



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

### Land and Climate

The West Bank is situated west of the Jordan River between the State of Israel and Jordan. Covering 2,263 square miles (5,860 square kilometers), the West Bank is about the size of Delaware. It has a generally rugged terrain, with a series of north-south hills its most prominent feature. There are few natural resources. The West Bank borders the Dead Sea, which, at 1,312 feet (400 meters) below sea level, has the lowest elevation on earth. Gaza is located on the Mediterranean Sea near the Sinai Peninsula. As a coastal plain, much of Gaza's 139 square miles (360 square kilometers) is covered with sand dunes. Temperatures vary by elevation. Jericho can be very hot in the summer, 104 to 113°F (40–45°C), while the highlands are cooler and more moderate. Summers are hot and dry; winters can be cold and wet.

### History

The area known to Christians as the Holy Land was named Palestine by the Romans. The history of the West Bank and Gaza naturally is linked to the history of the entire area. Because of its central location between Asia and Europe, Palestine was conquered by many nations. Some three thousand years ago, a Hebrew kingdom was established. It was later split into two states—Israel and Judah—that were destroyed by Assyria and Babylonia in the eighth and sixth centuries BC.

After the Persian conquest of the Middle East, the Jews

who were dispersed by previous invasions returned to establish a state and build a temple. But the area later fell to the Greeks and then the Romans. In the 600s, the Arabs conquered Palestine and subsequently settled the region. In the 1500s, the Ottoman Turks began to rule and remained in power until after World War I, when Palestine was declared a British mandate. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 pledged British support for the establishment of a national home for the Jews in Palestine, but it also insisted that nothing be done to prejudice the civil and religious rights of the existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine. These two goals conflicted and resulted in problems throughout the mandate.

The United Nations voted in 1947 to partition the area into two states—one Arab and one Jewish; Jerusalem was given a separate status because of its significance to both. The Jewish State became the independent nation of Israel in 1948. Arab countries that had opposed the UN partition immediately declared war. Palestinian refugees fled to the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Israel withstood initial advances, but hostilities erupted again into open war in 1956, 1967, and 1973. During the 1967 War, Israel occupied the West Bank, Syria's Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, and East Jerusalem. As a result of the 1979 Camp David Accords, the Sinai Peninsula was returned to Egypt and the final status of the West Bank and Gaza became subject to negotiation.

Peace negotiations during the 1980s broke down several times. Out of frustration for their situation, the Palestinian Arabs rebelled in 1987 and declared an independent Palestinian state. Their uprising, known as the *intifada*, continued until 1993. It led to violent clashes between

residents of the occupied territories and Israeli military forces but also resulted in peaceful demonstrations and other forms of resistance.

A Palestinian-Israeli peace conference convened in 1991. While talks frequently stalled, a final agreement, the Oslo Accords, was signed in 1993. The agreement granted the Palestinians limited autonomy and eventual self-rule in some occupied areas. Yasser Arafat, chair of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), was elected leader of the Palestine National Authority in 1996. Also elected was an 88-member Palestinian Council. Israel released many political prisoners, and many exiles returned to Gaza.

Palestinians and Israelis alike initially welcomed the agreement. However, conditions soon soured as opponents to it committed violent terrorist attacks, restoring a climate of distrust. The political environment allowed Israel's Likud Party to defeat the Labor Party, which had negotiated the agreement. Progress was brought to a halt in March 1997 by the expansion of Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem (traditionally claimed by Palestinians). Labor's Ehud Barak, elected on a peace ticket in May 1999 Israeli elections, ceded more territory to the Palestinians. He resigned as tensions arose from an inability to compromise on borders, expanding settlements, refugee status, and the sovereignty of Jerusalem.

High expectations for peace, frustrated by inaction, resulted in a second *intifada* in 2000. Israel's security measures included blockading Palestinian areas, which virtually shut down the economy. Months of demonstrations and violence preceded the election of Likud's Ariel Sharon as prime minister in 2001. Suicide bombings by extremist Palestinians and offensives in the West Bank and Gaza by Israeli forces claimed hundreds of lives and left thousands homeless.

