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Palestine Facts

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The roots of the "Palestinian question" extend deep into the turbulent history of that small sacred area at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea known as Palestine.

Beginning in the 1800s, European Jews, victimized by persecution and oppression, began to settle in Palestine, the land they had occupied in Biblical times. Zionism was the ideological expression of this movement.

After World War I, the League of Nations mandated Palestine (formerly a part of the Ottoman Empire) to Britain. The mandate incorporated the Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917 in which Britain pledged to help the Jews build a national home in Palestine without violating the rights of non-Jews who lived there. The Arabs, who had conquered Palestine in the A.D. 600s and lived there ever since, constituted the large majority of the population of the area and became increasingly opposed to large-scale Jewish immigration into what they considered *their* homeland.

In the aftermath of the World War II holocaust, in which six million Jews were killed by the Nazis, the pressure to carve a Jewish state out of Palestine intensified. Its adherents envisioned such a state as a haven for the refugees of the holocaust and for other Jews throughout the world. Such a state would also serve to atone for Western guilt about Nazi treatment of the Jews. Meanwhile, within Palestine itself, the Arabs were increasing their pressure to achieve complete independent statehood from Britain. Caught between these conflicting Jewish and Arab claims, Britain found itself in an untenable position and asked the United Nations to handle the whole Palestinian problem.

On November 29, 1947, the United Nations adopted a plan to divide Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state, with Jerusalem put under international control. The Jews accepted the decision. The Arabs, who stood to lose considerable land holdings, viewed the plan as inequitable and rejected it. On May 14, 1948, Jews in Palestine proclaimed the inde-

pendent state of Israel and Britain withdrew from the area. Immediately, fighting broke out between the surrounding Arab nations (Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and what was then called Transjordan) and Israel. When the fighting ended, Israel held territory beyond the boundaries provided by the United Nations plan and millions of Arabs had fled the land that had come under Jewish control.

The Israelis claim the Palestinians left on orders from Arab leaders who, they say, promised the Palestinians could return as soon as the Jews had been eliminated. The Arabs claim the Palestinians were driven away by Jewish brutality and death threats. Whatever the cause, the result was the creation of a massive refugee situation, one that became even more massive when the "Six-Day War" of 1967 brought the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip under Israeli control.

Under the original UN partition plan, the proposed Jewish state would have had an area of 6,000 sq. mi. After the 1967 war, Israel occupied 34,493 sq. mi. The Jewish population of Palestine at the time of the UN partition plan was 650,000. By 1979, it had grown to 3.1 million. [Figures provided by the Embassy of Israel].

Today, there are an estimated 3.5-4 million Palestinians living either under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip or scattered elsewhere in the Middle East and around the world. The fate of these displaced people is what is generally meant by "the Palestinian question." For many, it is a question ripe with historical irony: in creating a homeland for one dispossessed people (the Jews), another people (the Palestinians) have been dispossessed.

To most of the Arab world, the solution to this question, at the very least, lies in the creation of some kind of fully independent state controlled by no one but the Palestinians. To the Israelis, such a state would be "a dagger pointed at the heart of Israel." For some Arabs, the solution would be "to drive Israel into the sea" and reclaim the land it now occupies, while others dream of replacing Israel with a

secular state of Muslims, Christians and Jews. The Carter Administration has gone on record as opposing the creation of a separate Palestinian state while speaking vaguely of the right of the Palestinians to have "a voice in the determination of their own future." But the Administration also has gone on record as saying it will not sit down and talk with the political body that represents the Palestinian people, the PLO, until the PLO "accepts the right of Israel to exist."

The one truth that seems to shine through all these viewpoints—and the fierce emotions they stir up—is that unless the Palestinian question is openly addressed, any Mid East "peace," despite the hoopla of publicity it might attract, is sure to prove illusory. □

The above item was researched and written by Harriet Jackson Scarupa, publications specialist. Some of the data was obtained from the Palestine Information Office in Washington, D. C. and the Embassy of Israel. Ed.