differently by all parties ever since.

Israeli settlement construction in the West Bank and Gaza began in the years that followed and has continued, with varying intensity, under successive Israeli governments. The international community, including the United Nations and most governments worldwide, considers these settlements illegal under international law. Israel disputes this legal interpretation.

The Palestinian National Movement

The **Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)**, founded in 1964 under Egyptian patronage, came to represent Palestinian political aspirations under the leadership of **Yasser Arafat** from 1969 onward. For much of its early history, the PLO pursued its goals through armed struggle, including attacks that caused civilian casualties and were widely condemned. Over time, the organization shifted toward political engagement.

Two significant uprisings, known as **Intifadas**, marked Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation. The First Intifada (1987 to 1993) was a largely grassroots uprising involving protests, strikes, and civil disobedience, though it also involved violence. The Second Intifada (2000 to 2005) was considerably more violent on both sides and significantly deepened mutual distrust.

Oslo and the Peace Process (1990s)

The 1990s brought cautious hope. Secret negotiations between Israeli and PLO officials in Oslo, Norway produced the **Oslo Accords**, signed in 1993 on the White House lawn with a historic handshake between Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister **Yitzhak Rabin**. The accords established the **Palestinian Authority (PA)** as a governing body for parts of the West Bank and Gaza and set out a framework for negotiating final status issues: borders, Jerusalem, refugees, and settlements.

Final status negotiations, however, repeatedly broke down. The Camp David Summit in 2000, hosted by US President Bill Clinton, ended without agreement. Both sides blamed each other for the failure. Rabin had already been assassinated in 1995 by an Israeli extremist opposed to the peace process.

The Oslo process stalled and has not been revived in any meaningful way since.

The Hamas Factor

Hamas (an acronym for the Islamic Resistance Movement) emerged in Gaza in 1987 during the First Intifada. It presented itself as both a militant organization and a provider of social services, and it explicitly rejected the legitimacy of the Israeli state. Israel, the United States, the European Union, and several other governments designate Hamas as a terrorist organization. Others, including some analysts and governments, distinguish between its political and military wings.

In 2006, Hamas won Palestinian legislative elections. A violent political conflict followed between Hamas and Fatah (the dominant faction in the PLO), resulting in Hamas seizing control of the

Gaza Strip in 2007 and Fatah retaining control of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. This internal Palestinian split has complicated both governance and any unified negotiating position ever since.

Israel and Egypt imposed a blockade on Gaza following the Hamas takeover. Multiple rounds of armed conflict between Israel and Hamas have occurred since 2008, causing significant casualties and destruction on both sides, though civilian casualties in Gaza have consistently been far higher in absolute numbers.

The Current Situation

Today, the situation can be broadly described as follows:

The West Bank is governed in parts by the Palestinian Authority, while Israel maintains military control and continues to expand settlements. The area is fragmented by Israeli military checkpoints, settler roads, and a separation barrier (called a security fence by Israel and an apartheid wall by many Palestinians) constructed in the early 2000s. The International Court of Justice ruled in 2004 that portions of the barrier built inside the West Bank violated international law.

Gaza remains under Hamas governance. It is one of the most densely populated territories on earth. The blockade has severely constrained the movement of people and goods. Access to electricity, clean water, and healthcare has been limited. International organizations including the United Nations have repeatedly described conditions there as a humanitarian crisis.

East Jerusalem was annexed by Israel in 1980 in a move that has not been recognized by most of the international community. Both Israelis and Palestinians claim Jerusalem as their capital. The United States recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 2017, a decision that was welcomed by Israel and condemned by Palestinian leaders and many governments worldwide.

Settlements in the West Bank now house over 700,000 Israeli settlers, making any territorial partition increasingly complex in practical terms.

The Core Disputed Questions

Despite decades of negotiation, several fundamental questions remain unresolved:

Borders: What should the boundaries of a Palestinian state be? Should they follow the 1967 armistice lines, with or without land swaps?

Jerusalem: How should sovereignty over the city be divided, particularly over the Old City and its holy sites?

Refugees: What should happen to Palestinian refugees and their descendants, numbering in the millions, who were displaced in 1948 and subsequent conflicts? Should they have a right to return to their original homes, now within Israel?

Settlements: What is the status of Israeli settlements built in the West Bank since 1967?

Security: How can the security concerns of Israelis, who have experienced wars and sustained terror attacks, be guaranteed alongside the rights and sovereignty of a Palestinian state?

These are not simple questions with obvious answers. Each touches on history, law, identity, and survival in ways that have made compromise extraordinarily difficult.

The Human Dimension

Behind the political debates are millions of human lives. Israelis live with the memory of the Holocaust, centuries of Jewish persecution, and repeated wars fought since the state's founding. Many Israelis point to the sustained hostility of neighboring states and the genuine security threats they face as justification for policies that critics call oppressive. Palestinians live with the experience of displacement, occupation, checkpoints, movement restrictions, home demolitions, and the daily weight of statelessness. Civilians on both sides have lost family members to violence.

Any honest account of this conflict must hold both of these realities at once.

What Different Perspectives Argue

Those who emphasize Israeli legitimacy and security concerns point to the Jewish people's historical and religious connection to the land, the need for a Jewish state in the aftermath of the Holocaust, Israel's status as a democracy under repeated attack, and the genuine threats posed by armed groups that deny Israel's right to exist.

Those who emphasize Palestinian rights and self-determination point to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in 1948, the ongoing military occupation of the West Bank, the blockade of Gaza, the expansion of settlements in violation of international law, and the denial of basic political rights to millions of Palestinians who live under Israeli military control without citizenship.

International law generally holds that Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza is subject to the rules of belligerent occupation, that settlements are illegal, and that the Palestinian people have a right to self-determination. Israel disputes elements of this legal framework, particularly regarding the applicability of certain conventions to territories it argues were not under the

sovereignty of any recognized state prior to 1967.

Where Things Stand Today

As of 2024 and into 2025, the situation has entered one of its most acute phases in decades. The Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023, in which around 1,200 people were killed and approximately 250 were taken hostage, prompted a large-scale Israeli military campaign in Gaza that has resulted in tens of thousands of Palestinian deaths and widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure. The conflict has reignited global debate about international humanitarian law, the definition of proportionality in warfare, and the rights and obligations of all parties.

The two-state solution, long the dominant framework of international diplomacy, appears more distant than at any point since the Oslo era. Political currents within Israel have moved in a more nationalist direction, with significant opposition to Palestinian statehood. Within Palestinian society, deep divisions between the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority and Hamas-governed Gaza complicate any unified political path forward.

At the same time, voices on all sides continue to call for a just and lasting peace, though the frameworks and red lines they bring to the table differ significantly.

Conclusion

The Israel-Palestine conflict is not a simple story of good versus evil. It is a tragedy rooted in overlapping and legitimate national aspirations, compounded by colonial decisions made without the consent of those most affected, sustained by cycles of violence and distrust, and deepened by the failure of international diplomacy to produce a lasting settlement.

To understand it, one must be willing to hold complexity: to recognize that the Jewish people's desire for a secure homeland is understandable and historically rooted, and that the Palestinian people's claim to their land, rights, and self-determination is equally real and equally urgent. Neither people is going away. Neither set of grievances is fictional.

The search for a peace that respects both is one of the most consequential and unfinished tasks of our time.

This article is intended as a historical and contextual overview for public education. It does not advocate for any particular political position or solution.