Palestine-Israel 101

What are the origins of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

In the 19th century, some European Jews, known as Zionists, concluded that the solution to centuries of persecution and pogroms against Jews in Europe and Russia was the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, which was then part of the Ottoman Empire.

Some subsequently began emigrating to the Holy Land, where they came into conflict with the native Palestinian Arab population, as the former began to displace the latter in seeking to create a Jewish majority state.

This dispossession of Palestinians, first by early Zionist settlers and afterwards by the Israeli government, is the core of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and continues unabated today with Israel’s ongoing destruction of Palestinian homes and towns and construction of Jewish settlements.

What is the Palestinian Nakba?

In November 1947, following the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust of European Jewry, the newly-created United Nations voted to divide Palestine, which had been under a British Mandate since the end of World War One, into Jewish and Arab states. Tensions had been building for decades as growing numbers of European Jews emigrated to Palestine, particularly following the rise of the Nazis, and as Palestinian Arabs became increasingly aware that Zionists wanted to create a Jewish majority state in Palestine, which was overwhelmingly Arab at the time. The UN’s Partition Plan allocated about 55% of Mandate Palestine to the Jewish state, and 43% to the Arab state, with Jerusalem coming under an international administration, even though Jews comprised about 33% of the population, many of whom were recent immigrants from Europe, and owned just 7% of the privately-held land in Palestine.

Almost immediately after the war, violence broke out between the two sides and Zionist forces began to expel Palestinians from their homes. By May 15, 1948, when Israel declared independence, between 250,000 and 350,000 Palestinians had been forced from their homes and lands.

By the time an armistice was reached between Israel and its neighbors in 1949, between 750,000 and one million Palestinians had been expelled from the newly-created state of Israel, which covered approximately 78% of Mandate Palestine. Most of them ended up in refugee camps in neighboring countries, where they and their descendants continue to languish today. More than 400 Palestinian towns and villages that they left behind would be destroyed or repopulated with Jews. This mass expulsion of Palestinians and destruction of their society is known as the “Nakba” ("catastrophe" in Arabic) and is commemorated annually by Palestinians around the world.

What is the Occupation and what are the occupied territories?

In June 1967, Israel started what became known as the Six Day War, occupying the remaining 22% of Mandate Palestine, comprising Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem, which had fallen under Egyptian and Jordanian control, respectively, following Israel’s creation two decades earlier. The Occupation refers to Israel’s system of control over these lands.

The Occupation consists of a repressive and discriminatory military regime for Palestinians, now in its 48th year, under which they are denied the most basic human, political and civil rights. Meanwhile, Israeli settlers living in the occupied territories enjoy all the rights and protections of Israeli citizens. In 2010, Human Rights Watch issued a report on the Occupation entitled “Separate and Unequal: Israel’s Discriminatory Treatment of Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.”
What is a settlement?

A settlement is a housing unit built for Israeli citizens on occupied Palestinian land in East Jerusalem or the West Bank. Israeli settlements are illegal according to international law and contradict official US policy, and are widely viewed as the single greatest obstacle to the creation of a Palestinian state and the realization of the two-state solution. Israel’s construction of settlements has been condemned repeatedly by the UN through numerous resolutions, including Security Council Resolution 446, which stated: “the policy and practices of Israel in establishing settlements in the Palestinian and other Arab territories occupied since 1967 have no legal validity and constitute a serious obstruction to achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East.”

Israel’s settlement enterprise was designed to cement Israeli control over the occupied territories, particularly in and around occupied East Jerusalem, in order to prevent a Palestinian state from being created there. As noted by Israeli human rights organization B’Tselem: “The extreme change that Israel has made in the map of the West Bank prevents any real possibility to establish an independent, viable Palestinian state in the framework of exercising the right to self-determination.” In 2013, Israeli NGO Peace Now, which monitors settlement expansion, issued a report condemning Prime Minister Netanyahu’s settlement policies, stating that they “disclose a clear intention to use settlements to systematically undermine and render impossible a realistic, viable two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”

Today, there are approximately 650,000 Israeli settlers living on occupied Palestinian land in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

What is the Palestinian Authority?

The Palestinian Authority (PA) is a political body governing Palestinians living in the occupied West Bank and Gaza. Operating under the overall control of the Israeli military, the PA was created during the 1990s as part of the Oslo Accords and was supposed to be a temporary body on the way towards Palestinian independence. The PA has limited control over certain Palestinian affairs in parts of the occupied territories and its security forces work closely with the Israeli military. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas is also Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which is officially responsible for negotiations with Israel.

How is Israel’s Arab population related to Palestinians in the occupied territories?

Palestinian citizens of Israel, sometimes called “Israeli Arabs,” are the Palestinians who remained inside what became Israel in 1948. They make up about 20% of Israel’s population (about 1.5 million people) and face widespread, systematic discrimination by a political and legal system that privileges Jewish citizens over others.

What do Palestinians want?

Palestinians are a diverse people, like any other. Palestinians want the same things that Americans want: to live in freedom, to be treated as equals, and to give their children a chance at a prosperous future. Some believe that the best way to achieve this is by creating a Palestinian state in the occupied territories alongside Israel (the two-state solution), while many others believe a single state in Palestine-Israel with equal rights for everyone is the best solution.

The PLO, the official representative of the Palestinian people, supports the two-state solution, having formally recognized Israel in 1988 and again in 1993.

United Church of Christ Palestine-Israel Network: www.uccpin.org

Front image: a Palestinian boy and an Israeli soldier at the Israeli “separation barrier” in the West Bank, 2004. (Justin McCintosh)

Back map: “The Incredible Shrinking Palestine,” via Jewish Voice for Peace - Chicago

Background image: Palestinian Christian children outside the Latin Church in Gaza City, July 2007. (Wissam Nassar/MaanImages)