

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, competing national identities brought some Arabs and some Jews into conflict, a conflict which continues today. While the peace process, which also has a long history, has seen some successes, there are still many unresolved issues and a lasting peace agreement has not been reached. Understanding the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict—the history, geography, and politics of the region—is critical to being informed citizens and understanding the situation today.

### ORIGINS

The Jewish connection to this region extends back in history over 3,000 years. The earliest reference to Israel (the people who later in time would be called the Jews) can be dated to 1206 BCE where the term is found in an Egyptian inscription on the Merneptah Stele. In the inscription, the term Israel is used to identify one of the peoples living in the land of Canaan.

Archaeological records show that early Israelites lived in small villages in the hill country between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

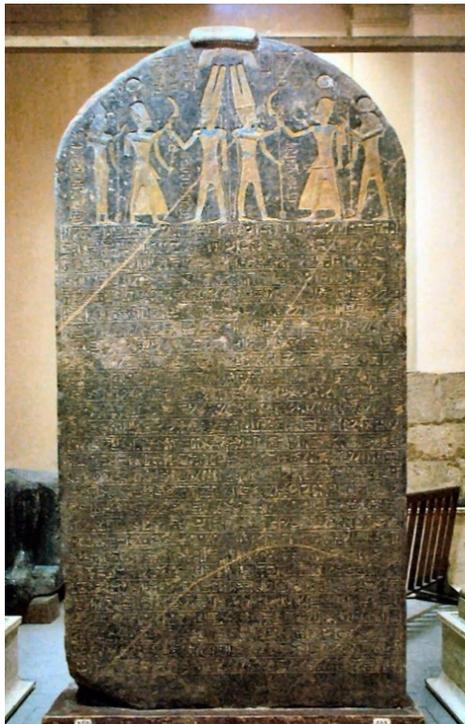


Figure 1 THE MERNEPTAH STELE ON DISPLAY AT THE CAIRO MUSEUM IN EGYPT.



Figure 2 AN APPROXIMATION OF THE KINGDOM OF ISRAEL IN THE 10TH CENTURY BCE.

### FROM TRIBE TO KINGDOM

By around 1000 BCE, the Israelites established the Kingdom of Israel which marked their transition from a tribal society to a monarchy.

In this early period, King David made Jerusalem his capital. Shortly after David's death, his son, King Solomon, began to centralize the nation's worship life in Jerusalem by building the Temple (which would later be called the First Temple). Upon Solomon's death, the Kingdom of Israel went through a period of internal conflict and divided into two separate kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south.

## ASSYRIANS, BABYLONIANS, PERSIANS, AND GREEKS

In 722 BCE, when the Neo-Assyrian Empire conquered the Kingdom of Israel, only the Kingdom of Judah remained. This was the state of affairs for well over a century, until the Babylonians set their sights on Judah, and conquered the small kingdom by 587-586 BCE. In the process, the Babylonians destroyed the city of Jerusalem along with its Temple and took many of the people of Judah captive, bringing them to Babylon to live in exile.

---

**Psalm 137:1-2**, written by Jews while in exile in Babylon

***By the rivers of Babylon,  
there we sat,  
sat and wept,  
as we thought of Zion.***

***There on the poplars  
we hung our lyres,  
for our captors asked us there for songs,  
our tormentors, for amusement,  
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion."***

---

The period of exile lasted nearly 50 years, until Cyrus, King of Persia (ancient Iran), conquered the Babylonian Empire. Cyrus allowed the people of Judah to return to their homeland. For the next 200 years, Judah was a province of the Persian Empire and had a certain amount of autonomy, particularly in religious and cultural matters. During this period, both the city of Jerusalem and the Temple (which became known as the Second Temple) were rebuilt. It was also during this period that the term "Jew" (the English translation of the Hebrew term "Yehudi," a person from Judah) came into wider use.

Shortly after becoming King of Macedon in 336 BCE, Alexander the Great began his quest to conquer the Persian Empire. Through a series of



Figure 3 SCALE MODEL OF JERUSALEM AND THE SECOND TEMPLE.

campaigns in which he extended his reach as far as India, Judah became part of Alexander's large Hellenic empire. Unlike the Persians, Alexander and the Greek rulers who succeeded him instituted a policy of Hellenization or spreading Greek culture, language, ideas, etc., throughout their conquered lands. Hellenization was so pervasive that Jews even translated their sacred scriptures from Hebrew into Greek and many Jews spoke Greek.



Figure 4 COINS WITH ALEXANDER THE GREAT'S IMAGE, THIRD CENTURY BCE.

## HASMONEAN DYNASTY

In 175 BCE a particularly oppressive Greek ruler named Antiochus Epiphanes IV came to power. He went as far as outlawing most Jewish religious practices and placed a statue of Zeus in the most holy place in the Temple in Jerusalem. Many Jews resisted and some were even martyred. But it was the refusal of a Jewish priest named Mattathias to worship Greek gods that ultimately sparked a full-scale Jewish revolt against Antiochus and his policies.

The Jews, led by Mattathias and his five sons, fought for nearly seven years but were ultimately successful in overthrowing the Greek leader. This marked the beginning of a period of more Jewish

independence under the Jewish Hasmonean Dynasty.



Figure 5 COIN FROM THE REIGN OF JEWISH KING ALEXANDER JANNEUS, THE SECOND HASMONEAN KING.

## JUDEA IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

In 63 BCE, the Roman military leader, Pompey the Great, conquered Jerusalem and the area now known as Judea became part of the Roman Empire. In 6 CE, Rome incorporated Judea into its empire as a province. Life under Roman rule was difficult for the Jews; taxation was heavy and Romans often interfered with Jewish religious practice. This is also the period in which Christianity first emerges as a small group of followers of the Jewish preacher, Jesus. As the century progressed, the movement began to grow, spreading around the Mediterranean basin.

