Twenty Questions (and Answers) on Palestine/Israel: A Guide for the Curious

By George Bisharat, J.D., Ph.D

Introduction

Palestine/Israel is not unusually complicated. Its essence can be summed up in one sentence: Israel is seizing Palestine from the Palestinians, and the Palestinians are fighting to keep their homes, land, and rights.

That's the forest.

Are there trees? Absolutely.

Just as the American civil rights movement had plenty of nuances, the moral arc was uncomplicated: the racially oppressed stood up for their rights. The conflict in Palestine is no different.

We won't examine each and every tree here, but when you finish reading this guide, you'll have the answers to common questions about the issue. For those interested in a deeper dive, further resources are listed at the end.

One more thing: the approach we take here is that Jewish Israelis and Palestinian Arabs have equal rights to live in Palestine/Israel in security, peace, and freedom. Neither people has the right to oppress or expel the other, not now and not in the future. Justice and equal rights are the keys to durable peace.

---

1. Is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict an ancient religious feud?

No. That framing suggests a timeless, irrational battle rooted in religious difference, which excuses inaction. But that's not the reality.

For centuries, Jews lived throughout the Middle East, including Palestine, largely in peace. The conflict began in the late 1800s when European Jews, responding to Christian antisemitism, founded Zionism—a political movement to create a Jewish state in Palestine. Zionist settlers came to build a new Jewish society, not to integrate peacefully with the existing population.

Britain supported this colonial project after World War I, governing Palestine and enabling Jewish immigration. When British rule ended and war broke out in 1948, better-armed and organized Zionist militias drove out 750,000 Palestinians in the event known as the Nakba, seizing their homes and property.

Bottom line: The conflict is about land, power, and displacement—not ancient religious hatred. It's a modern political conflict with colonial roots.

---

2. Aren't Jews also indigenous to Palestine, and don't they have an equal claim to the land?

Small Jewish communities lived in Palestine for centuries, and were integrated into Arab society and spoke Arabic. So yes, these Jews were certainly indigenous to Palestine. But Zionist Jews came from Europe with a nationalist ideology, aiming to create a separate Jewish state.

Even if Ashkenazi (that is, European) Jews have some Middle Eastern ancestry, that does not justify displacing the Palestinians who lived continuously in the land for generations. International law does not recognize ancient claims to a land, precisely because they are unverifiable and disruptive to the lives and livelihoods of people already living there.

Bottom line: Israel's founding Zionist movement was not indigenous to Palestine. While Jewish Israelis have the right to remain where they are today, they have no right to displace or dominate Palestinians in the name of indigeneity.

---

3. Who are the Palestinians and where do they live today?

Palestinians are the Arab people native to Palestine, a land at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea that, through time, has been administered by a variety of different rulers, and is holy to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Palestine's modern borders, like those of the surrounding states, were drawn after World War I following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

Today, Palestinians number about almost 15 million. Roughly half live under Israeli rule—in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. The rest are refugees and their descendants, living in neighboring Arab countries or farther abroad.

In many settings, Palestinians face political restrictions, surveillance, and suppression. Despite this fragmentation, Palestinians maintain a strong sense of national identity and shared destiny.

Bottom line: Palestinians are a dispersed but unified people whose common struggle binds them across borders and generations.

---

4. What is the Nakba?

The Nakba (Arabic for "catastrophe") refers to the mass expulsion and dispossession of Palestinians in 1948. As Britain withdrew from Palestine, Zionist militias launched a terror campaign against the Palestinians. Palestinians fought back, and later the armies of five Arab states joined to help them. Still, three-quarters of the Arab population fled or were driven out. Dozens of massacres occurred, including the notorious killing of over 100 civilians at Deir Yassin.

Israel seized Palestinian homes and their contents and destroyed about 600 towns and villages. The United Nations had recommended partition, but Israel's creation came through conquest and displacement.

Today, Palestinians speak of an "ongoing Nakba," as expulsions and land seizures continue throughout the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and Israel itself.

A recent Penn State poll showed that 82% of Jewish Israelis support forcible expulsion of Palestinians from Gaza. Israeli youth, meanwhile, are more right wing than their parents, and only 9% under 40 rejected ethnic cleansing of Gaza. This reflects a long-term rightward drift within Israeli society that has accelerated in the last two years.

Bottom line: The Nakba was not a one-time event but the beginning of an ongoing process of ethnic cleansing and land seizures by Israel. Israeli attitudes suggest that, without outside intervention, the Nakba will continue.

