

Historical Background

Around 3000 BC, Semitic-speaking peoples, who originated from the Arabian Peninsula, began settling in Mesopotamia and eventually moved into the Levant, including the area subsequently known as Palestine. These included the Amorites and the Canaanites, who established city-states and engaged in extensive trade and cultural exchanges with neighboring civilizations such as Egypt and Assyria.

Around the 12th century BC, during the late Bronze Age collapse, an ancient people called the Philistines settled in the southern coastal area of Canaan. They were part of a group historically referred to as the "Sea Peoples." Archaeological evidence suggests they may have originated from the Aegean region, possibly from areas around modern-day Greece, Crete, or Cyprus. They brought with them distinct cultural elements such as advanced pottery-making techniques, architectural styles, and dietary practices that set them apart from the indigenous populations of Canaan. The Philistines established and controlled five city-states, known as the Philistine Pentapolis: Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gaza, Gath, and Ekron, which were strategically important and thrived through trade and military prowess.

The term "Palestine" derives from "Philistine." The ancient Greeks used to refer to the region as "Philistia" or "Palaistina," after the Philistines who inhabited the coastal areas. The name "Philistine" or "Filastin," as the Palestinians refer to their homeland in Arabic, reflects the lingering cultural and historical impact of the Philistines, despite their assimilation and decline by the end of the Iron Age. The Romans later used the name "Syria Palaestina" for the province, which some scholars suggest was a move to sever the Jewish inhabitants' ties to the land following the Bar Kokhba revolt in 135 AD. Thus, the name "Palestine" has been used for this region for over two millennia, representing a wide array of peoples, cultures, and histories over the ages and including a geographic area that extended beyond the original territory of the Philistines, especially by writers and mapmakers in the Greco-Roman world.

By 1000 BC, several distinct groups inhabited the region that included not only the Israelites, from whom the later Jewish people descended, but also other Canaanite city-states and peoples like the Philistines, Moabites, and Edomites. The biblical kingdoms of Israel (northern kingdom) and Judah (southern kingdom) were established around this time. The kingdom of Judah lasted for approximately 314 years. These kingdoms were predominantly Israelite but interacted with neighboring groups.

During the Persian and Hellenistic Periods (538 BC - 63 BC), after Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon, he permitted the exiled Judahites (now known as Jews) to return to Judah and rebuild the Temple. Following Alexander the Great's conquests, the region saw an influx of Greek culture and settlers, mingling with the local Semitic populations.

In the Roman and Byzantine periods (63 BC – 638 AD), the Roman conquest introduced new administrative structures and brought in Roman settlers. Jewish revolts during this period highlight the tensions between the Jews and Roman authorities. Christianity, emerging from Jewish traditions, spread rapidly in this diverse environment. Many Jews and other locals converted to Christianity over the centuries, influenced by both religious appeal and socio-political changes. With the division of the Roman Empire, the region became part of the Byzantine Empire, further entrenching Christian influence.

The Arab Muslims conquered Palestine in 638 AD, introducing Islam and Arabic culture and the Arabic language, a Semitic linguistic cousin of Aramaic. The early Muslim rulers implemented policies of religious tolerance, in accordance with Islamic principles that call for respect towards "People of the Book" (Christians and Jews). When Jerusalem was surrendered to Caliph Umar, he famously assured its inhabitants of safety for their lives, churches, and crosses. The terms of surrender, known as the Covenant of Umar, guaranteed protection of religious rights in exchange for the payment of a tax (jizya). The Muslims established a military and administrative presence, but there was no migration. The population was made up of the indigenous people, including Christians and Jews, many who converted to Islam over time, drawn by the new socio-political reality and the communal benefits it offered.

Under various Islamic dynasties (Umayyads, Abbasids, Fatimids, and Mamluks), the population of Palestine became a mix of Muslims, Christians, and Jews, living together mostly peacefully and contributing to a vibrant cultural and social life. In the late 11th century, Christian Crusaders established several kingdoms in the region, but were eventually overcome by Muslim forces under Saladin and the Ayyubid dynasty. In the 13th century, the Mamluks took control, ruling the region until the Ottoman conquest in 1517. The region was relatively peaceful for 400 years under the Ottomans, who organized it as part of the province of Syria and later as a separate entity. Administrative and social structures were established that lasted until the end of Ottoman rule in 1917, at the conclusion of World War I.

