

Who Are the Palestinians?

General Background and History

- *“Palestinians” are a Semitic and Arabic-speaking people with origins in ancient Palestine, a name associated with the Philistines who once occupied the coastal regions that are now Lebanon, Israel, and Gaza. Palestinians are also the Biblical “Canaanites” and, along with “Jebusites,” are thought to be the indigenous dwellers of the region. “Canaan” (“Kanaan”) is a common last name among many Palestinians.*
- *Historian Rashid Khalidi in his 1997 book: Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness notes that the history of “Palestine” encompasses the Biblical histories from around 1000 B.C.E, as well as more recent Roman, Byzantine, Umayyad, Fatimid, Crusader, Ayyubid (Kurdish Saladin), Mamluk, and Ottoman periods, thus forming the pluralistic identities of the modern Palestinian people.*
- *After the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman Empire in 70 CE, the region became known as “Palestine.” Many different invaders and rulers came and went over the next 20 centuries. However, from the time that Arab Muslims took control in 635 CE, the region remained almost entirely in Muslim hands until 1917 when it came under a British mandate.*
- *“Palestine” had been incorporated into the Ottoman Empire (also Muslim) in 1516 and remained under Turkish Ottoman rule for more than 400 years. Beginning in the mid-1800’s, large numbers of Jews began immigrating to the Palestinian region, buying up land from the Ottomans and transforming the desert environment into productive agricultural settlements. Labor migrants were also brought in, who further increased the pluralistic nature of the Palestinian population.*
- *The widespread use of the term “Palestinians” emerged with the break-up of the Ottoman Empire during World War I. The territories of “Palestine” then included many ethnicities and religions including Arabs, Turks, Druze, Jews, Samaritans, Armenians, and several Bedouin tribes.*
- *Following World War I and the end of Ottoman Turkish rule, the area was carved up as a British Mandate that lasted from 1917 until 1947. During this time, “Palestine” included a larger area, including present-day Israel, Gaza, the West Bank and Jordan.*

- *Many squabbles and actual fighting erupted during the time of the British Mandate, mainly between the Arabs and very large influxes of Jews who were creating large settlements within the region.*
- *Following Germany's invasion into Poland in 1937, even greater floods of Jewish refugees fled to the Palestinian regions in efforts to escape the horrendous brutalities of the Nazi Regime against the Jews. This overwhelmed the populations resulting in efforts by the Palestinians to prevent more Jews from settling in Palestine. At the time, however, only a handful of other countries would allow Jews to enter.*
- *Complaints from the Palestinians to the British resulted in the 1939 issuing of the "White Paper," which prevented Jews from buying up any more Palestinian lands. By this time, the British were fed up with the continuing conflicts within the Palestinian mandated region and turned the matter over to the United Nations to be resolved.*
- *In 1947, the United Nations Resolution #181 was issued which called for the partitioning of the land into two states: a "State of Israel" and a "State of Palestine." The Jews accepted this partitioning agreement; the Palestinians did not.*
- *The first Israeli-Palestinian war occurred in 1948 with Israel decidedly winning against the Arab resistance offered by Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordanian forces. While Israel refers to this 1948 war as "The War of Independence," Palestinians call it "al Nakba," or "the Catastrophe."*
- *With the official establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, and particularly since the defeat of the Arabs in 1948, the term "Palestinian" has often come to identify people resisting the creation of the new state of Israel. The expulsion of 700,000 Palestinians from their homes further reinforced this identity and the resulting position of "statelessness" that has plagued Palestinian life ever since.*
- *The current worldwide Palestinian population is thought to be around 12 million people. More than 2½ million live in the Palestinian Territories of the West Bank and 1½ million live in Gaza; another million live in the State of Israel. The West Bank is about 90 miles long, 30 miles wide, and is surrounded on 3 sides by Israel. Gaza is 18 miles long and only 5 miles wide.*
- *Other Palestinians make up the "Palestinian diaspora," some of whom are 'stateless' refugees lacking citizenship in any country. About 4 million Palestinians live in Jordan, where they constitute a majority 70 per cent of the Jordanian population. The Jordanian Monarchy grants Palestinians in Jordan full citizenship rights. King Abdullah of Jordan is married to a Palestinian wife.*

