



TEN THINGS STUDENTS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE ORIGINS OF ISRAEL AND PALESTINE

By Alan H. Luxenberg

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Israel remains a focal point of world attention, as it has been since its birth. The state's origins do much to explain why the Arab-Israeli conflict has been so hard to resolve, but also provide a glimpse of the possibilities of peace. Here are ten things for students to know, along with ten things for them to research.

1. Nation vs. State

Understanding Israel and the broader Middle East requires understanding the difference between a **state** and a **nation**, two words often used interchangeably. A state in the traditional sense is the political apparatus that governs a territory; a nation is a people who share a heritage, a culture, or perhaps a system of beliefs. Israel is a young state, but it is a very old nation that traces its roots through the Bible back to Abraham, some 4,000 years ago. **Nationalism**, an eighteenth-century European idea imported into the Middle East in the twentieth century, is the idea that a nation should have its own state. **Zionism** is the nineteenth-century idea that the Jewish nation, which has lived largely in exile since 135 CE, when the Romans expelled the Jews from Judea, should return to its ancient homeland to build a Jewish state. It was at this time that the Romans renamed Judea as Palaestina, which in English is Palestine. *(This is only a brief essay, and cannot cover these subjects in full detail. Therefore, research tasks are suggested. Here is the first. The land of Israel has had many other names, such as Palestine, Judah, Judea, and Canaan; research all the names, find the time periods to which they correspond, learn who ruled the land at the time, and identify the borders for each time period. Can you draw any conclusions from your research? Also, in these paragraphs, research any of the words in bold that you do not know, as these are names and terms you should be able to define.)*

2. Anti-Semitism and the Origins of Modern Jewish Nationalism, or Zionism

The idea of a revived Israel as foretold by the Biblical prophets inspired Jewish movements to Palestine through the centuries but the political program to revive Jewish statehood known as Zionism dates from the mid to late nineteenth century. Persecution of Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe brought forth settlement efforts in the 1860s and 1880s. It was the (**secular Jewish**) Viennese journalist **Theodore Herzl**, however, who really established the political movement, organizing the first Zionist Congress in 1897 in Basel, Switzerland. Herzl had covered the trial in Paris of Jewish French Army captain **Alfred Dreyfus**, who had been falsely accused of treason in 1893. Hearing chants outside the courthouse of "Death to the Jews!" Herzl realized that **anti-Semitism** was rampant in France, the most liberal country in Europe, and foresaw the conflagration to come some 40 years later that today we know as the **Holocaust**. He saw the need for a safe haven in a Jewish state and invented modern political Zionism, which at the time and for years to come many Jews rejected, for various reasons. *(Identify the reasons different groups of Jews opposed Zionism and why some later changed their minds. Note, however, that you don't have to be Jewish to be a Zionist. The idea of restoring Jews to the Holy Land was acclaimed by British Christian Zionists as early as the mid-1800s by England's Lord Shaftesbury as well as by American Christian restorationists such as New York University Professor of Hebrew Studies George Bush, ancestor of two U.S. presidents. A "restorationist," as the word implies, was someone who wanted to restore the Jewish people to the land of Israel.)*

3. The Historic Connection to the Land of Israel

The desired safe haven for the Jewish people could not be located just anywhere; it had to be in Eretz Yisrael (Hebrew for the Land of Israel). Jews around the world include Eretz Yisrael in their daily prayers, as they have for long before the establishment of the modern State of Israel. The destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem in 586 BCE by Babylonians and

the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE by the Romans are mourned by Jews everywhere every year during the somber holiday of Tisha B'Av (literally, the ninth of the Hebrew month of Av). Even in moments of greatest joy--wedding ceremonies--Jewish bridegrooms crush a glass in remembrance of the destruction of the Temples. To this day, the Western Wall, the remnant of the retaining wall of the Temple, is a holy site visited by tens of thousands of Jews around the world every year. *(Jerusalem is sacred to three faiths. Find out the connection between Jerusalem and each of Islam and Christianity.)*

4. A Land Without a People?

Lord Shaftesbury called Israel “a land without a people for a people without a land.” This highlights the source of the problem that has troubled relations between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East for a hundred years. In the late 1800s, the land in question was indeed a “land without a people,” in the sense that the people living there did not think of themselves as a “nation.” But, it was not a land without people. While much of the land was barren, there were a few hundred thousand people living there, most of them Muslim Arabs, who began to be concerned about the influx of Jews. The Arabs living there did not, however, call themselves “Palestinians.” That is because in the late 1800s, there was no sovereign entity known as Palestine. (In ancient times, it was a Roman province.) The whole region, along with much of the Middle East, belonged to the Ottoman Turkish Empire, and Palestine did not even exist as a specific entity within the empire; nor had there ever been a sovereign entity known as Palestine. The area that today is called “historic Palestine” was at the time of Ottoman rule subdivided into different districts within the empire, reporting to different governors. If there was no Palestine, then there were no Palestinians. Indeed, if you asked the average person living there at the time to identify themselves, they may have identified themselves as members of a family or clan, as Muslims, possibly as Syrians (since “historic Palestine” was considered by many to be part of southern Syria, which itself was not an independent entity at the time), or they would have identified as Arabs or as subjects of the Ottoman Empire. The Palestinians didn't become a self-identifying people until later, perhaps around 1920 (or even much later), and that was largely in response to Zionism. One could say that had there been no Zionism, there likely would have been no “Palestinianism.” *(Research the difference between an Arab, a Kurd, a Berber, and a Persian--all Muslims who live in the Middle East--and find out which states are associated with which of these peoples today, and which “nation” has no state. Also, define Pan-Arabism, and find out the years in which it appeared to thrive.)*

