

THE DIVISION OF PALESTINE



Rabin, Clinton and Arafat: 1993

Unit Overview

Before World War II, Arabs were generally united in opposing the colonial powers in the Middle East and the migration of Jews to the Holy Land. Britain granted independence to Egypt and Iraq prior to the war, and the French gave similar rights to Syria and Lebanon in 1945. Palestine, however, was another matter. Both Palestinian Arabs and Jewish settlers were determined to establish their own nations there. When the British officially withdrew from the area in 1948, they turned the problem over to the United Nations, who answered by dividing Palestine into two states. The ensuing conflict has resulted in wars, acts of terrorism and extensive efforts to find a peaceful solution. Let's see how it all happened.

Timeline of Events	
1917	Britain issued the Balfour Declaration.
1947	The British withdrew from Palestine.
1947	The United Nations divided Palestine.
1948	The nation of Israel was established.
1948	Israel was attacked by neighboring Arab nations.
1952	Nasser became the leader of Egypt.
1956	The nationalization of the Suez Canal led to the Suez Canal War.
1967	Israel occupied territories as a result of the Six Day War.
1972	PLO terrorists murdered Israeli Olympic athletes.
1973	An attack on Israel started the Yom Kippur War.
1993	Israel and the PLO signed the Oslo Accords.
2010	PLO requested U.N. membership for a Palestinian state.

STOP: Answer Section A Questions.

The Growth of Zionism

Although the political moves which led to the formation of Israel occurred in the twentieth century, the return of Jews to the Holy Land gained momentum in the late 1800s. As **anti-Semitism** became increasingly prevalent in Russia and Eastern Europe, the number of violent attacks on Jewish citizens grew. Reacting to the persecution, many Jews thought that migration was the only way to ensure their safety and adopted the political philosophy of **Zionism**, a belief in the establishment of a Jewish-centered state in their ancestral territory. As the Zionist movement spread, groups of Jews returned to the Middle East and began to build agricultural settlements. Prior to this development, most Jews in the area lived in Jerusalem. The outlying regions were primarily inhabited by Arabs, who were Muslims. Following the turn of the century, Zionism gained support among many non-Jews. This became apparent in 1917 when the British government, in control of **Palestine**, issued the **Balfour Declaration**. In this document, Britain endorsed the creation of a Jewish state in the Holy Land. This encouraged even more Jews to move to Palestine after World War I. Meanwhile, fascist regimes in Italy and Germany fostered an alarming surge in anti-Semitism.

His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.

Arthur James Balfour
November 2, 1917

STOP: Answer Section B Questions.

The Division of Palestine

After World War I, Britain governed Palestine in the form of a League of Nations **mandate**. This meant that the British had temporary administrative control over the region. Arabs and Jews expected the fulfillment of the promises made in the Balfour Declaration, but this proved to be an impossible task. As the Jewish population grew, Arabs staged large-scale demonstrations in protest. The British tried to ease the tension by placing restrictions on the number of Jews that could legally immigrate to Palestine. This stranded many in Nazi Germany. The situation became increasingly volatile, and both sides resented the British. Exhausted from two world wars and financially drained, Britain withdrew from Palestine in 1947 and turned the Palestinian question over to the United Nations.



Palestinian Refugees Displaced by Israel

After much discussion, the General Assembly passed a plan to divide the region into two states—one Jewish and the other Arab. This was acceptable to the Jews but not to the Arabs. Nonetheless, when the British mandate officially ended on May 14, 1948, the Jewish settlers proclaimed their lands as the new nation of **Israel**. A group of Arab countries immediately attacked the Jewish state. The Israelis repelled the invasion and conquered additional territory. Over 900,000 Arabs were forced to flee and became **refugees**. This displacement deepened the hostility of the Arab states toward Israel and its allies, the United States and Great Britain. In 1964, various refugee groups joined together to form the **Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)**.

The Arab defeat inspired a revolution in Egypt in 1952 and brought its leader, **Gamal Abdel Nasser**, to power. His troops drove out Egypt's **King Farouk**, a corrupt, pro-Western leader. Then, Nasser became the republic's deputy prime minister and proved adept at playing the superpowers against each other. In 1956, Nasser infuriated the British and the French by nationalizing the European-owned **Suez Canal Company**. These nations responded by joining forces with the Israelis to invade Egypt and to retake control of the canal. Although they overpowered the Egyptian military in the **Suez Canal War**, international pressure forced Israel and its allies to withdraw. This elevated Nasser's status in the Arab world and fueled the **Pan-Arab Movement**. This idea encouraged political and cultural unity among the Arab states. However, Arabs remained too divided to

achieve this goal. They could agree on little but their support for Palestinian refugees and their opposition to Israel.



