

A Short History of the Conflict in Palestine/Israel

By Jody Sokolower, coordinator of Teach Palestine Project, Middle East Children's Alliance

Palestine has a very long history. Many cultures have left their mark on the region. The earliest evidence of shepherds setting up camp with their flocks dates to 6,000–7,000 years ago.

Over the centuries, the people of Palestine have lived under many rulers, including the ancient Egyptians, the Jewish kingdoms of Israel and Judea, the Early Muslim invasion, the Crusades, the Abbasid Empire, and the Ottoman Empire, which controlled Palestine until World War I. But the Palestinians continued to live on their land, tending their olive trees and other crops, fishing in the Mediterranean, and protecting the ancient walled city of Jerusalem. Today, many Palestinians can trace their family's connection to their home village back 700–800 years.

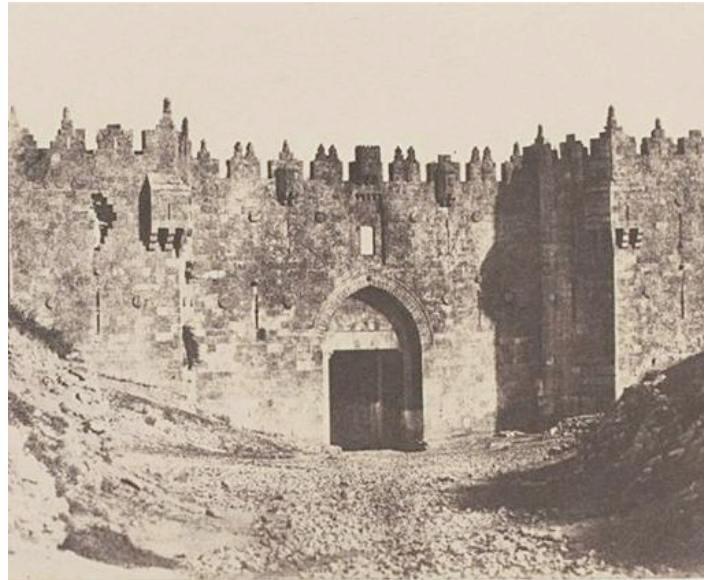
Meanwhile, many of the Jews who lived in ancient Palestine were forced out by the Roman conquest in the first century BCE. So for hundreds of years, Jews lived in many countries in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. Particularly in Europe, they were often mistreated. In Russia and Eastern Europe, for example, they had to live in special neighborhoods called ghettos, and were often attacked. In some countries, they weren't allowed to go to college or own land. Jews had different ideas about how to fight for justice. Some Jews emigrated to the Americas. Others joined revolutions in their countries, hoping that the new government would be better for everyone.

The Beginning of Zionism: The Plan to Create Israel as a Country

One group of European Jews, led by Theodor Herzl, decided that Jews needed their own country. They called themselves Zionists. The Zionists had an international meeting in 1897 and decided to move to Palestine, take it over, and turn it into a Jewish state called Israel. There was only one problem: There were people living in Palestine—the Palestinians, who had lived there for thousands of years.



Theodor Herzl addressed the First Zionist Congress in 1897.



The Damascus Gate to the Old City in Jerusalem was first built in the 2nd century CE. This photo was taken in 1855 by Auguste Salzmann.

In the late 19th century, Zionist Jews started to move to Palestine a few at a time, but still most people who lived there were Palestinians. The majority of Palestinians were Muslim, but some were Christian—that's still true today. Most Palestinians were farmers, but there were cities, too. For example, many people from around the world came to visit Bethlehem and Jerusalem because they are important cities in the Bible and the Koran.

Sykes-Picot and the Balfour Declaration

Then World War I changed everything. Britain and France wanted to use World War I to destroy the Ottoman Empire, which had ruled most of the Middle East for hundreds of years. They especially wanted to control the oil that was being discovered in the area.

So they came up with a strategy that was a horrible trick: First they promised the Arab people who lived in the Middle East that, if they helped them defeat the Ottoman Empire, they would have their independence after the war. At the same time, they made a secret deal called the

Sykes-Picot Agreement. Sykes-Picot split up the Middle East at the end of World War I: France got Lebanon and Syria; Britain got Iraq, Kuwait, Jordan, and Palestine. Nobody got their independence.

Then Britain decided if the Zionists ran Palestine, that would give Britain lots of power in that part of the world without having to run things themselves. So in 1917 they wrote a paper called the Balfour Declaration that promised Palestine to the Zionists.

