

Israel Palestine - a christian response to the conflict



Palestine, Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict

A Primer

By Joel Behin and Lisa Hajjar

The conflict between Palestinian Arabs and Zionist (now Israeli) Jews is a modern phenomenon, dating to the end of the nineteenth century. Although the two groups have different religions (Palestinians include Muslims, Christians and Druze), religious differences are not the cause of the strife. The conflict began as a struggle over land. From the end of World War I until 1948, the area that both groups claimed was known internationally as Palestine. That same name was also used to designate a less well-defined "Holy Land" by the three monotheistic religions. Following the war of 1948-1949, this land was divided into three parts: the State of Israel, the West Bank (of the Jordan River) and the Gaza Strip.

It is a small area—approximately 10,000 square miles, or about the size of the state of Maryland. The competing claims to the territory are not reconcilable if one group exercises exclusive political control over all of it. Jewish claims to this land are based on the biblical promise to Abraham and his descendants, on the fact that the land was the historical site of the ancient Jewish kingdoms of Israel and Judea, and on Jews' need for a haven from European anti-Semitism. Palestinian Arab claims to the land are based on their continuous residence in the country for hundreds of years and the fact that they represented the demographic majority until 1948. They reject the notion that a biblical-era kingdom constitutes the basis for a valid modern claim. If Arabs engage the biblical argument at all, they maintain that since Abraham's son Ishmael is the forefather of the Arabs, then God's promise of the land to the children of Abraham includes Arabs as well. They do not believe that they should forfeit their land to compensate Jews for Europe's crimes against Jews.

The Land and the People

In the nineteenth century, following a trend that emerged earlier in Europe, people around the world began to identify themselves as nations and to demand national rights, foremost



the right to self-rule in a state of their own (self-determination and sovereignty). Jews and Palestinians both started to develop a national consciousness and mobilized to achieve national goals. Because Jews were spread across the world (in diaspora), the Jewish national movement, or Zionist trend, sought to identify a place where Jews could come together through the process of immigration and settlement. Palestine seemed the logical and optimal place because it was the site of Jewish origin. The Zionist movement began in 1882 with the first wave of European Jewish immigration to Palestine.

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