---

5. Is it fair to apply the term "apartheid" to Israel?

Apartheid refers to a system where one group systematically dominates another through law and violence. Under international law, apartheid is a crime.

Major human rights organizations—including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Israeli groups like B'Tselem and Yesh Din—have concluded that Israel meets this definition. This is because it controls Palestinians through laws and policies that restrict their rights and enforce Jewish supremacy, whether in Israel, East Jerusalem, the West Bank, or the Gaza Strip.

Bottom line: Allegations of Israeli apartheid are well-founded and growing. Apartheid is not democracy—it is domination.

---

6. Who are the Palestinian citizens of Israel and what rights do they have?

About 20% of Israel's population are Palestinian citizens—descendants of those who remained after 1948. They can vote and hold office, but face pervasive discrimination.

Housing, education, and jobs are segregated and unequal. The Jewish Nation-State Law of 2018 formalized Jewish supremacy in law, declaring only Jews have national rights in Israel, and demoting the status of the Arabic language in state affairs. Efforts to draft an explicit guarantee of equal rights have always failed.

Bottom line: Palestinian citizens of Israel face systemic racism, with Jewish citizens enjoying superior rights to Palestinians. Israeli society is increasingly intolerant, not inclusive.

---

7. What was life like in Gaza before October 7, 2023?

Gaza is one of the most densely populated places on Earth, with 2.2 million Palestinians, most of them refugees driven from their homes in 1948. Israel imposed a blockade in 2007 after Hamas took control. Since then, Gaza has been under siege.

Israel restricted movement. It shot at fishermen and farmers. It strangled economic activity. Israel launched repeated military assaults, killing thousands. Israeli officials referred to these attacks as "mowing the grass," like a routine maintenance chore.

The October 7th attack followed decades of Israeli violence, occupation, and apartheid, including a record number of Palestinians killed in the West Bank earlier in 2023. It also followed "The Great March of Return," a sustained non-violent effort launched in 2018 in which thousands of Gaza Palestinians tried to breach the border fence Israel had erected around the Gaza Strip. Israeli snipers, protected behind barriers and in no danger of injury or death, killed hundreds and maimed thousands of unarmed Palestinians before the protests died down.

Bottom line: The conditions in Gaza were catastrophic long before October 7, shaped by siege, deprivation, and repeated violence by Israel.

---

8. What happened on October 7, 2023?

On that day, Hamas and other groups broke through the Israeli fence around Gaza and attacked military and civilian sites. Around 1,139 people were killed, including 695 civilians and 373 soldiers. About 250 hostages were taken.

Some Israeli civilians were killed by Israeli forces under an Israeli military doctrine known as the Hannibal Directive, meant to prevent hostage-taking. Reports of beheaded babies and ovens were proven to be false, while evidence of systematic rape remains in dispute.

Reliable evidence shows that Palestinians committed war crimes, particularly in the abduction and deliberate killings of Israeli civilians. Hamas has admitted that "mistakes were made," and has welcomed investigations of both sides by the International Criminal Court.

But the brutality of October 7 was not unique. Historically, the violence of oppressed and occupied peoples has been fueled by rage, pain, and loss. Nat Turner, for example, ordered his followers to kill men, women, and children, and killed a white woman with his own hands.

Bottom line: October 7 was brutal, causing grievous harm to Jewish Israeli communities. But it did not occur in a vacuum, nor was it uniquely savage. It was preceded by decades of Israeli oppression and was exploited to justify an even more devastating assault on Gaza. All wrongdoing on that day and after should be investigated, and when reliably established, punished.

---

9. Is it fair to describe Israel's actions after October 7 as genocide?

Yes. Numerous legal scholars and genocide experts—including Jewish and Israeli voices like Raz Segal, Omer Bartov, Shmuel Lederman, and William Schabas—have concluded that Israel's actions in Gaza meet the legal definition of genocide.

Evidence includes more than 60,000 deaths, including more than 15,000 children, destruction of 92% of Gaza's homes, repeated attacks on hospitals, doctors, and emergency personnel, starvation tactics, and many inflammatory public statements by Israeli leaders.

In December 2023, South Africa filed a genocide case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The court found the case plausible and ordered Israel to take preventive measures, which Israel failed to implement.

Bottom line: The charge of genocide is supported by facts, law, and expert judgment. The world is watching, and history will judge.

---

10. Isn't Israel just exercising its right to self-defense?

All states have a right to self-defense—but not in occupied territory. The ICJ has ruled that Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza is illegal. Israel cannot invoke self-defense to maintain or enforce it.

Self-defense also requires adherence to international humanitarian law—proportionality, distinction between combatants and civilians, and necessity. Israel has violated all of these repeatedly.

