

**The History and Meaning of "Palestine" and "Palestinians"**

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# The History and Meaning of "Palestine" and "Palestinians"

[A Time To Speak]

*Summary ... Palestine has never existed . . . as an autonomous entity. There is no language known as Palestinian. There is no distinct Palestinian culture. There has never been a land known as Palestine governed by Palestinians. Palestinians are simply Arabs by another name.*

*"There is no such thing as a Palestinian Arab nation . . . Palestine is a name the Romans gave to Eretz Yisrael with the express purpose of infuriating the Jews . . . Why should we use the spiteful name meant to humiliate us?"*

The British chose to call the land they mandated Palestine, and the Arabs picked it up as their nation's supposed ancient name, though they couldn't even pronounce it correctly and turned it into Falastin a fictional entity." — Golda Meir quoted by Sarah Honig, *Jerusalem Post*, 25 November 1995

*Palestine has never existed . . . as an autonomous entity. There is no language known as Palestinian. There is no distinct Palestinian culture. There has never been a land known as Palestine governed by Palestinians. Palestinians are Arabs, indistinguishable from Jordanians (another recent invention), Syrians, Lebanese, Iraqis, etc.*

Keep in mind that the Arabs control 99.9 percent of the Middle East lands. Israel represents one-tenth of one percent of the landmass. But that's too much for the Arabs. They want it all. And that is ultimately what the fighting in Israel is about today . . . No matter how many land concessions the Israelis make, it will never be enough. — from "Myths of the Middle East", Joseph Farah, Arab-American editor and journalist, *WorldNetDaily*, 11 October 2000

*From the end of the Jewish state in antiquity to the beginning of British rule, the area now designated by the name Palestine was not a country and had no frontiers, only administrative boundaries . . . — Professor Bernard Lewis, *Commentary Magazine*, January 1975*

Talk and writing about Israel and the Middle East feature the nouns "Palestine" and "Palestinian", and the phrases "Palestinian territory" and even "Israeli-occupied Palestinian territory". All too often, these terms are used with regard to their historical or geographical meaning, so that the usage creates illusions rather than clarifies reality.

## What Does "Palestine" Mean?

It has never been the name of a nation or state. It is a geographical term, used to designate the region at those times in history when there is no nation or state there.

The word itself derives from "*Peleshet*", a name that appears frequently in the Bible and has come into English as "Philistine". The name began to be used in the Thirteenth Century BCE, for a wave of migrant "Sea Peoples" who came from the area of the Aegean Sea and the Greek Islands and settled on the southern coast of the land of Canaan. There they established five independent city-states (including Gaza) on a narrow strip of land known as Philistia. The Greeks and Romans called it "*Palastina*".

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The Philistines were not Arabs, they were not Semites. They had no connection, ethnic, linguistic or historical with Arabia or Arabs. The name "Falastin" that Arabs today use for "Palestine" is not an Arabic name. It is the Arab pronunciation of the Greco-Roman "Palastina" derived from the Peleshet.

### How Did the Land of Israel Become "Palestine"?

In the First Century CE, the Romans crushed the independent kingdom of Judea. After the failed rebellion of Bar Kokhba in the Second Century CE, the Roman Emperor Hadrian determined to wipe out the identity of Israel-Judah-Judea. Therefore, he took the name Palastina and imposed it on all the Land of Israel. At the same time, he changed the name of Jerusalem to Aelia Capitolina.

The Romans killed many Jews and sold many more in slavery. Some of those who survived still alive and free left the devastated country, but there was never a complete abandonment of the Land. There was never a time when there were not Jews and Jewish communities, though the size and conditions of those communities fluctuated greatly.

### The History of Palestine

Thousands of years before the Romans invented "*Palastina*" the land had been known as "Canaan". The Canaanites had many tiny city-states, each one at times independent and at times a vassal of an Egyptian or Hittite king. The Canaanites never united into a state.

After the Exodus from Egypt — probably in the Thirteenth Century BCE but perhaps earlier — the Children of Israel settled in the land of Canaan. There they formed first a tribal confederation, and then the Biblical kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and the post-Biblical kingdom of Judea.

From the beginning of history to this day, Israel-Judah-Judea has the only united, independent, sovereign nation-state that ever existed in "Palestine" west of the Jordan River. (In Biblical times, Ammon, Moab and Edom as well as Israel had land east of the Jordan, but they disappeared in antiquity and no other nation took their place until the British invented Trans-Jordan in the 1920s.)

