

The Idea of Palestine: Geography or Nationality?

- The word Palestine was introduced by the Romans to rename the area of Judea following the repression of the Jewish uprisings against the Roman conquest.
- Palestine was subsequently used as the name of the area comprising today's Israel and the Territories under Palestinian Authority administration.
- Under the British Mandate between 1920-1948, the word Palestine was reintroduced to name the area between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea, bordering with Lebanon, Syria, Transjordan (now Jordan) and Egypt.
- After the State of Israel was established, Palestine was adopted as a national idea of the Palestinian people, implying Arab national and territorial claims.

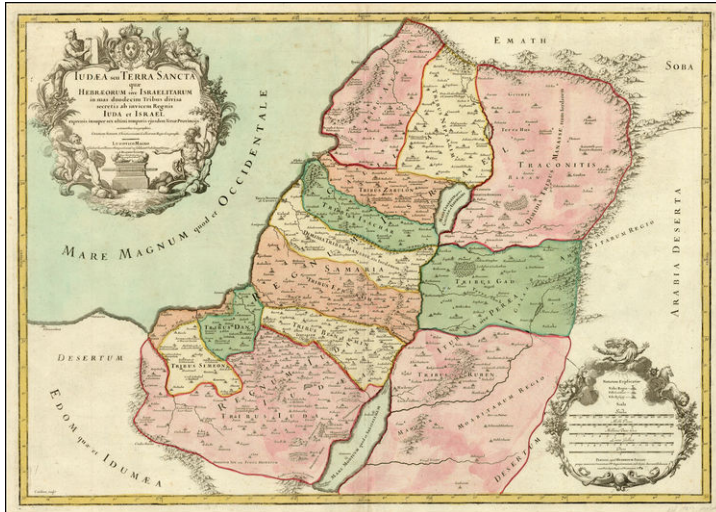
Palestine as a geographical name



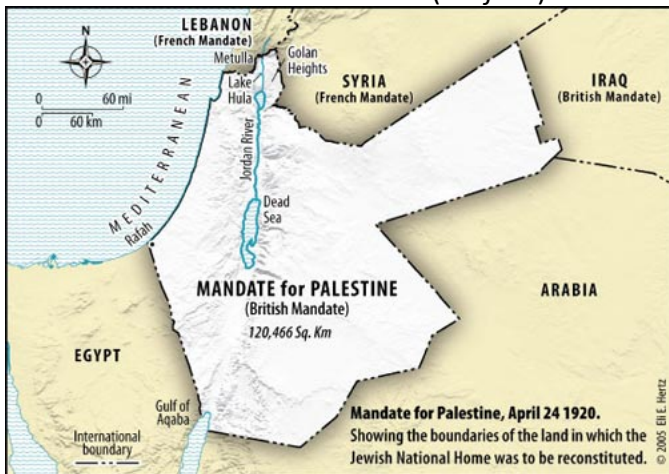
- The Biblical name of the area was originally Canaan, subsequently divided in the Kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of Judah, and then Samaria and Judea.



- When the Romans conquered Jerusalem suppressing Jewish uprisings, they renamed the area as *Syria Palaestina* and Jerusalem as *Aelia Capitolina*.



- Subsequent rulers named the area in different ways. The Crusaders, for example used the terms *Terra Sancta* (Holy Land) or the Latin *Iudaea*. The Ottomans divided the area in different administrative districts (*sanjaks*) under the region of Syria (*vilayet* of Damascus).



- After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the area was ruled by the British, who named it Palestine (East of the River Jordan) and Transjordan (West of the River Jordan)

Mandatory Palestine

- The British Mandate officially supported the creation of a Jewish National Homeland in Palestine, identifying the territory East of the River Jordan for Jewish settlement.



Zionist poster designed by Franz Kraus

- During the Mandate the word “Palestine” and “Palestinian” were used with geographical meaning, including both Jewish and Arab residents.



The Palestine Post article announcing the establishment of the State of Israel, now Jerusalem Post.



Keren Hayesod poster: the Yiddish version uses “Eretz Yisrael” (Land of Israel), while the English uses Palestine.

- Jewish institutions adopted the name Palestine and Palestinian, while only in 1940s Zionist leaders decided to name the Jewish State “Israel”.