In 66 CE, the Jews began a revolt to regain their independence. By the year 70, the Romans crushed the revolt and destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem—the center of Jewish religious life.

In 131 CE, the Romans began to build a temple to one of their gods on the ruins of the Jewish Temple. Jews rose again in rebellion in what is now known as the Bar Kokhba Revolt. That revolt was crushed by the Romans. Many of those who survived were taken as captives or expelled. There was, however, a small Jewish community that remained in the land. In an effort to sever the Jewish connection to the province, the Roman emperor ordered that its name be changed from Judea to Syria Palaestina, which was eventually shortened to Palaestina.



Figure 6 THE ROMAN PROVINCE OF JUDEA DURING THE FIRST CENTURY OF THE COMMON ERA.

For the next five hundred years, the term Palaestina referred to the large region in the eastern half of the Roman Empire (also called the Byzantine Empire). During this time, Christianity became the official religion of the Empire; its leaders began to value the area as the birthplace of Jesus and where he spent his life and ministry. The ancient Jewish cities of Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Jerusalem, are important Christian holy places.

## THE RISE OF ISLAM

Islam arose in the Arabian Peninsula early in the seventh century CE when Muhammad began preaching to Arab tribes in and around Mecca, a significant pilgrimage site in the region. By the time of his death in 632, Muhammad had united nearly all of the Arabian Peninsula under the banner of Islam. Abu Bakr succeeded Muhammad becoming the first Caliph and he extended Islamic reach beyond Arabia to parts of the Byzantine and Persian Empires before he died in 634 CE.

The second Caliph, Umar, continued the military expansion and within six years, he had conquered Egypt and much of Southwestern Asia, including Palaestina. Under Muslim rule, Jews were permitted to enter and live in Jerusalem. Muslims regarded Jerusalem as particularly important because they believed that Muhammad had ascended to heaven from there. They built a shrine, the Dome of the Rock, to mark that spot. It was built on the same location where the Jewish Temple had once stood. Islam soon became the dominant religion in the region.



Figure 7 THE DOME OF THE ROCK IN JERUSALEM.

Except for short periods during the Crusades in which Jerusalem was controlled by Christians, Jerusalem and the region as a whole remained under the control of different Arab Muslim leaders until it fell to the Ottoman Empire in 1517. From the 16<sup>th</sup> through 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, most Arabs lived in the Ottoman Empire. The majority of Arabs shared the Muslim religion with the Turks.

## THE EMERGENCE OF NATIONALISM

Nationalism is the idea that people who share an identity based on history, language, or culture have the right to self-determination and the ability to form independent states. It includes the idea that citizens should demonstrate loyalty and devotion to the state. Beginning with the French Revolution in 1789, the idea of nationalism

spread throughout Europe and then around the world.



Figure 8 BUILT IN 537 CE AS A CATHEDRAL IN THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE, THE HAGIA SOPHIA BECAME A MOSQUE DURING OTTOMAN RULE.

## JEWIS IN MODERN EUROPE AND THE BIRTH OF ZIONISM

Throughout history there was always a Jewish presence in the land of Israel, including those who remained or those who immigrated. But due to centuries of expulsion and migration, the majority of the world's Jews lived in Europe by the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The circumstances, however, of Jews who lived in Western Europe and those who lived in Eastern Europe and Russia differed significantly.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, pogroms—organized government-tolerated or government-sponsored attacks on Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe—became more common. Following a major wave of pogroms, the first significant modern migration of Jews to the land of Israel began in the 1880s. At the same time in Western Europe, many Jews had been granted legal equality with Christians and led many Western European Jews to believe that they had finally emerged from centuries of antisemitism.

France was the first European country to emancipate Jews, guaranteeing them equality of all of its citizens, regardless of their religion. Yet, in 1894, Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer in the French army, was convicted of treason. Theodor Herzl, a Jewish journalist reporting on the trial of Dreyfus, who was clearly innocent (he was exonerated in 1906), witnessed French mobs shouting "Death to the Jews!"

Herzl, who was not a religious Jew, concluded that the only solution to the prevailing antisemitism was to establish a Jewish state. He detailed his vision in his book, *Der Judenstaat* (The Jewish State) in 1896. In 1896, Herzl called for the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, where delegates agreed that "Zionism seeks to establish a home for the Jewish people in Palestine secured under public law." The term Zion is an ancient one that has traditionally referred to mount on which the Temple in Jerusalem was built.



LE PROCES DE RENNES : Dreyfus devant le Conseil de guerre.

Figure 9 ALFRED DREYFUS BEING TRIED FOR TREASON; FROM THE FRENCH MAGAZINE, *LE PETIT JOURNAL*, 1899.

## THE RISE OF ARAB NATIONALISM

Nationalist ideas began to spread among Arabs in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Still part of the Ottoman Empire, Arabs initially took interest in nationalism as a literary and cultural movement to reestablish the prominence of Arab language and culture and to promote a positive ethnic identity. In 1911 a group of Arab students in European universities formed a group called al-Fatat ("the Young Arab Society") to discuss their growing interest in nationalist ideas.

In 1913, the group called for a meeting of the First Arab Congress where they demanded both more autonomy for Ottoman Arabs as well the opportunity to have more meaningful roles within the administration of the Ottoman Empire.



Figure 10 A GROUP OF THE EARLY AL-FATAT MEMBERS MEETING IN DAMASCUS IN 1911.