

I

THE LAND AND ITS LURE

The British short-story writer Saki (H. H. Munro) once described the island of Crete as a place that has produced more history than could be consumed locally. The same might be said of Palestine (as it came to be called after World War I), the territory that includes the contemporary State of Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip (or simply, Gaza).

The area in question is quite small. It stretches from the Mediterranean Sea in the west to the Jordan River in the east and from Lebanon in the north to the Gulf of Aqaba and the Sinai Peninsula in the south. Israel in its commonly recognized borders is roughly the size of the state of New Jersey. And Israel comprises almost 80 percent of the territory in question.

(As with most everything else pertaining to Palestine, there are those who would challenge even these simple assertions. According to right-wing Revisionist Zionists, whom we shall meet again later in our story, and [ironically] the left-wing Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which we shall also meet again, Palestine includes the territory of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan as well. Hence, the slogan of the latter group: “The road to Jerusalem begins in Amman.”)

The population of Palestine is also small. As of 2020, the population of Israel was a little over 9 million, smaller than the population of London or New York City. That same year, there were approximately 5 million Palestinians in the Palestinian territories (the West Bank and Gaza Strip) – a population a bit larger than that of Los Angeles. (Although the exact figure is unknown, estimates for the total number of Palestinians in the world run as high as 13 million.) Since 1948, wars between Israel and its neighbors have claimed upward of 150,000

THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT: A HISTORY



Map 1. Palestine and the Middle East.

casualties. These wars were certainly tragic, but they just as certainly pale in horror when compared with the most grievous squandering of lives in the region during its recent history.

There were 500,000 to 1 million dead and 1 million to 2 million wounded in the war between Iran and Iraq, which lasted from 1980 to 1988. More recently, a combined total of 631,000 Syrians and Yemenis died between 2011 and 2020 from civil war and civil war-induced famine and disease. Outside the region, there was the Bosnian war of 1992–5 (upward of 250,000 dead) and the 1994–5 genocide in Rwanda (500,000 to 850,000 dead).

The size of Palestine and the numbers directly affected by its political problems are thus minuscule in comparative terms. Nevertheless,

THE LAND AND ITS LURE

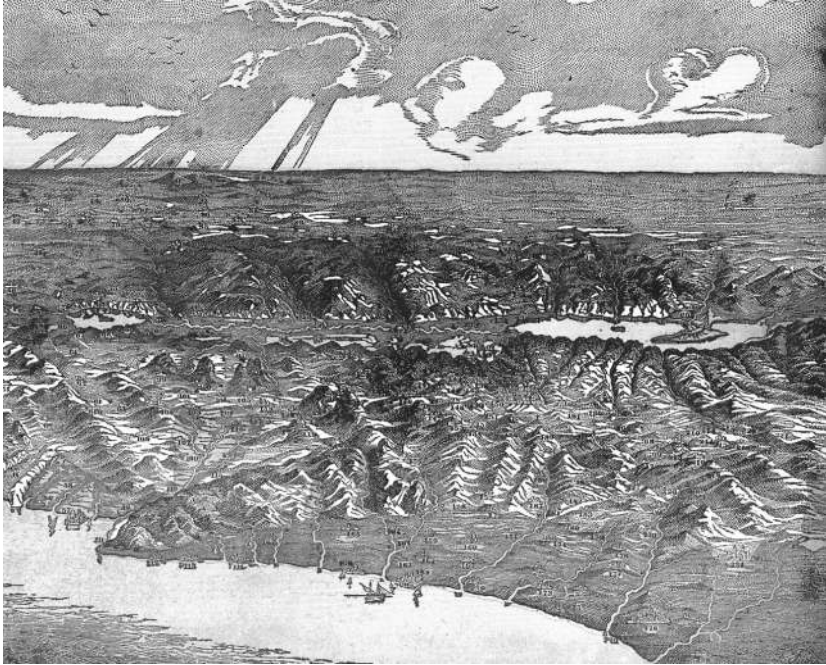


Figure 1. Detail of 1892 topographic relief map of the “Holy Land,” from the coastal plain (foreground) to the Jordan depression. (Source: From the collection of the author)

the dispute between Israel, on the one hand, and the Palestinians and various Arab states, on the other, has been at the forefront of international attention for more than seventy years, and its roots stretch back more than seventy years before that. Indeed, the dispute has gone on for such a long time and has been the subject of so much heated debate that it is easy to lose sight of the fundamental issue involved. The problem is, simply put, a dispute over real estate. Jewish immigrants and their descendants, guided by the nationalist ideology of Zionism, and the Palestinian Arab inhabitants among whom the Zionists settled both claim an exclusive right to inhabit and control some or all of Palestine.