After the Roman conquest of Judea, "*Palastina*" became a province of the pagan Roman Empire and then of the Christian Byzantine Empire, and very briefly of the Zoroastrian Persian Empire. In 638 CE, an Arab-Muslim Caliph took Palastina away from the Byzantine Empire and made it part of an Arab-Muslim Empire. The Arabs, who had no name of their own for this region, adopted the Greco-Roman name Palastina, that they pronounced "*Falastin*".

In that period, much of the mixed population of Palastina converted to Islam and adopted the Arabic language. They were subjects of a distant Caliph who ruled them from his capital, that was first in Damascus and later in Baghdad. They did not become a nation or an independent state, or develop a distinct society or culture.

In 1099, Christian Crusaders from Europe conquered Palestina-Falastin. After 1099, it was never again under Arab rule. The Christian Crusader kingdom was politically independent, but never developed a national identity. It remained a military outpost of Christian Europe, and lasted less than 100 years. Thereafter, Palestine was joined to Syria as a subject province first of the Mameluks, ethnically mixed slave-warriors whose center was in Egypt, and then of the Ottoman Turks, whose capital was in Istanbul.

During the First World War, the British took Palestine from the Ottoman Turks. At the end of the war, the Ottoman Empire collapsed and among its subject provinces "Palestine" was assigned to the British, to govern temporarily as a mandate from the League of Nations.

What Does "Palestine" Mean?

## The Jewish National Home

Travellers to Palestine from the Western world left records of what they saw there. The theme throughout their reports is dismal: The land was empty, neglected, abandoned, desolate, fallen into ruins

*Nothing there [Jerusalem] to be seen but a little of the old walls which is yet remaining and all the rest is grass, moss and weeds. — English pilgrim in 1590*

*The country is in a considerable degree empty of inhabitants and therefore its greatest need is of a body of population — British consul in 1857*

*There is not a solitary village throughout its whole extent [valley of Jezreel] — not for 30 miles in either direction. . . . One may ride 10 miles hereabouts and not see 10 human beings.*

*For the sort of solitude to make one dreary, come to Galilee . . . Nazareth is forlorn . . . Jericho lies a mouldering ruin . . . Bethlehem and Bethany, in their poverty and humiliation . . . untenanted by any living creature . . . .*

*A desolate country whose soil is rich enough, but is given over wholly to weeds . . . a silent, mournful expanse . . . a desolation . . . . We never saw a human being on the whole route . . . . Hardly a tree or shrub anywhere. Even the olive tree and the cactus, those fast friends of a worthless soil, had almost deserted the country . . . .*

*Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes . . . desolate and unlovely . . . . — Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad*, 1867*

The restoration of the "desolate and unlovely" land began in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century with the first Jewish pioneers. Their labors created newer and better conditions and opportunities, which in turn attracted migrants from many parts of the Middle East, both Arabs and others.

The Balfour Declaration of 1917, confirmed by the League of Nations Mandate, committed the British Government to the principle that "His Majesty's government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a Jewish National Home, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object. . . ." It was specified both that this area be open to "close Jewish settlement" and that the rights of all inhabitants already in the country be preserved and protected.

Mandate Palestine originally included all of what is now Jordan, as well as all of what is now Israel, and the territories between them. However, when Great Britain's protégé Emir Abdullah was forced to leave the ancestral Hashemite domain in Arabia, the British created a realm for him that included all of Mandate Palestine east of the Jordan River. There was no traditional or historic Arab name for this land, so it was called after the river: first Trans-Jordan and later Jordan.

By this political act, that violated the conditions of the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate, the British cut more than 75 percent out of the Jewish National Home. No Jew has ever been permitted to reside in Trans-Jordan/Jordan.

Less than 25 percent then remained of Mandate Palestine, and even in this remnant, the British violated the Balfour and Mandate requirements for a "Jewish National Home" and for "close Jewish settlement". They progressively restricted where Jews could buy land, where they could live, build, farm or work.

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After the Six-Day War in 1967, Israel was finally able to settle some small part of those lands from which the Jews had been debarred by the British. Successive British governments regularly condemn their settlement as "illegal". In truth, it was the British who had acted illegally in banning Jews from these parts of the Jewish National Home.

### Who Is A Palestinian?

During the period of the Mandate, it was the Jewish population that was known as "*Palestinians*" including those who served in the British Army in World War II.

British policy was to curtail their numbers and progressively limit Jewish immigration. By 1939, the White Paper virtually put an end to admission of Jews to Palestine. This policy was imposed the most stringently at the very time this Home was most desperately needed — after the rise of Nazi power in Europe. Jews who might have developed the empty lands of Palestine and left progeny there, instead died in the gas chambers of Europe or in the seas they were trying to cross to the Promised Land.

