

## Israel-Hamas War

# Glossary of Terms

### INTRODUCTION

Since Hamas's surprise attack on Israel on Oct 7th—and the resulting war between Hamas and Israel—your students might be confused about what's happening. They might have questions about what they're seeing in the news, reading on social media, and hearing from one another. To support their learning, ICS developed this glossary of terms. It is intended to provide students with answers to their questions, with accurate definitions and historical background related to the terms and concepts they are encountering every day.

The glossary is presented in three sections: *places*, *people*, and *movements*.

For increased comprehension and additional instructional support, some terms are linked to components of ICS's curriculum library.

### GLOSSARY OF TERMS

#### Places

##### Gaza

Gaza is a narrow stretch of land on the Mediterranean Sea, bordering Israel to the north and west and Egypt to the south. The region is home to roughly two million Palestinians. It is one of the poorest and most densely populated places in the world.

Gaza was part of the territory designated for an Arab state by the United Nations (UN) in its 1947 partition plan. It was controlled by the Egyptian military from 1949 to 1967, when Israel gained control of the area during the Six-Day War. Increased terrorist violence by Hamas (see "Hamas") and other militant groups in 2000 led to Israel's full withdrawal of its military and civilian presence from Gaza in 2005. Hamas seized control of the territory in 2007. Since that time, there have been no elections held in Gaza. Due to cross-border attacks, rockets, kidnappings, and arms smuggling, Israel and Egypt placed security barriers on their borders with Gaza.

[This map](#) shows regional boundaries after Israel's disengagement from Gaza in 2005.

To learn more about Gaza, including the history of Hamas and its ascent to power in the region, see the sidebar "A Brief History of Palestinian Leadership" below and [ICS's timeline of the Arab-Israeli conflict and peace process](#).

## Israel

The term *Israel* has referred to a number of regions and people throughout history.

- The term *Land of Israel* originates in the Hebrew Bible (from the Hebrew *Eretz Yisrael*). It typically refers to the region in the Eastern Mediterranean that is the traditional and ancestral home of the Jewish people.
- The term *people of Israel* refers to the Jewish people, a religious and national group indigenous to the Land of Israel.
- The *Kingdom of Israel* refers to the biblical regions ruled by the Israelites between roughly 1020 BCE and 722 BCE.
- The modern *State of Israel* was founded in 1948 on part of the Land of Israel.

See the map "[Eastern Mediterranean Today](#)" for current borders of the State of Israel.

Learn about the State of Israel's history, laws, and government with ICS's "[Israel Fact Sheet](#)."

## Palestine

The term *Palestine* has referred to a number of regions throughout history. It continues to have different meanings to different people today.

- After the Jewish-Roman Wars ended in 135 CE, the Romans changed the name of the province of Judea to Syria Palaestina, after the Philistines, an ancient enemy of the Israelites. The Romans did this to diminish the Jewish connection to the land. Note: There is no ancestral connection between the ancient Philistines and Palestinians today.
- For centuries, the Eastern Mediterranean region, which today includes Israel, the West Bank, Gaza, and parts of Jordan, was not a distinct political entity. It was informally referred to as *Palestine*, as well as *the Holy Land* and *the Land of Israel*.
- In 1920, the League of Nations designated the region of the Eastern Mediterranean that was administered by the British as the British Mandate for Palestine (or the British Mandate).
- Today, the term *Palestine* has several meanings. It may refer to the West Bank and Gaza, or it may refer to all of Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza.

To learn more about the origins of "Palestine," see the video "[Land Matters](#)" (1:05–1:32) from [ICS's curriculum on the Arab-Israeli conflict](#).

## West Bank

The West Bank is an area located between the State of Israel and Jordan. It is home to roughly 2.7 million Palestinians and 465,000 Israelis. The area has many religious sites holy to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, including in the cities of Hebron and Bethlehem.

The West Bank was part of the territory designated for an Arab state by the UN in its 1947 partition plan. It was captured and annexed by Jordan in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. The term *West Bank* comes from the Arabic name that Jordan used to describe the area (which includes the *bank*, or land, west of the Jordan River). Israel captured the West Bank in 1967 during the Six-Day War.

Today, the West Bank is divided into different areas—one controlled by the Palestinian Authority, one controlled by Israel, and one that is under joint control.

[This map](#) shows the territorial border of the West Bank today.

To learn more about the history of the West Bank, including its role in peace talks, see ICS's "[Unresolved Issues in the Arab-Israeli Conflict](#)" (page 6) and [timeline of the Arab-Israeli conflict and peace process](#).

## People

### Israeli

The term *Israeli* applies only to citizens of the modern State of Israel. *Israeli* is a nationality, with *Israelis* being citizens of the State of Israel. Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs are the country's largest ethnic groups, representing 74% and 21% of the population, respectively. Israeli citizens are religiously diverse and include Jews, Muslims, Christians, and Druze.