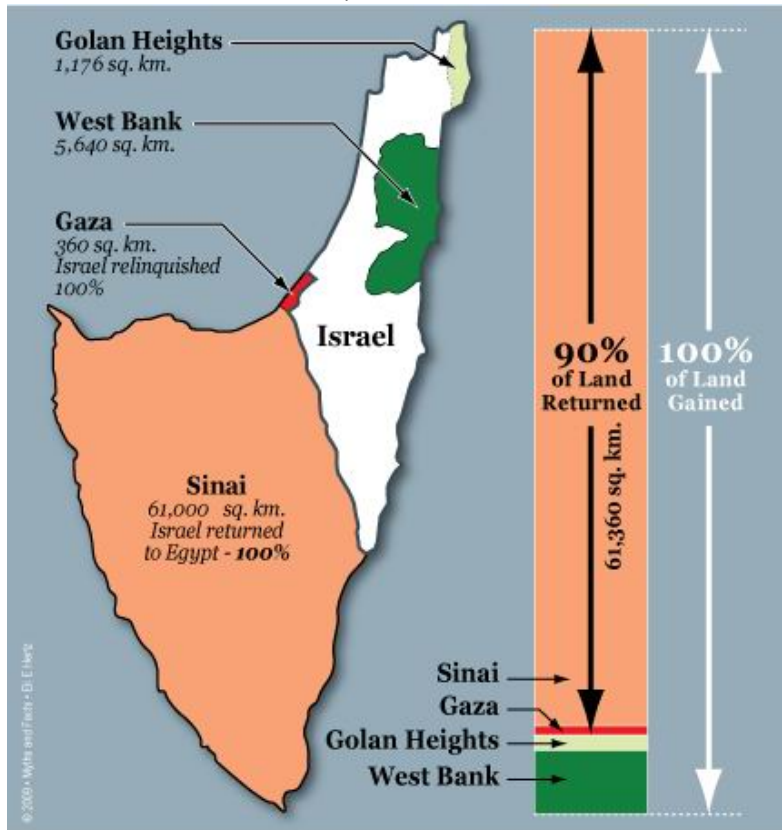
Modern Use and Controversy

- Currently, the term Palestine means the homeland of the Palestinian people and is used in relation to the Palestinian struggle for nationhood.



- From 1960s, Arabs have progressively adopted the terms “Palestine” and “Palestinian” in order to define their peoplehood and nationhood as well as to advance claims of statehood and sovereignty over the land.

- The State of Palestine is considered a legitimate right of the Palestinians and the solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, the use of the term still bears severe implications.



Land returned by Israel as part

of peace accords or toward peace talks.

- While Palestine has become a national idea of the Palestinian people, geographically the term is still used to indicate the whole area. Therefore, are Palestinian territorial claims restricted to the West Bank/Judea-Samaria territories and Gaza or do they include territories comprise within Israel's borders as well?



- The rhetoric built upon the Palestinian narrative has developed in several misuses of the word Palestinians with the intent to delegitimise Jewish historical ties to the Land of Israel. Accordingly, Palestinians are portrayed as indigenous and Israelis as foreign occupiers and usurpers. One such rhetorical use is the depiction of Jesus as a Palestinian.

Interview with Dr Mordechai Nisan, Hebrew University of Jerusalem



What is the origin of the word Palestine?

This is a major historical and political issue. It begins as history teaches us with the decision of the Roman conquest of Judea in the year 70 CE, and then with the repression of the Jewish rebellion of 135. As a foreign conqueror aiming at eliminating Judea, in Hebrew *Yehuda*, from the map, the Romans introduced the word *Palaestina*, based on the biblical people Philistines, in Hebrew *Plishtim*. Therefore, the Romans renamed the country by replacing its name Judea, the land of the Jews, with Palaestina, the land of the coastal Philistine people, assuming that the Jewish people would not survive without a land and that in the course of history a Palestinian people would come into existence. But there was no Palestinian people in existence. There have never been Palestinians, not at the time of the Romans, not a millennium later, in the period of the Crusaders, and not in the subsequent periods during which this land was under Mamluk and Turkish-Ottoman rulers.

Who are the Palestinians then?