Perhaps the best place to start, then, is with a brief look at the real estate in question. At the center of the territory of Palestine is a range of hills stretching from Lebanon in the north to the Negev desert in the south. The hills are interrupted in the northern Galilee region by the Valley of Jezreel (Plain of Esdraelon). For millennia the Valley of Jezreel was a major trade route linking the Mediterranean and Egypt with

THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT: A HISTORY

southwest Asia. It also provided the path for conquerors, from the Assyrians to the Persians.

South of the Valley of Jezreel is a hilly area that was the center of ancient Jewish settlement and is the site of Jerusalem. Today the plateau forms what the Palestinians call “the occupied West Bank” and what the Israeli government calls “Judea and Samaria,” after their Biblical names. This area is mostly populated by Palestinians, many of whom live near or in the principal cities of the West Bank: Nablus, Ramallah, Hebron (al-Khalil), and Jericho, the original seat of the Palestinian Authority, which is, theoretically, the Palestinian government in the process of formation. Many of the Palestinians living on the West Bank can trace their ancestry back for generations, if not longer. Others fled to the West Bank from their homes in contemporary Israel as a result of the 1948 war.

Lowlands lie on either side of the plateau and to its south. To the west of the hilly area lies a coastal plain. The coastal plain provided two of the centers of Jewish immigration in the nineteenth century, one around Tel Aviv–Jaffa, the other about a third of the way up the coast to the port city of Haifa.

To the east of the hilly area there is an area called the Jordan depression. This is not a psychological term – it refers to the fact that this area is low lying. The area is marked by the Dead Sea, which is below sea level – the lowest elevation of land on the planet. The Negev desert lies to the south of the hilly area. Until the establishment of the State of Israel, it was largely inhabited by bedouin. Further west, on the Mediterranean coast, lies the Gaza Strip, one of the most densely populated territories on earth.

Although countless cities, towns, and villages dot this landscape, several in particular play an important role in our story. First, there are those that lie on the coastal plain. Furthest north is the port city of Acre. Acre was the principal harbor of the First Crusade, launched in 1096. The First Crusade was, for all intents and purposes, the only truly successful Crusade. It resulted in the capture of Jerusalem in 1099 and the establishment of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, which lasted about a century. Zionist historians of an earlier generation found comfort in the kingdom’s longevity; Palestinian historians, in its eventual dislocation.

Haifa, the principal seaport of Israel, lies to the south of Acre. It was originally built during the eighteenth century by an Ottoman vassal who

THE LAND AND ITS LURE



Map 2. Israel and the Palestinian territories.

sought to preserve his autonomy from the Ottomans by enriching himself and his principality through expanding trade with Europe. The port was modernized and enlarged during the British mandate period (1922–48), in part because it served as the terminus of an oil pipeline that stretched from Iraq to the Mediterranean.

Further south still is Tel Aviv, which was founded in 1909 as a Jewish suburb of the Palestinian city of Jaffa. Depending on whether or not one accepts the Israeli claim that all of Jerusalem belongs to Israel – a contentious issue, as we shall see – Tel Aviv is either the second-largest or the largest city in contemporary Israel.

Jerusalem lies inland. The city was, according to the Bible, originally built by a people known as the Jebusites. Although “ownership” of the city is disputed, one untried solution would be to return the city to its

THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT: A HISTORY

original occupants, if any Jebusites can yet be found. For centuries, Jerusalem has been significant as a religious center and pilgrimage site. For Jews, it is the capital of David and Solomon's kingdom and the site of the Western (Wailing) Wall, which is the only remaining remnant of the second temple. For Muslims, it is the site from which Muhammad ascended to heaven on his famous night journey. For Christians, it is the site of the Passion and Crucifixion.

The struggle for control over some or all of the territory of Palestine pits two nationalist movements against each other. In spite of their claims to uniqueness, all nationalist movements bear a remarkable resemblance to one another. Each constructs a historical narrative that traces the unbroken lineage of a group – a nation – over time. Each endows the site of the nation's birth or greatest cultural or political moment with special meaning. Each uses its purported "special relationship" to some territory to justify its right to establish a sovereign state in that territory.