At the same time that the British slammed the gates on Jews, they permitted or ignored massive illegal immigration into Western Palestine from Arab countries Jordan, Syria, Egypt, North Africa. In 1939, Winston Churchill noted that "*So far from being persecuted, the Arabs have crowded into the country and multiplied . . .*" Exact population statistics may be problematic, but it seems that by 1947 the number of Arabs west of the Jordan River was approximately triple of what it had been in 1900.

The current myth is that these Arabs were long established in Palestine, until the Jews came and "displaced" them. The fact is, that recent Arab immigration into Palestine "displaced" the Jews. That the massive increase in Arab population was very recent is attested by the ruling of the United Nations: That any Arab who had lived in Palestine for two years and then left in 1948 qualifies as a "*Palestinian refugees*".

Casual use of population statistics for Jews and Arabs in Palestine rarely consider how the proportions came to be. One factor was the British policy of keeping out Jews while bringing in Arabs. Another factor was the violence used to kill or drive out Jews even where they had been long established.

For one example: The Jewish connection with Hebron goes back to Abraham, and there has been an Israelite/Jewish community there since Joshua long before it was King David's first capital. In 1929, Arab rioters with the passive consent of the British — killed or drove out virtually the entire Jewish community.

For another example: In 1948, Trans-Jordan seized much of Judea and Samaria (which they called *The West Bank*) and East Jerusalem and the Old City. They killed or drove out every Jew.

It is now often proposed as a principle of international law and morality that all places that the British and the Arabs rendered *Judenrein* must forever remain so. In contrast, Israel eventually allotted 17 percent of Mandate Palestine has a large and growing population of Arab citizens.

### From Palestine To Israel

What was to become of "*Palestine*" after the Mandate? This question was taken up by various British and international commissions and other bodies, culminating with the United Nations in 1947. During the various deliberations, Arab officials, spokesmen and writers expressed their views on "Palestine".

*"There is no such country as Palestine. 'Palestine' is a term the Zionists invented. . . . Our country was for centuries part of Syria. 'Palestine' is alien to us. It is the Zionists who*

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*introduced it.*" — Local Arab leader to British Peel Commission, 1937

"*There is no such thing as Palestine in history, absolutely not*" — Professor Philip Hitti, Arab historian to Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry, 1946

"*It is common knowledge that Palestine is nothing but southern Syria.*" — Ahmed Shukairy, United Nations Security Council, 1956

By 1948, the Arabs had still not yet discovered their ancient nation of *Falastin*. When they were offered half of Palestine west of the Jordan River for a state, the offer was violently rejected. Six Arab states launched a war of annihilation against the nascent State of Israel. Their purpose was not to establish an independent Falastin. Their aim was to partition western Palestine amongst themselves.

They did not succeed in killing Israel, but Trans-Jordan succeeded in taking Judea and Samaria (West Bank) and East Jerusalem, killing or driving out all the Jews who had lived in those places, and banning Jews of all nations from Jewish holy places. Egypt succeeded in taking the Gaza Strip. These two Arab states held these lands until 1967. Then they launched another war of annihilation against Israel, and in consequence lost the lands they had taken by war in 1948.

During those 19 years, 1948-1967, Jordan and Egypt never offered to surrender those lands to make up an independent state of *Falastin*. The "*Palestinians*" never sought it. Nobody in the world ever suggested it, much less demanded it.

Finally, in 1964, the Palestine Liberation Movement was founded. Ahmed Shukairy, who less than 10 years earlier had denied the existence of Palestine, was its first chairman. Its charter proclaimed its sole purpose to be the destruction of Israel. To that end it helped to precipitate the Arab attack on Israel in 1967.

The outcome of that attack then inspired an alteration in public rhetoric. As propaganda, it sounds better to speak of the liberation of Falastin than of the destruction of Israel. Much of the world, governments and media and public opinion, accept virtually without question of serious analysis the new-sprung myth of an Arab nation of Falastin, whose territory is unlawfully occupied by the Jews.

Since the end of World War I, the Arabs of the Middle East and North Africa have been given independent states in 99.5 percent of the land they claimed. Lord Balfour once expressed his hope that when the Arabs had been given so much, they would "not begrudge" the Jews the "little notch" promised to them.

[Note: Some of the material cited above is drawn from the book [From Time Immemorial](#) by Joan Peters.]

[ Published: May 11, 2004 ]