When Arafat died in November 2004, Palestinians elected Mahmoud Abbas as the new leader of the Palestinian Authority. In 2005, Abbas and Sharon agreed to a cease-fire, and Sharon launched a controversial plan to withdraw all Israeli settlers and troops from Gaza. Dissatisfaction with Abbas's Fatah faction produced a victory for the Hamas faction in 2006 elections. Fatah and Hamas agreed to form a national unity government in early 2007, but it dissolved as Hamas militants ousted Fatah to seize control of Gaza in June. Israel blockaded Gaza, militants there fired rockets into Israeli territory, and Israel launched air strikes. After Egypt mediated negotiations between Israel and Hamas, the two sides signed a six-month cease-fire agreement in June 2008. In practice, neither side met all its obligations under the terms of the cease-fire. When it lapsed in December, rocket fire into Israel increased. Arguing that no state could tolerate continued attacks on its citizens, Israel launched an air and ground assault in Gaza. The war lasted three weeks, during which 13 Israelis and about 1,300 Palestinians died; thousands more Palestinians were wounded or left homeless. Hostilities intensified in May 2010, when a ship bound for Gaza carrying toys, medical supplies, and clothing attempted to cross through the Israeli blockade. Nine activists on board the ship were killed during the ensuing fight, and international protests against the blockade grew. Israel then agreed to adjust its blockade policy.

## THE PEOPLE

### Population

About 2.5 million people live in the West Bank and about 1.6 million live in Gaza. These figures do not include Palestinian Arabs who live in the State of Israel as Israeli citizens. The figures also do not include about 364,000 Jewish settlers who live in the West Bank and East Jerusalem through an Israeli housing program. The annual population growth rates are high: 2.1 percent in the West Bank and 3.3 percent in Gaza. Gaza is nearly 100 percent Palestinian and densely populated. Gaza, Nablus, Hebron, Ramallah, and East Jerusalem are the largest cities. Many Palestinians live abroad, either as citizens of other countries (such as Jordan) or in refugee camps. All together, there are about six million Palestinians in the world. Several Bedouin groups also reside in the area; they retain some traditions but are no longer nomadic.

### Language

The language of Palestinian Arabs is Arabic. It has 28 letters and is written from right to left. It is a phonetic language. Many Palestinians also speak English or French. English is required as a second language in schools, and French is a popular third language in many (especially private) schools. Hebrew has become an important language for many Palestinians to speak due to the Israeli occupation.

### Religion

The majority of people (99 percent in Gaza, and 75 percent of the West Bank) are Muslim. Most are Sunni Muslim. Most Christians (generally Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Protestant) live in the West Bank. Religion plays an important role, as its concepts and perceptions drive behavior in society, home, and one's private life. Regardless of religion, being Palestinian unites the people as a group. Christians and Muslims respect each other's religions and holidays. Schools are out on Friday and Sunday (the respective Muslim and Christian days of worship). Shops close according to the owner's religion.

Muslims believe that Muhammad was the last and greatest prophet of *Allah* (God) and that he received the *Qur'an* by revelation. Devout Muslims follow the Five Pillars of Islam: confessing *Allah* to be God and Muhammad to be his prophet; praying five times daily while facing Makkah, Saudi Arabia; fasting during the holy month of *Ramadan*; trying to make at least one pilgrimage to Makkah; and donating money to the poor.

### General Attitudes

Palestinian Arabs value courage, freedom, generosity, and hospitality. They are known for their strong family ties and their social warmth. Social status is measured by one's family name, occupation, and education. Palestinians strongly believe they have the right to a sovereign state that provides them with basic human rights. Even self-rule does not go far enough to satisfy those who seek full independence. Since the Palestinian Authority has had difficulty bringing order and

structure to society, many people are as critical of their leaders as they are of Israel. Most have shared a dream for a Palestinian state but now are pessimistic about its future.

Most Palestinians say they respect Judaism, and even Israel's right to exist as a state, but they oppose Zionism as a movement to establish the entire region as only a Jewish homeland. They point to the fact that they, too, have lived in the area for centuries. Palestinians are therefore sensitive to references to the Holy Land as "Israel" because they consider the Holy Land to be Palestine.

