





Palestine, historic region on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, comprising parts of modern Israel, Jordan, and Egypt; also known as the Holy Land. This article discusses the physical geography and history of Palestine until the UN took up the Palestine problem in 1947; for the economy and later history, see Gaza Strip, Israel, Jordan, and West Bank. Palestine is the Holy Land of the Jews, promised to them by God according to the Bible; of the Christians because it was the scene of Jesus' life; and of the Muslims because Jerusalem is the traditional site of Muhammad's ascent to heaven. Palestine comprises three geographic zones: a part of the Great Rift Valley, a ridge, and a coastal plain. The earliest known settlements in Palestine, e.g. Jericho, may date from 8000 BC. An independent Hebrew kingdom was established 1000 BC. After 950 BC this kingdom broke up into two states, Israel and Judah. Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans in turn conquered Palestine, which fell to the Muslim Arabs by AD 640. The area was the focus of the Crusades and was conquered by the Ottoman Turks in 1516. By the late 19th cent., Zionism arose with the aim of establishing a Jewish homeland in Palestine, and during World War I the British, who captured the area, appeared to support this goal. After the League of Nations approved (1922) the British mandate of Palestine, Jews immigrated there in large numbers despite Arab opposition. There was tension and violence between Jews and Arabs, and the British, unable to resolve the problem, turned (1947) the Palestine question over to the UN. At that time there were about 1,091,000 Muslims, 614,000 Jews, and 146,000 Christians in Palestine.



West Bank, territory between Israel and Jordan, located W of the Jordan R. and the Dead Sea (1995 est. pop. 1,320,000), 2,165 sq mi (5,607 sq km), occupied by Israel since the Arab-Israeli War of 1967. Many Israelis refer to it as Judaea and Samaria. It includes the cities of Hebron, Jericho, and Nablus, and the Old City of Jerusalem. The north is fertile; the south largely barren. Olives, fruit, and citrus products are produced; small-scale industries manufacture goods such as cement and textiles. The inhabitants are mostly Muslim Arab Palestinians; there are about 198,000 Israeli Jewish settlers. After the partition of Palestine and the formation (1948) of Israel, the territory was annexed (1950) by Jordan.

Following the 1967 war, the UN Security Council called for Israel's withdrawal from the West Bank. The Camp David accords (1978) incorporated plans for Arab self-rule in the region. A peaceful resolution, however, was impeded by the establishment of Israeli settlements in the area and by Israeli-PLO hostility (Arab states, including Jordan, recognized the Palestine Liberation Organization as the sole representative of the West Bank Arabs in 1974).

A 1993 accord between Israel and the PLO led to limited Palestinian self-rule in Jericho and the Gaza Strip in mid-1994. An interim agreement in 1995 called for the extension of self-rule to, and the withdrawal of most Israeli forces from, all Arab cities and villages in the West Bank (except East Jerusalem) in 1996. Much of this had been accomplished when increased tensions between Israel and the Palestinians put the agreement in jeopardy. However, most of Hebron was turned over to Palestinian control in 1997.

Yasir Arafat was elected president of the Palestinian government in 1996. A 1998 accord called for further territorial handover; although



there were delays, this was accomplished by Mar. 2000. Negotiations in 2000 proved unfruitful, and widespread violence erupted in the West Bank (and Gaza) in the fall after Ariel Sharon visited the Haram esh-Sherif (or Temple Mount) in Jerusalem. Efforts to resume to talks were subsequently mainly unsuccessful, stymied by mutual distrust and a cycle of fighting and violence, including suicide bombings by Palestinians and Israeli attacks on facilities of the Palestinian authority and Israeli reoccupation of Palestinian territory. The continuing growth of Israeli settlements in the region, which nearly doubled in population from 1992 to 2001, has also proved a major irritant to Arabs and stumbling block to peace.

In Mar., 2003, the Palestinian parliament established the post of prime minister, effectively reducing Arafat's powers as president; Mahmoud Abbas, regarded as more moderate than Arafat, was appointed to the post. The acceptance by Palestinians and Israelis of an internationally supported "road map for peace" raised hopes for a cessation of violence, though militant Palestinian groups only agreed (June) to a three-month cease-fire that did not hold even that long. Abbas resigned in September and was replaced by Ahmed Qurei, who, like Abbas, clashed with Arafat over control of the security forces.

Israel's construction of a security barrier in the West Bank became an international issue in 2003. It was begun in 2002 in the N West Bank, where it paralleled the border, and around Jerusalem, but plans to extend it south and into the West Bank to protect Israeli settlements brought widespread condemnation. The United Nations estimated that 274,000 Palestinians would end up in the 15% of the territory on the Israeli side of the 400-mi (640-km) fence and wall barrier, and that 400,000 more would have their lives disrupted by it.



The United Nations General Assembly requested (Dec., 2003) that the International Court of Justice issue an advisory opinion on the barrier, and in July, 2004, the ICJ termed it illegal, in part because it encloses Palestinian territory. An Israeli court decision in June, however, ordered the wall partially rerouted because of the hardship it would cause.

Following Arafat's death in 2004, Rawhi Fattouh became interim president of the Palestinian Authority; Mahmoud Abbas was elected president in 2005. Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Sharon subsequently agreed to a truce, and in Mar., 2005, Israeli forces began handing over control of Jericho and other West Bank towns to the Palestinian Authority.

Gaza Strip, coastal region of the Middle East (2003 est. pop. 1,200,000), 140 sq mi (370 sq km), on the Mediterranean Sea, adjoining Egypt and Israel. Densely populated and impoverished, it is mainly inhabited by Palestinian refugees; there is also a small minority of Israeli settlers. The strip was part of the British mandate for Palestine from 1917 to 1948, passed to Egyptian control in 1949, and has been occupied by Israel since the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Autonomy for the region, promised by the Camp David accords (1978), has yet to be granted. The Palestinian uprising (*intifada*) began in Gaza in 1987; the area has been the scene of renewed violence since 2000.

A 1993 accord between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) resulted in limited Palestinian self-rule in the area in mid-1994, but the Palestinian National Authority in Gaza has been undermined by conflicts with both Israel and Hamas, which is especially strong there. Israel retained frontier areas and buffer



zones around Israeli settlements. The breakdown in peace talks in 2000 and the subsequent resumption of violence hurt the local economy. Although the Gaza Strip has seen less fighting with Israelis than the West Bank, in 2003 the Israeli army moved more aggressively to control sections of the Gaza Strip in response to Palestinian attacks. The Israelis have also launched attacks against leaders of Hamas, which has many supporters in Gaza and has carried out many suicide attacks; in 2004 Hamas's spiritual leader, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, killed in an Israeli strike.