- *About 1½ million Palestinians live in Syria and Lebanon, and a quarter million each in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United States where they make up about 12-15% of the Arab-American population. Other Palestinians live in Central and South America, with a half million in Chile, making it the largest Palestinian population outside the Arab world.*
- *East Jerusalem (Arabic name “Al Quds”) has served as the Palestinian capital for many centuries. Many beautiful architectural structures there attest to the genius of Muslim architects and artisans and reflect the sacred nature of the city. The most famous is the Al-Aqsa Mosque, first completed in 705 C.E. and rebuilt several times because of earthquakes and other damage. The mosque now occupies the famous “Dome of the Rock” grounds and carries great historic and religious significance to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The mosque was built to hold 5,000 worshippers.*

Palestinian Culture and Traditions

- *Most Palestinians (about 85%) are Muslim, particularly of the Sunni branch of Islam. Christian communities of Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Armenian Orthodox make up about 13% of the population. Many of these Christians claim origins from the first century C.E. There are also communities of Arab Jews, Druze (particularly in the Golan Heights) and also a few Baha'is.*
- *Palestinian culture largely centers on clusters of small villages. These are thought to be the largest concentration of villages throughout the Arab world. The fertile land around the northern villages produce beautiful groves of black and green olives, lemons, oranges, dates, figs, wheat, beans, and a large variety of garden vegetables.*
- *Palestinians enjoy one of the highest literacy levels in the Middle East. They boast four higher learning institutions: the Al Najah University in Nablus; Bethlehem University; Bir Zeit University; and the University of Gaza. They also have an extensive array of art, music, literature, and performances which speak of their ancient, as well as their more recent history and experiences.*
- *Several famous festivals each year draw visitors from around the world. These include the Palestine Festival of Literature featuring some of the world's best known writers; the famous Mozart Music Festival held each May or June; an annual Palestine Poetry Festival; and two festivals in Ramallah for the Festival of Contemporary Dance and the Ramallah Festival of Arts and Crafts. There is even a Hot Pepper Festival which draws attendees from all around the region!*
- *Palestinians also host world visitors to their famous Biblical sites in Bethlehem, Jericho, and Hebron ... where the Tomb of the Patriarch is the resting place of*

Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, and Leah. The tomb of Rachel is a few miles north in Bethlehem.

- *Palestinians are well-known for their “Abrahamic tradition” of hospitality. Based on the traditional stories of Abraham who, upon seeing three strangers approach his tent, ran in to Sarah and telling her to “make 3 measures of bread” and then “went to fetch a calf, tender and good” and set out “milk and butter” to serve to his guests (Genesis 18:1-8). Lot also gives a lavish welcome in Sodom when two angels approached, begging them to stay overnight.*

Palestinians Today

- *Perceptions in the Middle East today are that the Palestinian people represent the oppression, mistreatment, and careless arrogance of Western interference in the region. The creation of the State of Israel is thought to be synonymous with the United States and British intentions to maintain a foothold of control in Muslim lands.*
- *The current status for Palestinians is uncertain. President Mahmoud Abbas sought to present a request for Palestinian statehood to the United Nations Security Council in September, 2011, but it was blocked from being voted on by United States intervention.*
- *In September, 2012, President Abbas again spoke to the United Nations General Assembly, warning of the “... catastrophic dangers of the racist Israeli settlement of our country,” and suggesting that Palestinian membership be granted in that body. He made this request in order to “... support the realization of a free, independent State of Palestine now (in order) to prevent the occurrence of a ‘New Nakba’ in the Holy Land.”*
- *The most pressing problem for Palestinians worldwide today is that of “statelessness.” This is politically true for those living in the West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan Heights, but deeply affects the underlying psychological anxiety of Palestinian families worldwide.*
- *Many Palestinians today say they prefer a one-state solution with Arabs, Jews, and others living side by side. They refer to the example of King Solomon and the woman who refused to allow her son to be cut in half. The geography of the land speaks of the problems trying to establish a integrated State of Palestine. About 40% of the West Bank is consumed by Israeli settlements and there is a 60 kilometer stretch across Israel between Gaza and the West Bank.*