### Personal Appearance

Western clothing is common in urban areas, although it is less common in Gaza's cities than in those of the West Bank. Elderly men or those following traditional Muslim practices wear long, loose-fitting white robes and sometimes a turban. Women usually cover their heads with a scarf, although less-traditional women wear it loosely and some choose to go without. Elderly women, especially those in villages, wear traditional embroidered dresses. During the first *intifada*, urban women began to wear tightly drawn scarves with long, loose-fitting dresses and sometimes even a veil. This switch from Western dress was partly in response to greater religious devotion and partly in response to pressure from religious fundamentalists. In villages, the Muslim dress code remains standard practice.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

### Greetings

Palestinians smile and nod when passing each other on the street. *Al-salām 'alaykum* (Peace be upon you) is the usual verbal greeting among Muslims. *Marhabah, kayf halak?* (Hello, how are you doing?) is also common. Other expressions include *Sabah al-khayr* (Good morning), *Masa' al-khayr* (Good afternoon), and *Ma' al-salāmeḥ, deer balak* (Good-bye, take care). Expressions of goodwill and welcome include *Ahlan wa sahlan* and *Tafadal* (Please come in).

Close friends or women frequently greet each other with a handshake, a hug, and a kiss on each cheek. Men shake hands with each other. For religious reasons, most men and women, particularly those in villages, exchange greetings verbally; however, some urban women may initiate handshakes with men. A pat on the back or shoulder is considered a sign of affection between friends.

First names are used when addressing close friends. Otherwise, Palestinians use the titles *Anisah* (Miss), *Sayyidah* (Mrs.), and *Sayyid* (Mr.) with first or last names. The male elderly and other respected individuals are called *abu*, meaning "father of." Female elderly are called *um*, meaning "mother of." For example, the father of Ahmed (the oldest son) is called *Abu Ahmed*. The mother would be called *Um Ahmed*. Specific kinship terms are important when introducing relatives. An uncle may be called *ammo* if he is from the father's side of the family and *khalo* if he is from the mother's. Likewise, an aunt is called *amto* (father's side) or *khalto* (mother's side). A young person may sometimes address an elderly person as *ammo* or *khalto* as a sign of

respect, even if they are unrelated.

### Gestures

Palestinians stand close to each other and maintain eye contact when conversing. Hand gestures are used often. Placing all of the fingers together against the thumb with the palm facing upward means "Slow down" or "Be careful." When threatening punishment or warning others, Palestinians may lift the hand with the palm facing upward and the thumb closed against the index finger in a circle (similar to the "okay" signal in the United States).

Pointing the bottom of one's foot toward another person or placing one's feet on a table or chair is impolite. People also avoid crossing the legs or placing the feet across the knees in front of an older person. Palestinians are careful to show respect to all elderly individuals, no matter their social status or level of education. Muslims usually pass and receive objects with the right hand or both hands.

### Visiting

Visiting is an important part of Arab culture and is a social obligation. Palestinians visit each other to celebrate special events, socialize, and commiserate. Arranged visits are common, but unplanned visits also are expected. Relatives and friends may drop by at any time and often do. Hosts usually offer their guests drinks (i.e., soft drinks, tea, or fruit juice) and snacks (cake, nuts such as almonds, or fruit), followed by coffee. Guests are expected to end their visit after coffee.

Guests usually bring gifts for special occasions. The type of gift varies according to the event. Chocolates or flowers commonly are given to those who are sick. Guests usually wait to be seated by the hosts. In conservative families, men and women sit in separate rooms. Men also enjoy visiting in coffeehouses to smoke water pipes, drink coffee, and discuss daily concerns. Women more commonly socialize in the home.

### Eating

Breakfast usually includes milk, tea, eggs, cheese, yogurt, and bread. Lunch, the main meal of the day, is served around 3 p.m., when most people return home from work. In towns, the main dish usually consists of vegetables, rice, and either lamb, chicken, or beef. Salads and soup may accompany the meal, particularly during *Ramadan*. Dinner, which is served around 8 p.m., is usually lighter.

Palestinians generally eat with the right hand. Most families eat with utensils from separate plates. However, when eating traditional Palestinian food, many adults prefer to eat from one common dish with their hands; this gives them a sense of equality and union. In some cases, men will eat separately from women, but families generally enjoy eating at least their main meal together. The father is served first, followed by the sons, and then the daughters. Guests are served first when present. It is polite for guests to accept additional helpings.