### Palestinian

The word *Palestinian* was first used as a term of self-identity for Arabs in the Eastern Mediterranean region in 1898. During the period of the British Mandate for Palestine (1920–1948), the term referred to all residents of the Mandate, including Jews and Arabs. After the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the term was generally no longer used by Jews. In 1968, the updated Palestinian National Charter defined Palestinians as “those Arab nationals who, until 1947, normally resided in Palestine,” as well as those born anywhere in the world to a Palestinian father.

Today, the term *Palestinian* is often used to refer to Arabs in the West Bank and Gaza. There are many Arab citizens of Israel who identify as Palestinian by heritage.

Learn more about the use of “Palestinian” in [this excerpt from the 1988 Palestinian Declaration of Independence](#).

## Movements

### Arab nationalism

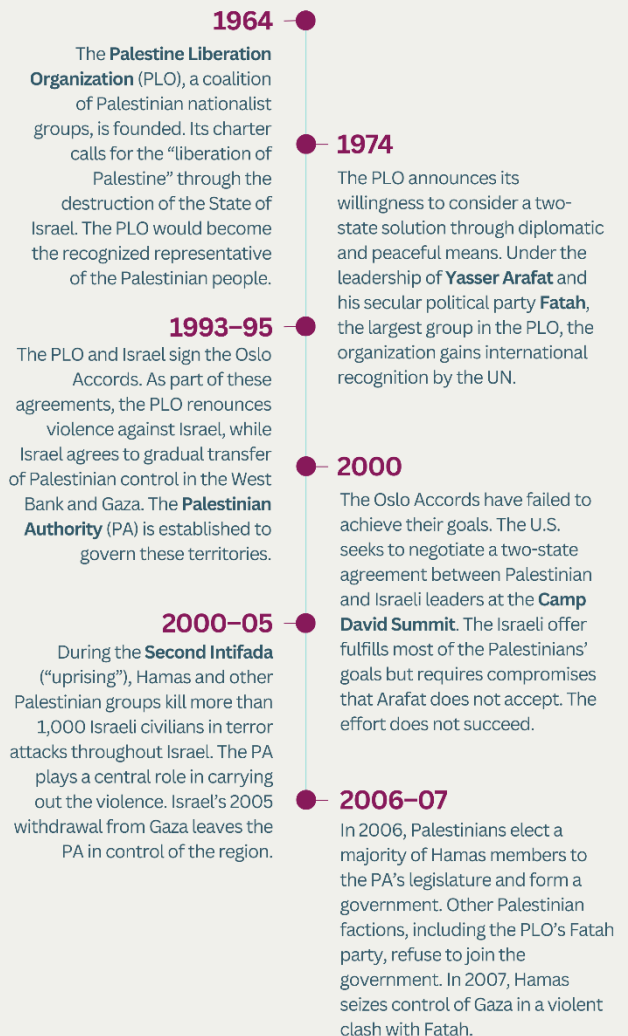
Arab nationalism is a political ideology and movement that promotes the right to self-determination of Arab peoples as a single national group united by shared culture, language, and history.

Arab nationalism developed throughout the 19th century, focused on cultural and political unity of Arab peoples. The movement led to the creation of independent Arab states throughout the 1940s and 1950s. However, the vision of a unified pan-Arab state was never realized. The influence of Arab nationalism declined following Israel's victory in the 1967 Six-Day War. This led to the rise in popularity of Palestinian nationalism (see “Palestinian nationalism”).

To learn more about Arab nationalism, see [these selected writings of Sati' al-Husri](#), one of the foremost thinkers and educators in the history of Arab nationalism.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF PALESTINIAN LEADERSHIP

*This timeline is intended to support understanding of the places, people, and movements explored in the Glossary of Terms. Terms that do not appear in the glossary are in bold.*



### SINCE 2007...

- The PLO lost influence after its Fatah party was defeated by Hamas in the 2006 election. However, it remains the representative of the Palestinian people in the UN.
- **Mahmoud Abbas**, a member of the Fatah party, serves as both chairman of the PLO and president of the PA.
- There are effectively two Palestinian governments, with Hamas controlling Gaza and the PA controlling the West Bank.



## Hamas

Hamas, also known as the Islamic Resistance Movement, is a political and military Palestinian organization that has ruled Gaza since 2007 (see “Gaza”). Despite being a Sunni movement, they still receive funding and weapons from Shia Iran, as well as other Sunni nations such as Qatar. The United States, Canada, European Union, United Kingdom, Japan, and other countries have officially designated Hamas as a terrorist organization and do not recognize a Hamas-led government. There have been multiple conflicts between Hamas and Israel, including in 2008, 2011, 2014, and 2021.