Sources for reference: Books and articles by Rashid Khalidi; Baruch Kimmerling; Joel Migdal; Benny Morris; James L. Gelvin; Bernard Lewis; and certain internet sources.

The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO)

- *The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was founded in 1964 by Egypt and the Arab League as the official government of the Palestinian people for their political, administrative, military, social, and economic causes.*
- *The PLO initially established its headquarters in Jordan; however, they were expelled from Jordan in 1970 and soon reestablished themselves in Lebanon. In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon to root out all PLO factions working from there. The PLO headquarters then moved to Tunisia, but currently are headquartered in the West Bank capital city of Ramallah.*
- *In 1974, the Arab states officially recognized the PLO as the “sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.” This “government in exile” now has a no-vote representation in the United Nations, as well as diplomatic representatives in many of the world’s capitals. The Palestinian National Council (PNC) is the legislative body. The PLO Executive Committee of 18 elected officials holds the decision-making power.*
- *In 1994, PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat appointed a 19-member Palestinian National Authority (PA) to administer Palestinian affairs. In 1996, he was elected President of the Palestinian territories in the West Bank and Gaza.*
- *Mahmoud Abbas was appointed as Palestinian Prime Minister in 2003 and was elected President of the PLO following Arafat’s death in 2004 and is the current President with offices in Ramallah.*
- *Until 2006, the PLO was dominated by Al-Fatah, the largest Palestinian political party, with Yasser Arafat serving as Chairman from 1969-2004. Other political groups within the PLO include HAMAS, which won the election in 2006 but was forced to move their party headquarters from the West Bank to Gaza.*
- *Since 1967 (the Six-Day-War with Israel) more than half a million Palestinians have fled to neighboring Arab countries, as Israeli settlements continually expand across the West Bank. (Queen Noor on the Larry King show (10/11/10) says that settlements now occupy forty per cent of the West Bank). Israeli soldiers are authorized to search any Palestinian home without warrant and to imprison anyone without charge for up to 18 days.*
- *In 2006, the political party HAMAS won the most democratically elected seats in the PLO Parliament. Both Fatah and the United States rejected the elected HAMAS leadership, and they now form only the government of Gaza.*
- *Peace negotiations with Israel have gone nowhere and many believe that no deal can ever be reached. However, new diplomatic efforts are now underway.*

Rival Movements within Palestinian Politics

Fatah (West Bank)

Founded in the 1950's by Yasser Arafat and other Palestinian exiles as a secular political movement. Later became core of the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

Did not expect Palestinian Hamas election victory in 2006. Declared that West Bank would keep Fata government in Ramallah.

Initially called for the destruction of Israel; since 1967 war, has advocated for a separate Palestinian state.

Fighters mainly belong to splinter groups; have launched raids and wars against Israel, though none recently. Many local skirmishes with Israel soldiers and settlers.

Current leader of FATA: Mahmoud Abbass.

Hamas (Gaza)

Founded in 1987 by Sheik Ahmed Yassin; it is an offshoot of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood and has a strong social and military mission.

Won 2006 Palestinian election but denied validity by West Bank (and the U.S.). Hamas government in Gaza.

Publicly, rejects the existence of Israel; seeks one Islamic state in Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel.

Launched many attacks against Israel, including suicide bombings. Classified by the West as "terrorist organization."

Current leader of Hamas: Ismail Haniyeh