The Palestinians had a big meeting. “Wait,” they said. “You can’t make Palestine a Zionist country. It isn’t empty. We live



British troops dynamited sections of Palestinian cities to quash the 1936 revolt. Jaffa, Palestine, July 3, 1936. Credit: AP

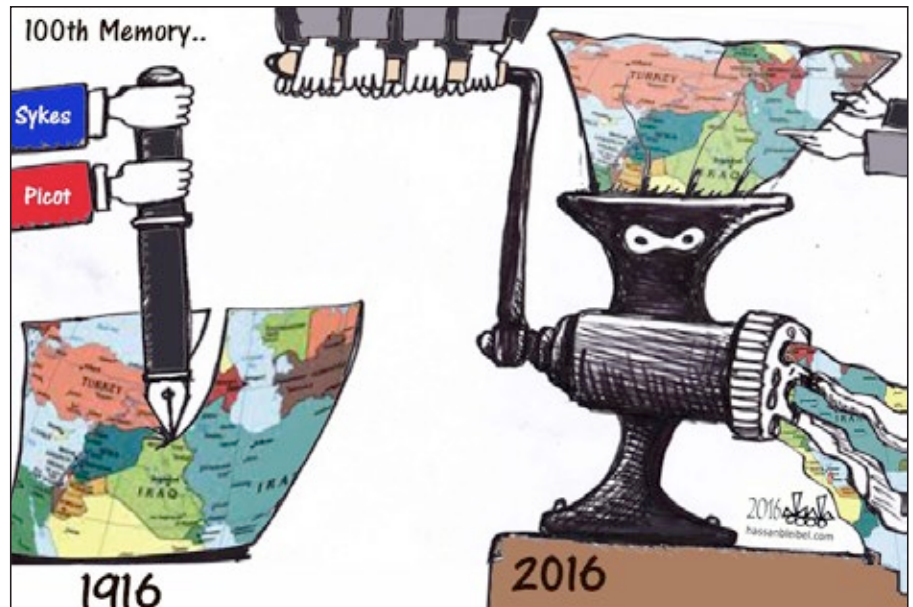
here. We want our independence. We want to be our own country.” England didn’t listen. The Palestinians organized a national strike in 1936 to demand their independence, but they didn’t succeed in forcing England to leave.

Starting in the 1930s, the Zionists started carrying out plans to push both Britain and the Palestinians out. They mapped Palestinian villages and kept lists of Palestinians who were part of the national strike. Even though the Zionists attacked British troops, trying to get them to hurry up and leave, the British gave the Zionists weapons and military training. At the same time, if you were Palestinian, you could go to prison if you got caught with a weapon.

World War II: The Holocaust

One terrible part of World War II was Nazi Germany’s attack on Jewish people in Germany and all over Europe. They arrested people just for being Jewish, sent them to prisons called concentration camps, and murdered many of them. The murder of six million Jews during World War II—along with millions of gay people, communists, Roma, and people with disabilities—is called the Holocaust.

After World War II, many more Jewish people went to Palestine. The United States, for example, didn’t want to have many Jewish refugees coming here, so they encouraged survivors of the war to go to Palestine instead.



Credit: Hassan Bleibel

The Nakba

In 1947 the British decided to leave Palestine. They asked the United Nations, which was brand new then, to split Palestine into two countries: Israel and Palestine.

The Palestinians said, “No. This is our country. You can’t divide it and give more than half of it—with the best land and most of our coast—to someone else.”

But the Israelis had lots of weapons. They had been preparing for many years. As soon as England took its army out of Palestine, the Zionists began to uproot the Palestinian population. They attacked villages, killed approximately 15,000 Palestinian men, women, and children, and forced about 750,000 Palestinians to leave their homes.

So 3/4 million Palestinians were forced into exile and became refugees. They thought they were just leaving for a week or two until the war was over, but they have never been able to return home. Many people still have the keys to their houses.

The Israelis named the day they declared themselves a country—May 15, 1948—Independence Day (like July 4 in the United States). But Palestinians call that same time the *Nakba*. In Arabic, *Nakba* means “catastrophe.” At the end of the *Nakba*, Jordan controlled the eastern half of Jerusalem and the parts of Palestine we know as the West Bank; Egypt controlled the Gaza Strip. Israel controlled everything else.

1967 War

In 1967 war broke out between Israel on one side and Egypt, Jordan, and Syria on the other. It is often called the Six-Day War because in that many days Israel tripled its territory, seizing East Jerusalem and the West Bank from Jordan, the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, and the Golan Heights from Syria. Another 280,000 Palestinians were displaced, many for the second time. A 1979 treaty between Egypt and Israel returned the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt, but Israel continues to occupy the rest of the territory it took in the 1967 war. The United Nations has said over and over again that Israeli occupation of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, is illegal.