## LIFESTYLE

### Family

Families are often large and play an important role in the life of the individual. Large families are common due to cultural and religious traditions. Palestinians feel more secure and better represented with a larger population. Parents with many children also have enjoyed greater economic and agricultural opportunities. Today, the size of families is gradually decreasing due to high living expenses.

The father is head of the family and the mother takes care of the housework and children. Although few women work outside the home, their numbers are increasing. The relationship between a mother and son or between a brother and sister is particularly significant. According to Islamic teachings and tradition, the son is responsible for taking care of his mother and sisters, unless they are financially stable. Brothers and sisters are close and almost always go to parties and activities together. Protecting one's family name and honor is also important. Palestinians are taught to cherish their heritage and respect their elders. Children (beginning with the eldest son) expect to care for their parents in their old age. It is not proper for a family member to die in anger or anguish, so every effort is made to keep the elderly happy.

### Housing

Most parts of the Palestinian territories, especially Gaza, are densely populated. People often live with or near members of their extended family, and it is common for a family of six or more to share one or two rooms. In previous generations, most families lived in freestanding one-floor houses surrounded by a yard. Today, buildings containing eight or more apartments are more typical. An average apartment has a living room, kitchen, bathroom, balcony, and two or three bedrooms. Most homes are equipped with running water and electricity and have refrigerators and televisions. Waste management and sewage systems are generally inadequate.

### Dating and Marriage

Dating is not common. In traditional families, it is forbidden. Girls marry at about age 18 and boys at age 22 or older. Families and friends play an important role in finding spouses; many couples also meet at work or at school. Cousin marriage is common among Palestinian Muslims. Marriages between Christians and Muslims are fairly rare. Rural marriages usually are arranged.

Most weddings include three celebrations. The *Hinna* is a party held at the bride's home with female friends and family members (from both the bride's and groom's sides of the family) two nights before the wedding. They dance and sing traditional songs and put henna dye on the bride's hands and feet. A second celebration for male and female guests typically takes place the night before the wedding. In some villages, this is a three-day celebration at the house of the groom's family. Last, the *al-Shabka* (big feast) is often held at hotels or large homes, where family and friends congratulate the newlyweds and enjoy an evening of dancing and eating.

### Life Cycle

Palestinian society is generally patriarchal, so celebrations marking the birth of a boy are often more pronounced than when the baby is a girl. A newborn boy is circumcised, and families hold another celebration with family and friends to mark the event. Young people are legally considered adults at the age of 18. Some families may consider a girl to be an adult by age 16, as girls sometimes marry before they turn 18.

Burials take place soon after a person dies. For the next three days, the house of the deceased person is open to friends and relatives, who visit to offer condolences to the immediate family. Visitors often bring meals for the family.

### Diet

Rice, beef, lamb, and vegetables with tomato sauce are staples in the Palestinian diet. Chicken, fish, garbanzo beans, fava beans, oranges, grapes, dates, figs, and olives are also common. Traditional specialties include *mansaf* (rice, lamb, yogurt, bread, and nuts), *musakhan* (bread with fried onions and chicken on top), and *waraq dawalee* (stuffed grape leaves). Also common are *maftool* (couscous served with vegetables and meat) and *makhlobah* (vegetables, meat, and rice served with salad and yogurt). Pita sandwiches filled with *falafel* (fried balls of crushed garbanzo beans mixed with oil and spices) are popular. Spicy food, such as *qedra* (a rice dish), is also enjoyed. Tea, fruit juice, and Turkish coffee are common. Observant Muslims do not eat pork or drink alcohol.

### Recreation

Soccer and basketball are the most popular sports. Playing cards and visiting friends are common activities. Attending movies is popular in urban areas, where cinemas are available. Camping is becoming a favorite way to spend leisure time. Adults love to socialize at coffeehouses or cafés. Many people attend cultural arts performances when possible.

### The Arts

Artisans create pottery, painting, and leather work. Carvings and ornaments of olive wood are common. Women embroider cushions, dresses, jackets, tablecloths, and other items in an ancient form of cross-stitch. Songs always accompany holidays and celebrations and are led by singers called *Zajjaleen*. The *dabkah* is a traditional dance performed with handkerchiefs and accompanied by the pounding of feet to keep the rhythm. Storytelling and poetry are well developed, but theater is a relatively new phenomenon. Literature is valued, but many writers have emigrated.