5. The Thrice-Promised Land?

In 1914 came “The Great War,” or as we call it today World War I because it was followed by an even greater war. The Ottoman Turks aligned themselves with the Germans and the Austro-Hungarians. These “Central Powers” fought against the “Allied Powers,” consisting of the British, French, Italians, Russians, and eventually the Americans. To help win the war, the British made many promises to many groups. From the Arab viewpoint, the British promised Palestine to them in 1915-16, in the [Hussein-McMahon correspondence](#), an exchange of letters between a British official and the Sherif Hussein of Mecca, the

gist of which was that in exchange for leading an Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Turks, the British would grant independence to the Arabs after the war (assuming British victory in the war!). From the Jewish viewpoint, the British promised Palestine to them in the [Balfour Declaration](#) of 1917. The French also had a claim on it by dint of the 1916 [Sykes-Picot Agreement](#), which is why Israel/Palestine is sometimes called “the thrice promised land.”

In fact, however, the borders in all of these agreements or understandings were ambiguous. After the war the British attempted to make good on all their commitments--including establishing the sons of Sherif Hussein, Abdallah and Feisal, as the leaders of the soon-to-be-independent states of Transjordan and Iraq--but none of the claimants were satisfied. *(In this paragraph and the next, you will find references to what historians call “primary documents”--the actual documents prepared at the time these events took place. The British documents cited here, which can be found at Yale University's Avalon website and on mideastweb.org, are clearly written and worth taking the time to read. Compare the three sets of documents cited above, and determine to what degree they conflict with each other. URLs for these documents are provided at the end.)*

6. The British Mandate for Palestine

With the collapse of the 600-year-old Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, the victorious Allied Powers met in 1920 to determine the disposition of the former Ottoman territories. The northern half of the province of Syria was assigned to France, and the southern half – corresponding to the modern states of Israel, Jordan, and the areas known as the West Bank and Gaza – was assigned to Great Britain. In 1922, the newly formed **League of Nations** (the predecessor of the United Nations) confirmed the assignment of the “[Palestine Mandate](#)” to Great Britain, tasking Britain specifically with the responsibility of putting into effect the terms of the Balfour Declaration (securing “the establishment of a Jewish national home” in Palestine). Soon, however, Britain found itself embroiled in a dispute between Jews and Arabs in Palestine that it could not resolve. Eventually, in 1937, it put forth the **Peel Partition Plan** to divide Palestine into two separate states, one Jewish and one Arab. However, this plan was rejected by the Arabs and quickly shelved. With an eye to securing Arab support in the coming war with Germany, the British then moved to restrict Jewish immigration into Palestine in 1939 – at just the moment the Jews of Europe most needed a safe haven from Nazi Germany. In hindsight, we can see that tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of Jews, lost their lives because of this policy. With Hitler's rise to power in 1933 (after a democratic election in Germany!), the systematic deprivation of the rights of German Jews began. Eventually, in 1938, the world witnessed the **Anschluss** (Germany's ingestion of Austria), **Kristallnacht** (a German pogrom against the Jews), and the **Evian Conference** (an international conference to discuss the Jewish refugee problem that revealed that in fact no country really wanted any more Jews). With the onset of World War II in 1939, Britain turned to deal with a much larger problem. *(Find a map of the Peel Partition Plan and determine what percentage was planned for the Jews, what percentage for the Arabs, and what was to remain under international trusteeship. How did the two sides*

respond to it?)

7. Establishment of the Jewish State

On November 29, 1947, the United Nations voted in favor of Resolution 181, known as the [UN Partition Resolution](#), dividing Palestine into three parts – a Jewish state, an Arab state, and the area in and around Jerusalem, which was set aside for governance under an international trusteeship. It was not everything Ben-Gurion wanted, but a small state was better than no state at all. Not so for the Arabs, for whom partition of any kind was unacceptable. A civil war of sorts ensued immediately following the passage of the Partition Resolution, and after **David Ben-Gurion** proclaimed the [establishment of the Jewish state of Israel](#) on May 14, 1948, five Arab states invaded. Israel's victory in that war was by no means ensured, as it was outnumbered and out-gunned. America's newly formed CIA predicted Israel's imminent defeat. Yet, the Israelis emerged victorious, culminating in Israel's controlling about 78 percent of Palestine, including half of Jerusalem, and Jordan controlling the West Bank and the other half of Jerusalem, while Egypt won control of the Gaza Strip. Notably, Arab possession of the West Bank and Gaza during the 19 subsequent years (1949-67) did not result in the emergence of a Palestinian state. *(One alternative to partition would have been establishing a bi-national state that protected the rights of both nations of Palestine; this was favored by a small minority of Zionists but rejected by the Arabs. It is sometimes offered as an alternative even today. How would you assess the merits of partition vs a bi-national state in the 1920s or 30s, and how would you assess it today? One place to look for competing arguments is the majority and minority reports of the [UN Special Committee on Palestine](#) in 1947.)*