In its 1988 founding document, Hamas called for the destruction of Israel, the murder of Jews, and rejection of “peace initiatives [in favor of] holy war.” Its goal remains an Islamist Palestinian state covering all of Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. Its leaders continue to endorse hatred of and violence against Jews and Israel.

On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched a surprise attack on Israel, with thousands of fighters crossing into southern Israel, killing more than 1,200 people and taking about 240 hostages back to Gaza.

*To learn more about Hamas, including its ascent to power in Gaza and history of its conflict with Israel, see [ICS’s timeline of the Arab-Israeli conflict and peace process](#).*

## Hezbollah

Originally founded in 1982, Hezbollah is a Shia militant organization based in Lebanon and devoted to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the then leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Their goal is to carry out attacks against American and Israeli targets, who they view as the main enemies of the Muslim world. The group is a US-designated terrorist organization and is heavily funded by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.

They helped to introduce and popularize the tactic of suicide bombings in Lebanon in the 1980s, developed a strong guerrilla force and a political apparatus in the 1990s, provoked a war with Israel in 2006, intervened in the Syrian civil war after 2011 at Iran’s direction, and have become a major destabilizing influence in the ongoing Arab–Israeli conflict. While other terror groups are more well-known, Hezbollah murdered more Americans than any other terrorist group before September 11, 2001.

The group initiated its most recent conflict with Israel in October of 2024, when Hezbollah forces in southern Lebanon launched rockets into northern Israel forcing the evacuation of nearly 60,000 Israelis.

## Houthis

The Houthis are a Shia Islamist militant group based in Yemen and are armed and funded by Iran. The Houthis periodically fire at targets in Saudi Arabia and have actively targeted shipping in the Red Sea. They oppose Yemen’s Sunni majority and have been accused of numerous human rights abuses. Since late 2023, the Houthis have frequently fired ballistic missiles and suicide drones at Israel and ships in the Red Sea, most of which have been intercepted by Israel’s air defense system. They have hijacked commercial ships sailing in the Red Sea and threaten to attack all ships going to Israel.

## Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)

The Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was created in the wake of Iran’s 1979 Revolution. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the hereditary Shah of Iran, was deposed and replaced by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who had been in exile since 1964. After the establishment of the new Islamic Republic of Iran, the IRGC was created as an armed force independent of the Iranian military and tasked with upholding the values of the revolution. The group numbers some 190,000 members and answers directly to the current Ayatollah, Ali Khamenei, and contributes resources to the regime’s proxies across the Middle East. These include Hezbollah and the Houthis.

## Proxy

An entity that is aligned with but separate from a state actor that supports the proxy with arms, training, and financial support. The actor supports the proxy to advance its strategic interests, particularly in a conflict, without directly engaging in military confrontation.

When used in the context of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, the term proxies refers to the more than dozen military groups and political parties which are funded, trained, and armed by the Islamic Republic of Iran. These organizations are based in at least six countries: Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza and the West Bank, Syria, and Yemen. Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis are some Iranian proxies in West Asia. Their activities align with the Iranian regime's goals of destroying Israel and any United States presence in the Middle East, and they act to destabilize Middle Eastern countries that oppose the expansion of Iran's influence.<sup>1</sup>

## Palestinian nationalism

Palestinian nationalism is a political ideology and movement that promotes the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people and their sovereignty in the historic region of Palestine. Initially, Palestinian nationalism was a version of Arab nationalism that focused on local communities (see "Arab Nationalism"). It emerged as a distinct national movement, based on the shared history and culture of Palestinian Arabs, following Israel's victory in the 1967 Six-Day War.

The primary goal of Palestinian nationalism is the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state. Some Palestinian nationalists, like the Palestinian Authority, are willing to accept some form of coexistence with the State of Israel, including a two-state solution. Others, like Hamas, call for the elimination of any Jewish state in the region, to be replaced by a Palestinian state that includes Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza.

## Zionism

Founded in the late 19th century, Zionism is an expression of Jewish nationalism, namely the belief in the right to self-determination and sovereignty for the Jewish people in the Land of Israel (see "Israel").

Zionism arose during a time of rising nationalism across the globe and widespread antisemitism across Europe. Primarily secular in nature, Zionism drew on Jewish historic and religious connections to the Land of Israel that are central to Judaism. Two of the primary goals of Zionism were the return of the Jewish people to their ancestral homeland in the Land of Israel and the reestablishment of a Jewish national home there. These goals were largely achieved with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

Today, Zionism is a diverse movement with subgroups across the political spectrum. While Zionists have different perspectives on issues and policies, they share a strong attachment to the people and country of Israel and are committed to Israel as the Jewish homeland.

To learn more about Zionism, see [\*this excerpt from "The Jewish State"\* \(1896\)](#), a pamphlet written by Theodor Herzl, the founder of political Zionism.

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<sup>1</sup> For more detailed information on Iranian proxies in West Asia, see: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/irans-islamist-proxies>.