Before the end of World War I, the British government issued the Balfour Declaration, stating its support for the establishment in Palestine of a "national home for the Jewish people." This declaration was significant in shaping the future political landscape of the region.

During the war, the Ottoman Empire sided with the Central Powers. Following the Ottoman defeat, its vast empire, including the territories comprising modern-day Palestine, was divided among the Allied powers.

At the Paris Peace Conference and subsequently the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920, the partition of the Ottoman lands was formalized, but the treaty was never ratified by the Ottoman government. The failure to ratify the Treaty of Sèvres led to the re-negotiation of peace terms,

culminating in the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. This new treaty recognized the sovereignty of the newly established Republic of Turkey and redrew the borders more favorably for the Turks compared to the Sèvres terms. The non-ratification and subsequent events also significantly impacted the structure of West Asia. It prevented the implementation of some of the divisions and mandates over Arab lands as initially envisioned in the Treaty of Sèvres, leading instead to different borders and mandates (such as those seen with British and French mandates over territories like Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon).

The allocation of the Middle Eastern territories of the former Ottoman Empire was further clarified at the San Remo conference (1920). It was here that the British Mandate for Palestine was officially approved by the League of Nations in 1922. The mandate document incorporated the Balfour Declaration and Britain was tasked with establishing a Jewish national home in Palestine while also ensuring that the "civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities" were not prejudiced.

The British mandate period (1917-1948) saw increased Jewish immigration, spurred by the Balfour Declaration and the rise of European anti-Jewish sentiment. Notably, during the 1930s and 1940s, Palestine was among the few places that accepted Jewish refugees fleeing the persecution in Nazi Germany, a time when many Western countries closed their borders. The Palestinians welcomed the disenfranchised Jews to their homeland.

In 1947, The UN Partition Plan to partition Palestine into Jewish and Arab states was accepted by Jewish leaders but rejected by Palestinian Arabs and surrounding Arab countries. Israel's declaration of "independence" in 1948 led to the Arab-Israeli War. During the conflict, Jewish militias and later the Israeli military were involved in actions that killed tens of thousands of indigenous Palestinians, both Muslims and Christians, and displaced over 700,000 Palestinians from their homes and lands—an event known as the Nakba ("catastrophe"). These actions included military offensives, attacks on Palestinian villages, expulsion orders, and other measures aimed at securing territory for the newly established state of Israel, deeply contesting the narrative that Palestine was "a land without a people for a people without a land." This slogan, used to justify and promote Jewish settlement, is now widely criticized as a misrepresentation that ignored the existing Arab population.

From 1948 until the present day, the region has not known peace.

Every effort to resolve the conflict has been thwarted. The United States, for example, has exercised its veto power in the United Nations Security Council at least 42 times since 1972 to block resolutions that were supportive of Palestinian positions or condemnatory of Israeli policies.

The True Meaning of the Word “Anti-Semitic”

The use of "anti-Semitic" to refer to prejudice specifically against Jews sometimes leads to misunderstandings about the broader "Semitic" context, which encompasses a wide array of peoples, including Palestinians. Referring to anti-Zionist or pro-Palestinian movements as being “anti-Semitic” is, therefore, not historically or linguistically accurate.

The term "Semitic" refers to a family of languages that originated in West Asia and includes, among others, Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic, Amharic, and Akkadian. It also refers, by extension, to the peoples who speak these languages. This term was derived from "Shem," one of Noah's three sons in the Bible, whose descendants were thought to be the speakers of these languages, according to biblical genealogies. The concept of "Semitic" emerged in the 19th century when scholars began to classify languages based on their linguistic similarities.

Semitic-speaking peoples have a long and complex history that dates back thousands of years. They originally migrated from the Arabian peninsula to live in Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) around 3000 BCE. These peoples, including the Akkadians, Hebrews, Phoenicians, and Arabs, spread across West Asia and North Africa over time, developing distinctive cultures and civilizations.

Despite their diverse histories, Semitic peoples share certain linguistic, cultural, and genetic traits due to their common origins and millennia of interaction. These languages and cultures continue to play a significant role in West Asia and globally.

Palestinians, who predominantly speak Arabic—a Semitic language—share historical and cultural ties with other Semitic peoples, making them part of this group. The term "Semite" thus includes not only Jews and Arabs but also Palestinians and other groups who speak or spoke a Semitic language.