

# History and Geography of Palestine

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## 4.1 Introduction

In Greek and Roman times, the name Palestine was applied by Herodotus and other Greek and Latin writers to mean the Philistine coastland and sometimes also to the territory between it, and the Jordan Valley. Early in the Roman Empire, the name Palastina was given to the region around Jerusalem. The Byzantines in turn named the province west of the River Jordan, stretching from Mount Carmel in the north, to Gaza in the south, Palaestina Prima. It was limited eastward and northward, and was extended southward, so that it came to describe the region between the Taurus, the Euphrates, the Syrian Desert, Egypt, and the Mediterranean. The name Palestine evolved to denote the Middle Eastern region situated on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, west of Jordan, south of Lebanon and north of Sinai. (1)

In geopolitical terms, Palestine constitutes the south-western part of a huge geographical unity in the eastern part of the Arab world, '*Bilad El-Sham*'. In addition to Palestine, '*El-Sham*' contains Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. It used to have common borders with these countries, in addition to Egypt.

Palestine's earliest known inhabitants were the Canaanites. Theirs was the first of a series of migrations that headed north-east out of the Arab peninsula about 3,500 BC. Persistent famine and harsh climatic conditions forced successive waves of migrants northwards to the *Bilad el Sham*. The Bible refers to the Arab tribes that settled west of the River Jordan as 'Canaanites' and to the land as 'the country of the Canaanites' (Exodus 3:17). Of its capital city,

Jerusalem, Josephus Flavious writing in the first century, recorded that it was founded by the Canaanites. Melchisedek, the 'Righteous King' built it. He was a contemporary of the Prophet Abraham (Genesis 14:18).

In the 8th century BC it was conquered by the Assyrians; from the 3rd to the 1st century BC, Egyptian, Syrian, and Hebrew armies fought for its possession. During the Roman occupation it was called Minoa.

At the time of the arrival of the Israelite tribes in Canaan in the 12<sup>th</sup> century BC, the population of the country included, apart from the Canaanites, the Hittites, Amorites, Edmites, Moabites and Philistines. The Palestinian people of today are the descendants of the Philistines.

Gaza was an important city in the 15th century BC, when the Egyptian king Thutmose III made it a base for his army in a war with Syria. In biblical times Gaza was one of the five royal cities of the ancient Philistines.

In the 7th century AD Gaza became a sacred Muslim city, but the Crusaders found it almost deserted in the 12th century. Gaza fell to the French general Napoleon Bonaparte during his Egyptian campaign.

Palestine was part of the Ottoman Empire until the end of WW1 when it came under the British mandate. In 1948, it was divided into three political identities, Israel and two Arab regions annexed to neighbouring Arab countries. Gaza Strip came under Egyptian administration and followed the economic sphere of that country, with open routes and free travel to any part of Egypt together with the closer social and

economic ties between the two that always existed historically. The educational system and school curriculum was also that of Egypt. The WB on the other hand became an integrated part of the Kingdom of Jordan.

Because of its location in the middle of several Arab countries, Palestine constitutes a combination of natural and humanistic geography, comprising the originality of Bedouin life in the south, and that of long settlement in the north.

More importantly, Palestine lies at the crossroads of three continents; Europe, Asia and Africa. It is a holy land to the three major monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. As such it has held, and continues to hold, a pivotal place in world history. (2) (3) The Muslim population forms two thirds of the and the remainder are made up of various religious and ethnic minorities which include Greek Orthodox, Greek and Roman Catholics, Uniates (ie Greek Melchites), Maronites, Chaldeans, Syrian Catholics and Armenian Catholics (1) (2)

#### 4.2 The West Bank

The West Bank is the term used to mean the disputed lands located west of the Jordan River between Israel and Jordan. (Figure 4-1) It covers an area of 5,879 sq km (about 2,278 sq miles) and is roughly 130 km long and 40-65 km wide. It is hilly and, for the most part, rugged terrain which changes from desert and scrub landscape in the south to more lush vegetation in the north. The West Bank has an average elevation of 750m, but it also comprises Jericho and the shores of the Dead Sea which, at 390m below sea level, form the lowest point on earth. (4) (Figure 4.1)

The WB currently supports a population of about 2,090,713 (est. July 2001). The population figure for the period in question (1985-87) was approximately 836,000 in the West Bank (Judea and Samaria). It holds many sites of religious importance to Jews, Christians and Muslims. The largest cities of the West Bank are Jerusalem (Al-Quds), situated centrally, Hebron (al Khalil), location of the tomb of Abraham, and Nablus.

The area is divided north-south by limestone hills (Samaritan Hills north of Jerusalem, Judean Hills south of Jerusalem) with an average height of 700-900 metres. The principal municipalities are Jenin, Nablus, Ramallah, Hebron and Jericho (the latter being the municipality on the River Jordan). (5)

#### 4.3 Gaza Strip

The Gaza Strip is an area of 378 sq km (146 sq miles), some 45 km long and 5-12 km wide. (4) (Figure 4.2)

The region is mostly flat and the soil sandy. Gaza, (Arabic Ghazze), is a city and port near the Mediterranean Sea, about 32 km north of the Egyptian border. This ancient city has given its name to the Gaza Strip.

