History of West Bank and Gaza

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
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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 the agreement 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 shutdown 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. Amid cautious optimism that the change might improve Palestinian-Israeli relations, Abbas and Sharon agreed to a cease-fire. In 2005, Sharon proceeded with a controversial plan to withdraw all Israeli settlers from Gaza. Palestinian dissatisfaction with Abbas’s Fatah faction resulted in victory for the Hamas faction in 2006 elections. Tensions between the two groups’ supporters led to violence, but in January 2007, Fatah and Hamas agreed to form a national unity government.

References: