

From Time Immemorial: Questions and Answers About the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Over the weekend, the world was shocked by news of the Hamas attack on Israel, with a [massacre](#) against partygoers, brutal [house-to-house killings and kidnappings](#), and the deaths of [at least 22 Americans](#).

Now the world braces as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [declares](#) war against Hamas, [vowing](#) “mighty vengeance” for the over 1,300 Israelis [killed](#). As of this writing, at least 1,100 Palestinians have already died as Israel launches [retaliatory air strikes and a likely ground war](#) in Gaza.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has deep historical roots. Both sides lay claim to the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, while Christians, Jews, and Muslims all regard the land as sacred.

Understanding the situation can be difficult, and questions continue to circulate today about the origins of the conflict and the identity of the Palestinian people.

Joan Peters (1936–2015) was a secular American journalist who believed the popular mythology surrounding the Arab-Jewish conflict as she set about investigating the plight of the Arab refugees.

The result of that investigation was her lengthy tome [From Time Immemorial: The Origins of the Arab-Jewish Conflict Over Palestine](#). Contrary to her original assumptions, in the book she documents just how far popular views on the origins of the

Arab-Jewish conflict depart from historical reality.

So, amid all the questions and confusion, here are some answers.

What Is the History of the Holy Land?

Peters records that the land remained desolate for much of the period between A.D. 70—the date that marks the siege and destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans and the subsequent exile of the Jews—and 1917. A remnant of Jews did however remain in the land continuously throughout the intervening period:

The Jewish presence in 'the Holy Land'—at times tenuous—persisted throughout its bloody history. In fact, the Jewish claim—whether Arab-born or European-born Jew—to the land now called Palestine does not depend on a two-thousand-year-old promise. Buried beneath the propaganda—which has it that Jews 'returned' to the Holy Land after two thousand years of separation, where they found crowds of 'indigenous Palestinian Arabs'—is the bald fact that Jews are indigenous people on the land who never left.

What Land Does Israel Have? What Land Do the Arabs Have?

After Britain pushed the Ottoman Turks out of the Holy Land in World War I, Jews scattered across the world began dreaming of a return home to Israel. This goal won the support of many, and in 1917, the British government issued the [Balfour Declaration](#), proposing “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.”

In 1922, the League of Nations (later the U.N.) approved the

Palestine Mandate, designating the entirety of Israel, Palestine, and Transjordan—then British territory, won from the Turks—as Jewish land. Later, Britain was appointed to facilitate the repatriation of hundreds of thousands of Jews who had fled the Holocaust and the horrors of World War II to resettle in the land of Israel.

Surrounding Arab powers took great issue with Britain returning this land to the Jewish people. So, to appease them, Britain gave 83 percent of the Palestine Mandate—land that had been set aside for Israel—to the Arabs. That piece of land is today known as Jordan.

Who Are the Palestinians?

In her research, Peters discovered that Britain largely mismanaged the resettlement process. They kept strict quotas on Jewish refugees entering the land, even turning away some ships full of Jewish refugees, resulting in their eventual extermination in Nazi death camps.

However, Britain failed to keep records of foreign Arabs entering Israeli territory. Peters demonstrates that vast numbers of Arabs did illegally enter during this period, attracted by the sudden injection of Western funds, infrastructure, and as a result, employment. She spends five chapters documenting these figures, concluding that hundreds of thousands of Arabs illegally entered during this time.

Thus, Peters is convinced that the Palestinians who came to be refugees in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were largely immigrants, or descendants of immigrants, who entered the land from foreign Arab lands during the period of the British mandate.

Moreover, Peters writes that until recently,

The Arabic-speaking peoples in Palestine were not motivated

towards Palestinian nationalism, and that it was long after, not before, the Jews settled their new farms that the first claims of 'Palestinian Arab' identity and an 'age-old' tie to the land would be invented.

How Did the War in the Middle East Start?

Israel's statehood was declared by the United Nations on May 14, 1948. The following day, the armies of Egypt, Transjordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq declared war on the new Jewish state and launched an offensive. Miraculously, Israel was victorious, even gaining land in a war they should have lost.

Some half a million Palestinian Arabs were displaced by Israel's War of Independence. Many did flee, creating refugee situations in the areas of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In response, the U.N. set up relief programs for the refugees. According to Peters' research, in turn, many Arabs not affected by the war came for hand-outs, became dependent on the aid, and were ultimately counted as refugees by the U.N.

Thus, in Peters' reckoning, many of today's "Palestinian refugees" are descended from Arabs who actually never were refugees from the war—or even necessarily Palestinian.

These populations have suffered immensely. However, according to Peters, they are victims not primarily of Israel but of an Arab agenda that has forced them to remain refugees for 70 years instead of being resettled in their original Arab homelands, or in alternative resettlement locations in surrounding Arab nations.

The refusal of surrounding nations to resettle the Palestinians refugees has two aims, according to Peters. First, removing the refugees from the West Bank and Gaza Strip would be to concede victory to Israel and to recognize

Israel's right to the land. The second aim is to promote anti-Israel sentiment in the Arab and Western worlds. Indeed, she quotes Zuheir Mushin, military department head of the Syrian wing of the Palestine Liberation Organization between 1971 and 1979, who in 1977 said:

The existence of a separate Palestinian identity serves only tactical purposes. The founding of a Palestinian state is a new tool in the continuing battle against Israel.

The sad political refugee game continues today—and to great effect. As Peters asks, “why has UNRWA [United Nations Relief and Works Agency] spent well over a billion humanitarian-contributed dollars—mostly from the United States—to perpetuate the refugee dilemma?”

Summarizing her book, Peters says that “in the human sense, it is about the onrushing of peoples—about flight from conquest, from persecution, from corruption, from habit, and from poverty. But in essence, it is about the flight from fact.”

Though *From Time Immemorial* doesn't absolve Israel of its wrongs and shortcomings, it should prompt all of us to question the narrative perpetuated by the Arab world and repeated by the Western press.

Truth matters—but as the saying goes, it is always the first casualty of war.

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