

BACKGROUND

Key Players in the Middle East

Israel. Israel was formed from part of the Palestine Mandate—the territory of Palestine entrusted to Great Britain by the League of Nations following World War I. At that time, Palestine included areas now comprising most of present-day Jordan, Israel, the West Bank of the Jordan River, and the Gaza Strip.

Modern Israel grew out of Zionism, a political movement founded in 1897 to establish a Jewish homeland free from persecution. Twenty years later, in the Balfour Declaration, the British government agreed in principle to a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Tens of thousands of Jews from around the world then began immigrating to Palestine, joining other Jews who had lived there for centuries. However, the Holocaust—the extermination of millions of European Jews by the Nazis before and during World War II—was the major reason the United Nations (UN) decided to create a Jewish state. Israel, established in the section of Palestine west of the Jordan River, declared itself an independent nation on May 14, 1948.

The United States was one of the first nations to officially recognize the new Israel. U.S. support was an outgrowth of American cultural and religious ties to Jews, the feeling of a moral obligation to help them establish a homeland after the Holocaust, and the belief that the new Israeli government would be democratic. Today, the United States gives Israel, its most reliable ally in the Middle East, about \$3 billion per year in foreign aid.

Egypt. The modern Republic of Egypt—the most populous nation in the Middle East—was established in 1952, when King Farouk was overthrown in a coup led by Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser. President Nasser established close relations with the Soviet Union and, by exploiting strong anti-Israeli feelings, attempted, with little success, to unify other Arab nations into a United Arab Republic (UAR).

After Nasser died in 1970, Vice President Anwar el-Sadat became president and dramatically altered Egypt's policies. For example, he asked Soviet military advisers to leave in 1973, and in 1978 became the first Arab leader to negotiate peace with Israel. This overture caused most Arab countries to condemn Sadat; many broke relations with Egypt. In 1981, a group of Muslim fundamentalists assassinated the Egyptian president. Vice President Mohammad Hosni Mubarak replaced Sadat, and has led Egypt ever since.

The **Palestinians** are a mainly Arabic-speaking people with family origins mainly in Palestine. The Palestinian population is largely Sunni Muslim, with Christian and other minorities. The 1968 Palestinian National Covenant defines Palestinians as Arabs who had inhabited Palestine before 1947. While most Palestinians define themselves as Arabs, their ancestry is most probably a combination of many tribes that inhabited the region over many centuries.

The Palestinians do not have a common ethnic origin or a common religion. What joins them together is simply the fact that they and their ancestors have lived in the land of Palestine from as far back as any of them can record. In their veins run the blood of the ancient Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Crusaders and Turks. The Palestinians are a very mixed group of people and each group of Palestinians traces its ancestry over differing lengths of time.

Where do Palestinians live?

Region	Population
West Bank and Gaza Strip	3,700,000
Israel	1,213,000
Jordan	2,598,000
Lebanon	388,000
Syria	395,000
Saudi Arabia	287,000
Gulf states	152,000
Egypt	58,000
Other Arab states	113,000
The Americas	216,000
Other countries	275,000
TOTAL	9,395,000

The Palestinians. The Palestinians are a people without a home. In 1921, the British gave two-thirds of Palestine to a non-Palestinian Arab king who then formed the kingdom of Jordan. When the western third of Palestine was partitioned after World War II, Egypt, Israel, and Jordan absorbed areas that had been intended to form a separate Palestinian state.

In 1964, Palestinian leaders formed the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to lead the struggle for the establishment of their own state. The PLO has used both violence and diplomacy in its efforts. In 1974, the United Nations granted the PLO observer status, which allows it to participate as a nonvoting member in the UN General Assembly.

In accordance with the Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement of 1993, Palestinians created their own governing body, the Palestinian Authority (PA), with a president, legislature, and police force. In 1996, Yassir Arafat, leader of the PLO, was elected president of the Palestinian Authority. The PA oversees areas of Israeli-occupied territories that have been returned to Palestinian control under the 1993 accord.