

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF ISRAEL



The history of the Jewish people and their roots in the Land of Israel span 3500 years. It was here that the culture and religious identity of the Jewish people was formed. Their history and presence in this land has been continuous throughout the centuries, even after the majority of Jews were forced into exile almost 2,000 years ago. With the establishment of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948, a country for Jews to live freely had finally become a reality in the modern era.

## EARLY HISTORY

In the first century of the common era, when the Jewish civilization in Israel was already over 1,000 years old, the Roman Empire put down a revolt and destroyed the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. At this time, the Romans renamed the region “Palestine” and exiled a large portion of the population. However, some Jews remained.

For the two millennia after the Roman conquest, different empires colonized, ruled, and disappeared, always adding to the diversity of the population. Jews remained in Palestine during these changes. Throughout these 2,000 years, most Jews who were in exile, regardless of their country of residence, continued to view a return to their ancient homeland as an essential part of their identity and a source of hope.

Between 1517 and 1917, Palestine was part of the Ottoman Empire. The region initially prospered under the Ottomans, but during the Empire’s decline, the country was neglected.

In the late nineteenth century, the Zionist movement emerged in Europe as a response to increasing antisemitism and violence against Jews in Europe as well as the rising nationalism throughout the continent. The Zionists sought the return of the Jewish people to a sovereign state in the Land of

Israel. They promoted increased Jewish immigration to Palestine and Jews began to purchase and develop land there beginning in 1882. Politically, the Zionists sought international recognition of the Jewish right to independence in Palestine.

In 1917, the British issued the Balfour Declaration, expressing support for the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

British forces conquered the Land of Israel in 1917 and in the following year, the Ottoman Empire was defeated in World War I. The victorious Allies carved the remainder of the land in the Middle East into new nations, which included Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria.

## THE BRITISH MANDATE

In 1920, the League of Nations formally gave control of Palestine to the British government. As Jews continued to purchase and develop land, the Jewish population grew to some 600,000 alongside a substantial Arab Muslim and Christian population. By the eve of WWII, the national consciousness of these Arabs had coalesced into Palestinian nationalism, and that nationalism aspired to independence. The Arab population strongly opposed the Jewish return to the area and rejected the idea of an independent Jewish state. Thus, the Arab desire for independence clashed

with the Jewish desire for return.

British control over this territory lasted from 1923 to 1948, during which time the growing Arab nationalist movement employed more violence against the Jewish community. As tensions and violence grew between Arabs and Jews, including attacks on British personnel by some extremists, Britain sought to end its mandate of the area.

In 1936, the British government appointed a commission to seek a permanent solution. In July 1937, the Peel Commission recommended a partition of the land into a Jewish state and an Arab state, with exchanges of land and population between the two, with an international zone stretching from Jerusalem to Jaffa that would be under British authority. Jewish leadership was skeptical while the plan was rejected by the Arabs. By 1938, the British abandoned the plan and felt the Jewish-Palestinian conflict was unsolvable.

In 1939, the British issued a “White Paper” that stated that Palestine would be neither a Jewish state nor an Arab state, but an independent state to be established within ten years, thus reneging on the Balfour Declaration. The “White Paper” also limited Jewish immigration to Palestine to 75,000 for the first five years, just when Jews most needed a haven from the persecution of Nazi Germany. Immigration was to be subject to the country’s ability to absorb them economically and would later be contingent on Arab consent. Stringent restrictions were also placed on how much land Jews could acquire. Despite efforts to rescind the “White Paper” following the end of World War II, it remained in effect until the British departed Palestine in May 1948.

### UNITED NATIONS PARTITION PLAN

Following Britain’s February 1947 announcement of its intention to terminate its mandate government, the UN General Assembly appointed a special committee—the United Nations Special Committee

on Palestine (UNSCOP)—to make recommendations on the land’s future government. UNSCOP recommended the establishment of two separate states, Jewish and Arab, to be joined by economic union, with the Jerusalem- Bethlehem region as an enclave under international administration.

On November 29, 1947, the UN General Assembly voted on the partition plan, adopted by 33 votes to 13 with 10 abstentions. The Jewish leadership in Palestine accepted the UN plan for the establishment of two states. However, the leadership of the Palestinian Arabs and the surrounding Arab states rejected the plan and almost immediately began to attack the Jewish areas in order to seize the entire territory.