Life Under Occupation

Ever since 1967, Israeli settlers have been moving into the West Bank. They build new towns on Palestinian land, and build roads around them that Palestinians can’t use. These towns are called settlements. It’s very similar to the way that



A family in Silwan, East Jerusalem, after the Israeli authorities demolished their home. 2017. Credit: Wadi Hilweh Information Center.



Palestinian refugees forced from their villages in 1948. Photographer unknown.

pioneers in the United States moved onto Native American lands and built towns that exiled Native peoples from their homelands.

In order to protect the settlements, which are illegal under international law, Israel has built a tall concrete “security wall” that snakes through the West Bank, separating Palestinian villages from each other, separating Palestinians from their olive fields, often making it impossible to travel, go to school, visit family and friends, or get to the hospital.

Conditions for Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem are very difficult. They cannot travel from one part of occupied Palestine to the other without permits.

Traveling even short distances involves passing checkpoints that often mean being late to school or work. Children are constantly targeted for arrest. In Jerusalem, Palestinians can't get building permits, and any construction, even small additions, built without permits is subject to demolition by the Israeli municipal authority. Settlers steal and occupy Palestinian homes.

Gaza is a narrow strip of land on the Mediterranean; it is the only place where Palestinians have contact with the sea. But under Israeli control, it is essentially an open-air prison: Two million people are squeezed into 139 square miles surrounded by barbed wire. Israel controls five of the gates; Egypt controls one. Almost no one can go in or out. Every few years, Israel has launched a major air and ground offensive against the people of Gaza, killing thousands of men, women and children each time and destroying schools, universities, hospitals and power plants.

Palestinians Fight Back

Palestinians want their human rights. They want to be able to return to Palestine, to live in their families' villages and cities. They want the democratic right to decide the future of their country. They want to be able to travel, go to school, live in peace. They have fought for their rights in many ways.

Two big movements for Palestinian rights were the first and second popular Intifadas. The Intifadas were campaigns against Israel's illegal occupation. They included demands for free movement within Palestine and abroad, an end to Israeli settlements in the West Bank, and freedom for all political prisoners. The first Intifada broke out in December 1987 and the second one began in September 2000. The Intifadas were started by Palestinian youth. They held big demonstrations and threw stones at the Israeli soldiers. Soon whole families in every city and neighborhood in Palestine were involved. During the Intifadas, the Israelis closed down almost all the Palestinian schools and universities. But Palestinians kept studying anyway—sometimes in secret houses, sometimes with no electricity or water. For Palestinians, education is part of fighting for freedom. Many Palestinian teenagers were killed and spent time in prison during the Intifadas.

Palestinians continue to fight for their human rights, including the right of return and an end to the criminalization of their children. They want to make their own decisions as a people about their future.

What Now?

Today Palestinians are living in very difficult situations—some inside current Israeli borders, some in the West Bank and Gaza, many scattered all over the world, waiting to come home. By now, there are millions of Israelis who believe that Israel is their home and see Palestinians as threatening outsiders, just as US pioneers saw Native Americans during the conquest and settlement of the United States.

How do you think this problem can be solved? Whose voices do we need to hear to understand this situation better? What questions do you have? What do you want to know more about? ■

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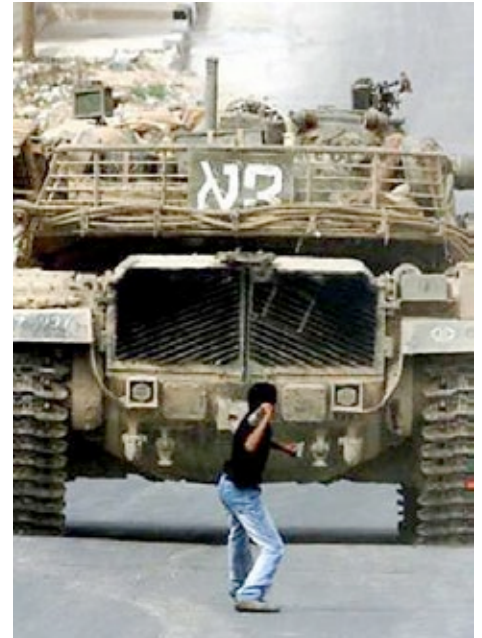
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A Palestinian youth confronts an Israeli tank during the First Intifada. Photographer Silwan, December 8, 1987. Photographer unknown.