This is where nationalism differs from mere nostalgia or collective memory: Whereas all sorts of religious and ethnic groups feel sentimental attachment to places, nationalism converts sentiment into politics. The adherents of a nationalist movement demand exclusive sovereignty over the designated territory and, for their nation, membership in the global order of nation-states. When it comes to connecting history and geography to political rights, neither Zionism nor Palestinian nationalism is a slacker.

Zionism views itself as the political expression of the Jewish nation. Indeed, it views itself as the fulfillment of Jewish history. In a manner analogous to most other nationalisms, Zionism has constructed a three-part narrative that traces the unbroken history of the Jewish nation from its birth and efflorescence in Palestine, through a period of decay and degeneration in exile, to a period of redemption at the hands of the modern Zionist movement and its return to its ancestral home in Palestine.

For Zionists, the Jewish claim to Palestine comes from their ancient habitation in Palestine. Archaeologists and Biblical scholars agree about that habitation, although ancient habitation, even with a small continuous presence and fond communal memories, is a slender reed on which to hang the right to reclaim a territory and establish a modern state there – particularly when another people forms the majority.

THE LAND AND ITS LURE

Most commonly, the Zionist narrative of Jewish history begins with Abraham and his descendants, who immigrated to Palestine in the second millennium BC, possibly from the territory that is now Iraq. The standard Zionist narrative considers the tenth-century BC reigns of King David and King Solomon the highpoint of the Jewish presence in Palestine. According to the narrative, this period was one of cultural and political glory, when the Jewish nation was politically united and religious authority radiated from the great temple in Jerusalem. Archaeologists are divided on just how glorious the kingdom actually was and the extent of its territory. In any event, this was also a short-lived period, lasting a little less than seventy years, about half the length of the “golden age” of Greece.

Following the death of King Solomon, the Jewish community fragmented politically, save for eighty years under the rule of the Maccabees. In 63 BC, the Romans conquered Jerusalem, the capital of David and Solomon’s kingdom, and in AD 135, after a series of revolts, they destroyed Jerusalem, enslaved or slaughtered its inhabitants, and dispersed most of the Jewish community. The Romans, drawing on the more extensive vocabulary of their Greek forerunners, renamed the reconquered province “Palestina” (from which we get the names “Palestine” and its Arabic equivalent, “Filastin”).

Without a central cultic site, the hub of Jewish life shifted to the diaspora – Jewish communities outside Palestine, including some that had existed in such places as Babylon and Alexandria even before Roman times. The diaspora – later to include communities in Europe and the Americas – would remain the central site of Jewish life until the emergence of the Zionist movement. Zionists claim that Zionism saved the scattered Jewish nation from decay from within and corruption from without and redeemed it by restoring it to its rightful home in Palestine.

Zionists do not weave their narrative of Jewish history from whole cloth, of course. Nationalist movements – be they Russian, French, or American – never do. Palestine was, after all, recalled in Jewish texts and rituals for centuries, and for centuries Jews proclaimed at their yearly Passover seders, “Next year in Jerusalem.” But what Zionists did, as all nationalist movements before and since have done, was to read their history selectively and draw conclusions from it that would not have been understandable to their ancestors before the advent of the modern era.

THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT: A HISTORY

The narrative of the Jewish people, as recounted by Zionists, situates periods of Jewish exile from Palestine (such as exile to Egypt and Babylon), dispersion (by the Assyrians), political division (most notably when the Jewish tribes divided themselves into two states, Israel and Judah), and wars with other inhabitants of the land (most notably the Philistines along the coast) within a framework that gives pride of place to ancient periods of political unity and dominance within Palestine. As the nineteenth-century French philosopher Ernest Renan once put it, “Getting history wrong is part of being a nation.”

A good example of this “getting history wrong” can be found in the standard Israeli textbook accounts of the siege of Masada in AD 74. Masada was a fortress near the Dead Sea where Jewish rebels made their last stand against the Romans. According to one account, written by the Roman historian Josephus, the Jews of Masada committed mass suicide rather than surrender to the Romans. The Romans, Josephus wrote, “encountering the mass of slain, instead of exulting as over enemies, admired the nobility of their resolve and the contempt of death displayed by so many in carrying it, unwavering, into execution.”