### FOUNDING OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL 1948

Israel’s establishment as an independent sovereign state was officially declared in Tel Aviv on Friday May 14, 1948, by Zionist leader David Ben-Gurion, the day the British Mandate of Palestine was officially terminated, in accordance with UN Resolution 181. When Israel declared independence on May 14, 1948, the armies of five Arab nations: Egypt, Syria, Transjordan, Lebanon, and Iraq immediately invaded and attacked the new State to destroy it. The newly formed Israeli Defense Force (IDF) managed to prevail.

As a result of an armistice in 1949, the borders of the State of Israel were established on the ground. Jerusalem was divided. Jordan gained control over what is now known as the “West Bank” and Egypt gained control over the Gaza Strip, although both territories had been allocated under the partition plan to the Arab Palestinians for a state of their own. As a result of the fighting, between 700,000-750,000 Arab residents were displaced and became refugees. Some left because their leaders told them to; others fled because of the brutal war which included incidents of forced expulsion by Israeli forces. Palestinians use the term “Nakba”,

meaning catastrophe, to describe this displacement. Meanwhile, the Arab countries of North Africa including Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, and those of the Middle East including Iraq and Yemen, began to expel their Jews. Ultimately, between 800,000-850,000 Jews were forced to leave their homes in these countries, often leaving everything behind.

### CONFLICT SINCE 1948

Since 1948, the armies of several Arab countries have attacked Israel multiple times, resulting in a series of wars and conflicts. Some of these conflicts were major military engagements, such as the Six-Day War in 1967 and the Yom Kippur Wars in 1973. Others have been eruptions of violence often spurred by tensions over borders, security, and land disputes. While Israel has managed to prevail militarily, disputes remain regarding territories and the status of refugees. Most Arab states have taken the position that they refuse to recognize Israel, negotiate with Israel, or make peace with Israel.

### ATTEMPTS TO ACHIEVE PEACE

Beginning in 1978, there have been various attempts to make peace between Israel and the Arab countries, some more successful than others. Some of the most successful were:

- In 1979, Israel gave back the Sinai Peninsula, which had been captured from Egypt in 1967, in exchange for peace with Egypt. This was the first peace treaty between an Arab country and Israel, a significant milestone.
- In 1993 and 1995, Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) signed two treaties called the “Oslo Accords” with the hope that peace and a two-state solution (one state for Israel, one state for Palestine) could be

achieved through a series of phases, including recognizing an autonomous Palestinian Authority and giving it administrative control over parts of the West Bank.

- In 1994, Israel and Jordan signed a peace treaty.
- In 2020, Israel signed the Abraham Accords, a series of agreements to normalize relations with the Arab states of The UAE, Bahrain and Morocco.

Despite these efforts of peace, in most of the Arab and Muslim world, there continues to be a great deal of opposition to Israel’s right to exist. Conflicts continue to erupt between Israel and its neighbors, particularly in times of tension and unrest.

The ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict is complex, with challenges related to borders, settlements, sovereignty, and other contentious issues. There are those on both sides of the conflict who hope one day to achieve a peaceful coexistence.

### ISRAEL TODAY

Since 1948, Israel’s population has grown tenfold. Israel was founded with a population of 872,700 (including Jews and non-Jews). As of January 1, 2024, there were 9,842,000 Israelis. Jews make up about three-fourths of the total population of Israel, representing 47% of the Jewish population worldwide. The Jewish population of Israel is diverse, with immigrants from eastern and western Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, Central Asia, North America, and Latin America arriving since the late 19th century. More than one-fifth of Israeli citizens are Arabs, almost all of whom are Palestinians.

Israel is a democratic republic with a parliamentary system of government headed by a prime minister and involving numerous political parties

representing a wide range of political positions. Like other democratic, multi-ethnic countries, Israel struggles with various social and religious issues and economic problems.

### OCTOBER 7 AND THE CURRENT WAR

On October 7, 2023, on the Jewish Sabbath and during the celebration of a significant Jewish holiday, the Gaza-based terrorist group Hamas, which has governed the Gaza strip since 2007 after Israel unilaterally withdrew in 2005, carried out a brutal attack on Israel. More than 1,200 Israelis, mostly civilians, were murdered, thousands wounded and more than 240 people were taken hostage. The attack on October 7th was the deadliest single day for Jews since the Holocaust. The October 7th attack precipitated the war that continues today.

### LOCATION

Israel is located at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, where Europe, Africa, and Asia meet. The country borders on Lebanon and Syria in the north, Jordan to the east, and Egypt to the south.



Source: National Geographic Kids, all rights reserved.