For example, the Israeli military has killed more than 200 Palestinian journalists over the past 21 months, some of them clearly targeted deliberately. It has bombed 36 of Gaza's hospitals, many of which remain inoperable. It has attacked bakeries, sewage and water treatment plants, and damaged or destroyed all of Gaza's universities. Doctors have reported seeing numerous bodies of children with gunshot wounds to the head or torso from Israeli snipers. Entire

Palestinian families have been wiped out in bombings of apartment complexes, including 132 members of the Abu Naser family in Gaza City.

Bottom line: Israel's actions go far beyond lawful self-defense and instead constitute illegal use of force to maintain an apartheid regime. Israel has used the Hamas attack as a pretext to make Gaza unlivable for Palestinians, and this is ethnic cleansing, genocide, or both.

---

11. What is life like in the West Bank?

Palestinians in the West Bank live under Israeli military rule. Jewish settlers, in contrast, live under civil law and are tried in civil courts with standard procedural protections. Palestinians are tried in military courts with few procedural rights and a 99.74% conviction rate.

Jewish-only settlements continue to expand—an estimated 340 of them now dot East Jerusalem and the West Bank—displacing Palestinians through violence and terror. Roads, water, education, and political rights are segregated.

Bottom line: The West Bank is a showcase of apartheid. Palestinians endure daily oppression while settlers are protected and empowered.

---

12. What is the BDS movement?

BDS stands for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions—a global campaign launched by Palestinian community organizations in 2005 to pressure Israel to respect international law.

It targets institutions, not individuals. It is nonviolent and modeled on the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa.

In the U.S., BDS is protected speech under the First Amendment. Yet 38 states have passed laws attempting to restrict it, often under pressure from pro-Israel groups.

The U.S., state, and even local level governments currently sanction such countries as Russia, Iran, and North Korea. Calls for BDS therefore do not single Israel out, and instead call for Israel to be treated the same as other human rights abusing nations.

Bottom line: BDS is a peaceful, rights-based strategy. Suppressing it violates free speech and obstructs justice.

---

13. Is criticism of Israel antisemitic?

No. Criticizing Zionism—a political ideology—is not antisemitic. Many Jews oppose Zionism, and some antisemites support it.

Equating anti-Zionism with antisemitism silences legitimate dissent and distracts from real antisemitism, especially from the far-right.

Palestinians did not choose the identity of their oppressors. They resist Zionism because it dispossessed them—not because they object to Jews as a people.

Bottom line: Opposing Israeli policies or Zionism is not antisemitic. False accusations weaken real anti-racist efforts and shield injustice.

---

14. Are slogans used by campus protesters like "Free Palestine," "From the River to the Sea," and "Globalize the Intifada" antisemitic?

No. Each of these slogans is about ending Israel's oppression of Palestinians and allowing them to live in freedom and dignity in their own land. None of them calls for violence against Jews. The term "intifada" means "shaking off" and connotes grassroots resistance to systemic injustice—much like the movement for civil rights in the United States and opposition to apartheid in South Africa.

A rapidly growing number of Jews in the United States oppose Zionism as a racist ideology that does not reflect Jewish values. Anti-Zionist Jews, some associated with groups like Jewish Voice for Peace or If Not Now, have led protests against the Gaza genocide.

Younger Jewish Americans are especially critical of Israel and Zionism. One 2024 survey conducted by the Israeli Ministry of Diaspora Affairs found that 42% of young American Jews believed that Israel was committing genocide in Gaza, and 66% of American Jewish teens sympathized with the Palestinians.

Bottom line: smearing students or other protesters with false accusations of antisemitism is wrong, and jeopardizes our First Amendment right to freedom of speech and academic freedom.

---

15. Does Israel have a "right to exist"?

No, nor does any other state. Individuals have rights, and people have rights. But states come and go throughout history, either splitting off from or merging with other states. Once they come into being and are recognized, states have rights to self-defense, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and more. But they do not enjoy a "right to exist" under international law.

The question is sometimes phrased differently: Does Israel have a right to exist as a Jewish and democratic state? The problem is that it can't be both. Israel is, in fact, a Jewish state—one that denies equal rights to Palestinians**.** No state has a license to permanently oppress a portion of its subjects based on their identity.

Apartheid ended in South Africa and Nazism ended in Germany—and both countries continued to exist. If Israel were to become a state with equal rights for all its citizens, its "right to exist" would not be challenged.

Bottom line: Israel's existence is a fact. But no state has a right to exist as an ethno-supremacist regime. This does not mean that Jewish Israelis have no right to live in peace and security in Palestine/Israel: they do. It does mean, however, that equal rights must be the foundation of peace.

