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Gregory Harms  
with Todd M. Ferry

The  
**PALESTINE  
ISRAEL  
CONFLICT** A Basic Introduction



SECOND EDITION

# **The Palestine–Israel Conflict**

## **A Basic Introduction**

**Second Edition**

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Maps 2–5 courtesy of PASSIA. Map 6 courtesy of UN-OCHA.

# Introduction

## THE MIDDLE EAST

Though this book addresses the Palestine–Israel conflict particularly, it is important that we get our bearings and go in with an understanding of where it is we’re talking about. You might already know that the Palestine–Israel conflict is a Middle Eastern issue, and that it involves Arabs and Jews, but what do these terms mean exactly?

The Middle East is a region we are all familiar with, given its political turbulence and the resultant saturated coverage of it in the news. Yet, getting down to discussing what it is precisely can lead to vacant stares and head scratching. The very term itself – “Middle East” – is confusing upon initial consideration (the middle of where, and east of what?). If you live in India it’s hardly east, and if you live in Mexico, well, the term is pretty much useless. Clearly, these labels are relative to Western Europe, suggesting its global centrality. Let’s start with the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*:

[The Middle East consists of] the lands around the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, extending from Morocco to the Arabian Peninsula and Iran and sometimes beyond. The central part of this general area was formerly called the Near East, a name given to it by some of the first modern Western geographers and historians, who tended to divide the Orient into three regions. Near East applied to the region nearest Europe, extending from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf; Middle East, from the Gulf to Southeast Asia; and Far East, those regions facing the Pacific Ocean.<sup>1</sup>

The designation of the Middle East changed around the time Great Britain established colonial control in Egypt in the 1880s, where it then began to include what had previously

been labeled the Near East in the above quote. As for the term “Orient,” this word is usually taken to connote far-eastern Asian imagery – jade dragons, ornate lamps with tassels, etc. However, the Orient (which means “east”) is Asia taken in its entirety, from Israel to Japan, including a big southwestern chunk of Russia. So, technically, what we call the Middle East could (should) be called Western or Southwestern Asia. However, for the purposes of this book, we will carry on the Eurocentric tradition and call it the Middle East.

What countries make up the Middle East? Egypt, Israel–Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, plus the countries that comprise the Arabian Peninsula: Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait. All these countries are also considered Arab countries, with the exception of Iran whose inhabitants are Persian, and Israel where most are Jewish. Turkey, Greece, Libya, Morocco, and the Sudan are sometimes considered Middle Eastern.

## THE PEOPLE

Though we get into it in Chapters 1 and 2, an Arab is simply someone who speaks Arabic, and who has grown up in, and identifies with, Arab culture, which is also typically Middle Eastern. As *Britannica* puts it: “This diverse assortment of peoples defies physical stereotyping.”<sup>2</sup> A Jew is a person who believes in the religious tenets of Judaism and may have some ethnic roots tracing back to what may have been an original population group from Canaan or Palestine. Much more will be said about these matters later. Likewise, we will also get into the particulars of Islam in Chapter 2, but just keep in mind that Muslims are people who practice Islam, and they may or may not be Arab. (Actually, most Muslims aren’t Arab.) Let’s look at the current numbers:<sup>3</sup>

- There are 1.3 billion Muslims worldwide. In comparison, there are 2 billion Christians, 900 million Hindus, and 360 million Buddhists (world population: 6.53 billion).<sup>4</sup>

- 20 percent of Muslims are Arab, and 95 percent of the world's 260 million Arabs are Muslim.
- The four countries with the most Muslims in them, in order of greatest to least, are Indonesia (181m), Pakistan (141m), India (124m), and Bangladesh (111m).
- The Middle Eastern countries listed in the previous section, with the exception of Israel, are about 90 percent Muslim. Israel is 80 percent Jewish.

Though I've used *National Geographic* here for the current data on Islam, I also suggest seeking out the most recent *World Almanac*. It's relatively inexpensive and dead handy for looking up these sorts of figures.

Okay, we're ready to begin our understanding of the Palestine–Israel conflict, so we can watch the news with critical confidence as well as correct, with gentle sophistication, those who proclaim the Thousand Year Myth. And if *you're* that person, don't be hard on yourself – you've made the first step. We're going to cover a little over a million years of history in 199 pages, which makes for an average of 5,025 years per page. Let's begin.