Figure 2. In an official ceremony, skeletons identified as belonging to second-century Jewish rebels are reburied at Masada. (Source: David Rubinger/Corbis Historical)

THE LAND AND ITS LURE

The ruins of Masada, excavated in 1963–5, provide what one historian has called “an elaborate and persuasive stage scenery for a modern passion play of national rebirth.”¹ The government of Israel considers Masada a historic monument. Maintained by the National Parks Authority, it is the site where members of the Israeli tank corps are sworn in. In 1968 (the year after the momentous and potentially cataclysmic Six Day War), the Israeli government even organized a mass reburial of the skeletons found there. In the words of Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin:

Its scientific importance was known to be great. But more than that, Masada represents for all of us in Israel and for many elsewhere, archaeologists and laymen, a symbol of courage, a monument of our great national figures, heroes who chose death over a life of physical and moral serfdom.²

The only problem with this rendition of the story of Masada is that it does not stand up to scrutiny. Our main source of the siege and mass suicide is Josephus’ *The Jewish War*. Josephus was a Jewish turncoat who may have manufactured the entire story to slander a violent Jewish sect – either the better-known Zealots or the shadowy Sicarii (the “knife wielders”), one of which had control over the site during the period of the siege. By dwelling on the mass suicide, he very well may have been seeking to portray the barbarity of the besieged, not their heroism. After all, it was the same Masadans who apparently had raided a Jewish village nearby in AD 68, killing 700 Jewish men, women, and children. Hardly the stuff of national myth.

Skeptics have also pointed out that archaeologists have found remains of pigs in kitchen areas (a clear violation of Jewish law that casts doubt on the very “Jewishness” of the site), that stories of mass suicide were as common in the classical period as serial-killer movies are today, that in any event suicide is hardly condoned by Jewish law, and that no other Jewish text from the period recalls the incident. Yet, the slogan “Masada shall not fall again” still appears on coffee mugs and T-shirts on sale at souvenir shops near the site.

¹ Neil Asher Silberman, *Between Past and Present: Archaeology, Ideology, and Nationalism in the Modern Middle East* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 88.

² Yigael Yadin, *Masada: Herod’s Fortress and the Zealots’ Last Stand* (New York: Random House, 1966), 13.

THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT: A HISTORY

Investing sites such as Masada with special meaning reflects one way in which Zionists have used the Bible and archaeology to assert territorial claims. Another is through the act of naming. For Israelis, the West Bank town captured during the 1967 war is “Hebron,” the Hebrew name for what is called in Arabic “al-Khalil.” Hebron is mentioned in the Bible as one of the homes of the Jewish patriarch Abraham and as King David’s first capital. Interestingly, both the Hebrew and Arabic names refer to the same individual. The Bible refers to Abraham as the “friend” (*haver*) of God. Muslims agree: Their prophet Ibrahim (the Arabic rendering of Abraham) was also the “friend” (*al-khalil*) of God.

The town of Hebron lies in an area that most observers call “the occupied West Bank” but that Israelis officially designate “Judea and Samaria” after the territory’s Biblical names. Calling the territory “the occupied West Bank,” of course, presumes the Palestinianness of the territory and the foreignness of the Israeli occupation. It thus serves to justify Palestinian aspirations to establish an independent entity there. On the other hand, by calling the territory “Judea and Samaria,” Israelis are calling attention to their Biblical roots in the land and their right to inhabit or control it.

The problem of dueling names is not restricted to geography. Each side in the struggle for Palestine also seeks to buttress its historic narrative by naming events as well. Hence, what for Israelis is their War of Independence is for Palestinians the *nakba* (disaster). For the former, the name denotes the fulfillment of Zionist dreams – the establishment of the State of Israel. For the latter, the name denotes a very different result of the 1948 war: the destruction of the Palestinian community in the territory of Israel and the expulsion or flight of almost three-quarters of a million Palestinians.

(As in the case of geographic names, readers would be well advised not to read significance into the names used to designate events in this book. I use what I find comfortable, and for me “Hebron” is more comfortable than “al-Khalil,” and “the occupied West Bank” is more comfortable than “Judea and Samaria.”)

If this account seems a bit one-sided so far, it is merely because most Palestinians see their connection to the territory of Palestine as self-evident. According the 1968 version of the Charter of the Palestine Liberation Organization, for example,