---

16. What role has the U.S. played?

The U.S. has been Israel's chief enabler, providing $3.8 billion annually in military aid and shielding Israel diplomatically from accountability. It has vetoed at least 53 United Nations Security Council resolutions critical of Israel, and recently issued sanctions against ICC judges and prosecutors investigating Israeli war crimes.

Since October 7, 2023, U.S. support to Israel has surged to over $50 billion, helping fund the destruction of Gaza. While many Americans struggle to buy food or access education or healthcare, Israeli citizens enjoy heavily subsidized public education and universal healthcare.

Beyond funding and diplomacy, the U.S. has been operationally engaged in Israel's Gaza campaign—through intelligence-sharing, munitions provision, regional military presence, and infrastructural support.

Bottom line: We are currently part of the problem. U.S. support for Israel fuels apartheid, occupation, and war. It harms Palestinians, damages U.S. credibility, and diverts resources away from Americans who genuinely need them.

---

17. If Congress limited aid to Israel to purely defensive weaponry, wouldn't that just save Israeli lives?

In fact, such measures lead to more Palestinian deaths. Defensive weapons systems such as the Iron Dome (which protects Israel against missiles) reduce the costs to Israel of attacks on the Gaza Strip – and Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Iran.

Protected from effective retaliation, Israel has repeatedly attacked and bombed its neighbors at little or no cost, either in the form of Israeli casualties or in dollar terms when American taxpayers pick up the tab.

Israel cannot bomb its way to lasting security. Genuine friendship toward that country would involve ending its repeated aggressions against its neighbors, not encouraging an endless cycle of violence.

Bottom line: a vote for defensive weapons for Israel is not a vote to save Israeli lives. It is a vote that incentivizes Israel to use violence against its neighbors, and thus is a vote for more Palestinian deaths. Congress should, instead, ban all arms support to Israel.

---

18. Is the two-state solution still viable?

Israel has brought nearly 700,000 settlers into the West Bank, cutting it into disconnected fragments. No truly sovereign Palestinian state could be built in these isolated patches of land, separated by Jewish-only settlements, roads, and other infrastructure. Nor has anyone one has offered a credible plan that would withdraw these Israeli settlers and settlements. As a result, the two-state solution is no longer viable. Israel has deliberately destroyed it.

Even as U.S. officials continue to mention it, Israeli leaders have openly rejected it, and continue to pursue permanent control.

Bottom line: The two-state solution has been buried by Israeli policies. Continuing to support a failed model distracts from the need to envision bold alternatives based on equality.

---

19. What can we do to support peace?

The U.S. must first stop enabling Israeli oppression. That means ending military aid to Israel, supporting international law, and respecting human rights. We should be humble about our ability to dictate solutions.

Still, peace is possible. South Africa and Ireland demonstrate that long-term disputes can end. But freedom and equal rights for all, regardless of ethnicity or religion, must come first.

Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews will have to figure out for themselves how those principles can be realized, whether in one state, two states, or some other configuration. But peace cannot grow on a foundation of injustice.

Bottom line: We must stop being part of the problem before we can promote a durable peace. When we do, we can support a future grounded in equality and dignity for all.

---

20. Where do the American people stand on all of this?

In the past, U.S. public opinion has been more sympathetic to Israel than to the Palestinians. However, public opinion has been rapidly shifting, particularly among Democrats and young Americans.

A CNN poll in June 2025 showed that in 2017, Democrats favored Israel by 13 points. Now, they sympathize with Palestinians by 43 points. Among Democrats under 50, the swing has been even greater: from +14 siding with Israel in 2017 to +57 for the Palestinians.

A YouGov/IMEU poll from earlier in 2025 showed that among voters who supported Biden in 2020 but did not vote for Harris in 2024, their top reason was “ending Israel’s violence in Gaza.”

While change is especially evident among Democrats, there is a similar shift among Republicans. A 2025 Pew Research Center poll showed that 50% of Republicans under 50 held negative views of Israel. Just three years ago, 63% of this same group viewed Israel positively.

Bottom line: the U.S. political class, especially Democrats, are out of touch with the views of their constituents, and they are beginning to suffer the electoral consequences of that neglect.

Additional Resources

- Institute for Middle East Understanding: https://imeu.org
- Mondoweiss: https://mondoweiss.net
- +972 Magazine: https://www.972mag.com
- Jewish Currents: https://jewishcurrents.org
- Journal of Palestine Studies: https://online.ucpress.edu/jps