Gamal Abdel Nasser: 1954

Israel defeated other attacks from neighboring Arab nations in 1967 and 1973. The country also confronted random **guerrilla warfare** tactics and terrorist activities. As result of the **Six Day War** in 1967, Israel won the **Gaza Strip** and the **Sinai Peninsula** from Egypt. The Jewish state also took the **Golan Heights** from Syria as well as the **West Bank** and **East Jerusalem** from Jordan. The Israelis refused to give up these territories unless the Arab nations recognized their right to exist. Eventually, Israel annexed the Golan Heights and East Jerusalem. When settlers built homes on these occupied lands, even more Palestinians were displaced.



Support for the PLO, led by **Yasser Arafat**, increased proportionally with the number of refugees. Since the PLO believed that Israel had no right to exist in Palestine, the destruction of the Jewish state was the organization's primary goal. Airplane hijacks, bombings and the **Munich Massacre**, an event that resulted in the deaths of several Israeli Olympic athletes, were part of the PLO strategy to gain recognition for their cause. These attacks also strengthened the Israeli resolve not to negotiate with the PLO. Beginning in the 1980s, young Palestinians engaged in uprisings, known as **intifadas**, to protest Israeli occupation. Snipers fired on Jewish soldiers. Suicide bombers killed and injured hundreds of civilians. Israel

responded with military force, and thousands of Palestinians lost their lives and their homes. Bitterness escalated on both sides.

STOP: Answer Section C Questions

Peace Efforts

Even though the fighting continued, there were attempts to secure a peaceful settlement. In 1977, Egyptian president **Anwar Sadat** broke with Arab precedent and made a visit to Israel. This breakthrough led to negotiations between Israel and Egypt under the direction of U.S. **President James Carter**. Although the agreement, referred to as the **Camp David Accords**, was limited, both countries gained. Israel committed to the gradual return of the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt by 1982, and Egypt established normal diplomatic relations with Israel. Because Israel retained the Gaza Strip, however, some Palestinians regarded Sadat's initiative as treason, and this led to his assassination in 1981. Israel managed to construct an agreement with **Jordan** in the early 1990s, but talks with the **Syrians** were inconclusive.



Anwar Sadat, Menachem Begin and James Carter at Camp David: 1978

The PLO agreed to face-to-face talks with Israel concerning occupied territories in 1993. This resulted in the **Oslo Accords**, an agreement signed by Yasser Arafat and **Yitzhak Rabin**, the Israeli Prime Minister. Under its terms, Israelis would gradually hand over the governmental functions of the West Bank to a Palestinian council. The **Palestinian Authority**, directed by Yasser Arafat, would oversee the change. Israelis would be able to come and go freely, but security would be the responsibility of the Palestinian police. In exchange, the PLO agreed to recognize Israel's right to exist. Israelis began to withdraw their forces in 1994, and the first elections were held under the supervision of the Palestinian Authority in 1996. As expected, Arafat was chosen as president, and his **Fatah Party** earned a majority in the **Palestinian Legislative Council**. In 2003, the post of prime minister was added, and **Mahmoud Abbas** was the first person to hold that office. Abbas also assumed the leadership of the PLO after the death of Arafat in 2004.

Although these were positive developments, the implementation of the Oslo Accords faced strong opposition. Palestinians were disappointed that it did not create an independent Palestinian state, and many Israelis did not want to give up territory that they had sacrificed to win. **Hamas, Hezbollah** and other radical Palestinian groups continued to carry out terrorist attacks and reaffirmed their intent to destroy Israel. As the number of suicide bombings increased, Israel's fear and distrust of its Arab neighbors intensified. When the United States pushed to restart the peace process, efforts remained stalled. Since 2010, the Palestinian leadership had made international recognition of a Palestinian state its priority. Abbas asked the United Nation's Security Council to recommend U.N. membership for an independent Palestinian state. He argued that the American-led meetings did not put equal pressure on Israel to make concessions. No action was taken on this suggestion, however, when the United States made it clear that it would veto the measure.



Jewish Settlements on the Golan Heights

Issues continue to inhibit a peaceful solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Many Israelis demand that an agreement include permission to maintain their homes built in occupied territories. Palestinians, on the other hand, want to return to the lands traditionally held by their families before the wars. Questions also surround the city of Jerusalem. It has great religious significance for Christians, Muslims and Jews. Palestinians want Muslims to have control over the Islamic holy places in the city and to reserve East Jerusalem as the capital of the new Palestinian state. Jews and Christians are equally determined that Jerusalem remain undivided. As long as both sides remain fully entrenched their own viewpoints, peace continues to be difficult to achieve.

STOP: Answer Section D Questions.

What Does It All Mean?

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Additional Resources and Activities

[Unit 20 Main Points Worksheet](#)

[Unit 20 Writing Exercises: Conflicts and Change in the Middle East](#)

[Unit 20 The Gaza Strip: A key point in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Article with Quiz](#)