Figure 4.1 Map of West Bank ([Google Maps](#))  
(Accessed 3 October 2010)



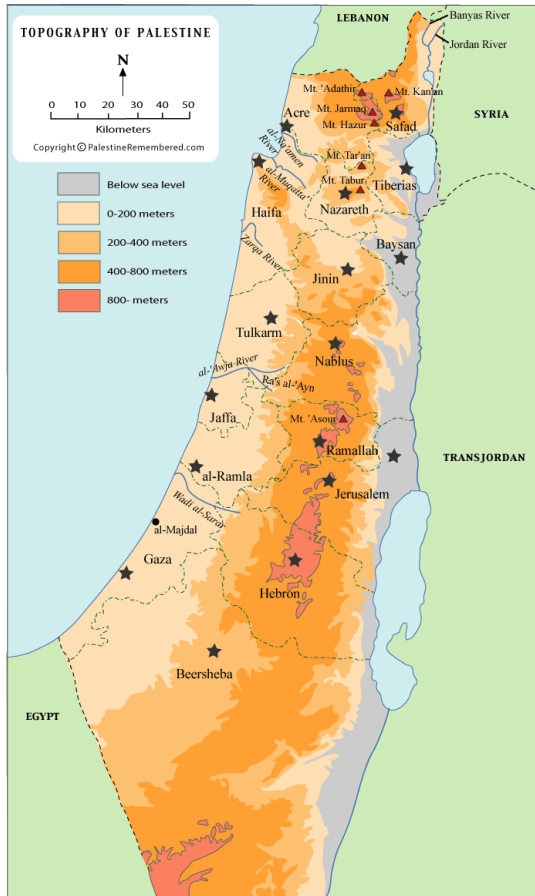
It has an 11km border with Egypt, near the city of Rafah, and a 51km border with Israel. It also has a 40 km coastline onto the Mediterranean Sea.

The terrain is flat or rolling, with dunes near the coast. The highest point is Abu 'Awdah (Joz Abu 'Auda), at 105 metres above sea level. Natural resources include arable land (about a third of the strip is irrigated), and recently discovered natural gas.

The Gaza Strip is densely populated; an estimate in July 2001 put the population at 1,178,119 with more than 99% of its population being stateless Palestinian Arabs. At the time this study was undertaken (1985-87), the population was 545,000. The majority are refugees from Israel who have lived under extremely difficult conditions in the refugee camps since 1948. There are eight refugee camps containing one third of the population. The non-camp population at the time of this study, approximately one tenth of the population, travelled daily to work in Israel. The area was maintained jointly by the United Nations Welfare



**Figure 4.3 Topographical map of Palestine (6)** According to the United Nations partition plan of 1947, the total land area of Palestine (26,323,00 donums)<sup>a</sup> should have been divided into a Jewish state made up of 56.47% of Palestine (15,261,648 donums); and a Palestinian state of 42.88% (11,589,868 donums).

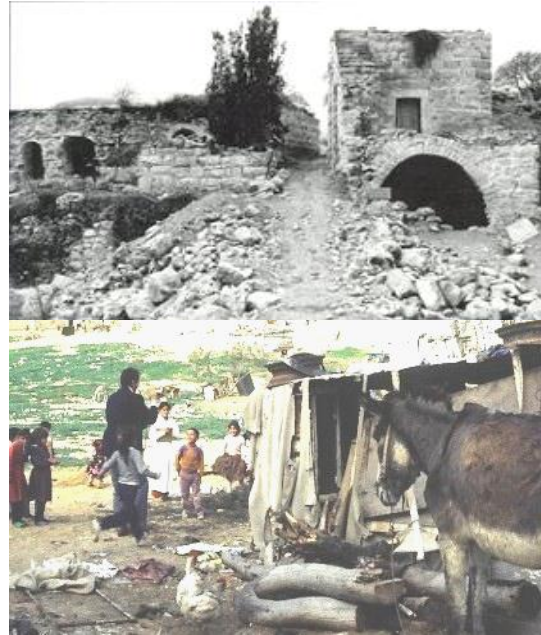


Following the 1949 Armistice Agreement however, Israel controlled 77.94% of Palestine. Only 22.06% of Palestine was left outside Israeli control. The West Bank fell under Jordanian control, and the Gaza Strip fell under Egyptian control. Following the 1967 war however, Israel has occupied these areas.

The effect of these events has been that between 1917-49, 750,000 people were displaced from their homes to become refugees in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and adjoining countries. Further displacements increased that figure to 1.5 million. At the current time, out of a total population of 4.7 million Palestinians, 3.4 million are refugees registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNWRA). Of these, 38% live in the West Bank and

Gaza Strip; 40% live in Jordan; Syria and Lebanon and the remainder are in other neighbouring countries or have moved to Europe, USA, Canada and South America. (Figure 4.4)

**Figure 4.4 Ruins of a Palestinian village (top) (7)** *Top:* demographic changes of the Palestinian territories. (3) *Bottom:* A scene from Jabalia Refugee Camp, Gaza Strip in 1987 during the survey 1987)



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