8. The Altalena Affair

One of the most bizarre events of the 1948 War of Independence was the **Altalena affair**, in which Israeli Prime Minister Ben-Gurion ordered an attack upon a ship carrying weapons to the Irgun, an organization led by future prime minister **Menachem Begin**. Begin was on the ship, and **Yitzhak Rabin**, another future prime minister, was among the attackers. The ship burned with its load; Begin made it to safety. What brought Jew to attack Jew in the middle of a war against the Arabs? Ben Gurion's requirement that the new State of Israel have only one military under one command and his insistence that the arms shipment would have violated the terms of a ceasefire then in effect. *(When Israelis today say they await the Palestinian Altalena, what do you think they are saying? And speaking of ships that help tell the story of the establishment of the State of Israel, students are encouraged to research the stories of two others, the SS St. Louis and the Exodus 1947. Whom and how many did these ships carry? From where did they embark and where did they intend to disembark? What happened to the passengers? And what do they reveal about the story of Israel?)*

9. Can Israel and Palestine Co-Exist?

From the outset there were competing visions of Zionism: there were those Zionists who would accept a piece of land, however small--they were the majority; there were those who would brook no compromise of their vision of the Biblical promised land (Israel, the West Bank, Gaza, and parts of Jordan, Syria,

and Lebanon)--they were the minority. Until now (perhaps), there were never competing visions of "Palestinianism"--just the one vision that would tolerate no compromise over any part of the land. That was the position of the **Hajj Amin al-Husseini**, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and leader of the Palestinian Arabs for much of the 1920s and 30s, until he went into exile and subsequently aided the Nazi regime in Germany, whose goals he shared. That was the position, later on, of the Palestine Liberation Organization, founded in 1964 with the aim of liberating all of Palestine from Zionist control. [The 1988 charter of the terrorist group Hamas](#), for example, specifically says that no compromise is possible over any portion of "historic Palestine," for it is all a sacred Islamic trust. Likewise, some Jews even today want all the land that they feel was promised in the Bible. My opinion (and students are certainly encouraged to develop contrasting but reasoned opinions) is that the only way to peace is for all sides to remember that while the land may be holy, the borders are not; they are subject to negotiation. Indeed, when some claimants to the land claim all of "historic Palestine," all they are claiming is a land whose boundaries were defined by Great Britain in the 1920s in accordance with London's reading of history and the Bible! *(Do profiles of prominent Palestinian leaders, such as al-Husseini, Yasir Arafat, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, Sari Nusseibeh, and Mahmoud Abbas, and describe their visions for Palestine. How do they differ?)*

10. A Final Thought

The creation of the modern State of Israel is the story of a people who, despite being expelled from their homeland nearly 2,000 years ago and persecuted throughout the world, managed not only to survive as a people but to return to their ancient homeland to establish a modern state. This is unprecedented. That the preponderance of Jewish immigrants came from countries without any experience of democracy to a region that enjoyed no democracy itself, and that they constituted a state that, from its inception, was threatened with extinction by its neighbors--and still managed to build a thriving democracy--is unique in world history. But their greatest achievement still lies in the future, and it is one that they cannot achieve alone: peaceful relations with a yet-to-be-established State of Palestine and with the Arab world as a whole.

Here are a few must-read books to learn more about this:

- A Short History of the Jewish People: From Legendary Times to Modern Statehood*, by Raymond P. Scheindlin (Oxford, 2000)
- Right to Exist: A Moral Defense of Israel's Wars*, by Yaacov Lozowick (Doubleday, 2003)
- Israelis and Palestinians: Why do they Fight? Can They Stop?*, by Bernard Wasserstein (Yale, 2003)
- The Palestinians*, by Anna Carew-Miller (Mason Crest Publishers, 2004)
- Israel*, by Adam Garfinkle (Mason Crest Publishers, 2004)

Some movies worth viewing include:

- Lawrence of Arabia* (1962)
- Cast A Giant Shadow* (1966)

Exodus (1960)

Judgment at Nuremberg (1961)

Finally, one cannot begin to think about any of this before consulting maps. Here's one place to find them:

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Maps_of_the_history_of_the_Middle_East

Key Documents

Hussein-McMahon Correspondence

<http://www.mideastweb.org/mcmahon.htm>

Balfour Declaration

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/mideast/balfour.htm>

Sykes-Picot Agreement

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/mideast/sykes.htm>

Palestine Mandate

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/mideast/palmanda.htm>

Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/mideast/israel.htm>

UN Partition Resolution

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/un/res181.htm>

Report of the UN Special Committee on Palestine - 1947

<http://www.mideastweb.org/unscom1947.htm>

Charter of Hamas

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/mideast/hamas.htm>

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