### Holidays

Islamic holidays include the prophet Muhammad's birthday and *Ra's al-Sannah al-Hijriyyah* (the first day of the Islamic year). *Ramadan* is the Muslim month of fasting, and adherents go without food or drink during daylight hours. In the evenings, they eat a meal and visit friends or relatives. At the end of *Ramadan*, a three-day feast called *'Eid al-Fitr* is held. Muslims also celebrate *'Eid al-Adha*, which comes after the pilgrimage to Makkah, Saudi Arabia, and celebrates the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son. Palestinian

Christians join the world-renowned Christmas celebrations in Bethlehem and Easter commemorations in East Jerusalem.

## SOCIETY

### Government

The West Bank and Gaza are governed by the Palestinian Authority, which is headed by a president (currently Mahmoud Abbas) and a prime minister (Salam Fayyad). A 132-seat Palestinian Legislative Council has legislative authority. While the Palestinian Authority oversees domestic affairs, Israel maintains security and borders. Palestinians need Israeli-issued identification cards and may not leave the country without permission. Jewish settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem remain under Israeli jurisdiction.

### Economy

The economies of both the West Bank and Gaza are poor and struggling. Unemployment and inflation are chronically high and fluctuate according to political relations with Israel. Underemployment is also a problem. Frequent closures of Palestinian areas have severely damaged the economy. Any economic recovery or growth depends largely upon the access Palestinians have to places of employment in Israel and the West Bank and Gaza. Many skilled and educated workers emigrate due to the political situation. The standard of living is decreasing, and both regions are in need of substantial foreign investment. Most industries in the West Bank and Gaza are small-scale and family-operated. They include cement, textiles, fishing, and souvenirs. Agricultural crops include fruits, olives, vegetables, beef, and dairy products. The West Bank and Gaza rely heavily on foreign aid. The *new Israeli shekel* (ILS), the Jordanian *dinar* (JOD), and the U.S. dollar (USD) are acceptable legal tender.

### Transportation and Communications

Buses are the primary mode of mass transit. Taxis and private cars are also common. A growing number of people own cars, adding to traffic problems. Roads generally are in poor condition. Movement is contingent on Israeli political or security decisions. Travel between Gaza and the West Bank must follow specified routes.

West Bank and Gaza have more cellular telephone subscribers than telephone landlines. About 15 percent of the population has a cellular telephone, while the number of telephone landlines is only about 10 per 100 people. The primary news medium is television; most families have a television set. Radio stations and newspapers also operate.

### Education

Most children begin kindergarten at the age of three and are required to attend school from the age of six to eighteen. After secondary school, students with high marks in the *Tawjihi* exam (General Secondary Certificate) may attend a university or community colleges; however, not all can attend because most families' financial resources are limited. Public schools lack space, materials, and teachers. Still, education is highly valued by society. During periods of the *intifada*,

parents organized and continued the educational process in their homes. Some private schools are supported by international Christian and Muslim organizations. Palestinian Arabs have a relatively high literacy rate. Nine percent of all Palestinians have had at least some college education.

### Health

Health conditions are better in the West Bank than in Gaza. However, hospital and medical care are difficult to obtain in either region. Existing facilities are often inadequate. The United Nations sponsors some medical care programs. Life expectancy rates vary, depending on gender and territory.

## AT A GLANCE

### Contact Information

Office of the Palestine Liberation Organization, 1320 18th Street NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20036; phone (202) 974-6360; web site [www.plomission.us](http://www.plomission.us).

### POPULATION & AREA

|               |                      |
|---------------|----------------------|
| Population    | 4,119,083 (rank=128) |
| Area, sq. mi. | 2,402 (rank=168)     |
| Area, sq. km. | 6,220                |

### DEVELOPMENT DATA

|                        |                          |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Human Dev. Index* rank | NA                       |
| Gender inequality rank | NA                       |
| Real GDP per capita    | \$2,900                  |
| Adult literacy rate    | 97% (male); 88% (female) |
| Infant mortality rate  | 21 per 1,000 births      |
| Life expectancy        | 72 (male); 75 (female)   |

\*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).