The Land of Israel has somehow been called *Palestine*, but without a Palestinian people: there is no such Palestinian identity, no Palestinian literature, no Palestinian peoplehood. Despite the fact that the region has been called Palestine since the Roman conquest, no Palestinian people has ever emerged. The emergence of the so-called Palestinian people in the 20th century is a fabricated and circumstantial identity, as many other peoples in the Middle East were fabricated in the same period.

One can say, for example, that historically there is no Syrian people, and today the idea of a Syrian people is by no means less questionable: the people living in Syria call themselves Syrians, but there is no common identity under which they can all come together as a people in terms of cohesion and solidarity. Similarly, if one says that there is a Jordanian, a Saudi, and a Palestinian people, one has to bear in mind that these are modern fabrications, which become politically terminological conventions. However, in a deeper sense, they are false communities, which can easily dissolve under the force of events, as we can see in Syria, Iraq, or Libya today.

Once the word “Palestine” referred to an area in the Near East, but now it is used as a geo-political concept that is the homeland and State of the Palestinian people. How come?

With respect to Palestine, the term was introduced in the course of the 20th century basically as a way to deny the legitimacy of the Zionist movement of the Jewish people and to undermine the historical validity of the Jewish people and its identity placed in the Land of Israel. Politically, the term *Palestine* was introduced in opposition to Israel, as an attempt to replace and deny the term *Israel*. Likewise, the Palestinians try to substitute themselves in place of the Israelis; to the absurdity that Jesus has become a Palestinian figure (*when he was obviously a Jew from Judea*), as part of the Palestinian propaganda machine, which gets rolling from about the mid-20th century.

Furthermore, the idea of a Palestinian people emerged in the 1950s, after the establishment of the State of Israel, as an attempt to give a common identity to the various Arab communities that lived in the area known as Palestine. The concept has developed and adapted in the course of history also thanks to the political movements such as the PLO and Fatah, but the use of the term, although intrinsically void of any national significance, reflects the success of the Palestinian political campaign.

In your last book “Only Israel West of the River”, you identify the Oslo process as the main point in history where the idea of a Palestinian state was legitimised legally, politically and historically. If Palestinian statehood has emerged just 20 years ago, why is it politically incontestable?

We should recall that the 1993 Oslo Accords did not mention the establishment of a Palestinian state. They talked about interim agreements and about a process whereby the two parties would incrementally advance toward the resolution of conflicting issues. It is then important to emphasize that never in the Oslo Accords is the idea of a Palestinian state ever mentioned as a goal, or even as a basis for an agreement. Not even in Oslo II in 1995 or in consequent agreements is the idea of a Palestinian state ever mentioned. Therefore, the legitimacy of a Palestinian state did not emerge with Oslo.

There are other personalities and forces that talked about a Palestinian state: the PLO started at the end of 1980s; certain Israelis began talking about a Palestinian state then and in the 1990s. Consequently, the idea of a Palestinian state became much more explicit under Clinton presidency in the U.S. in the 1990s and under Bush’s presidency beginning in 2000. This is when the idea of a Palestinian state surfaces more and more and is posed as a key to the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The realisation of Palestinian national aspiration would not bring the conflict to an end?

The basic understanding is that if there will be a Palestinian state in Judea, Samaria (called the West Bank) and Gaza, the fulfilment of the national aspirations of the Palestinian people will bring about political coexistence between Palestinians and Israelis. Consequently, with Ariel Sharon in Israel and Bush in America, the idea that a Palestinian state should be established became more explicit and reckoned as a just solution to the conflict and as a peace-making effort.

However, we should bear in mind that the Palestinians have always considered the establishment of a Palestinian state as an act of war against Israel and Zionism, and as the benchmark for further

offensive actions against Israel; indeed, it is considered as a way to deny Israel part of the land, to engage in political insurgency against the legitimacy of Israel, to argue that all Palestine belongs to the Palestinians, and that Israel within any borders is an illegitimate state.

Do you mean by this that a Palestinian state is incompatible with Israel's existence?

The point is that the very idea of a Palestinian state, from every point of view, including political, ideological or security arguments, is a weapon in the arsenal of the Palestinian struggle against Israel, and is not an authentic basis for rapprochement and reconciliation between Israel and the Palestinians.

They think that the establishment of a Palestinian state will bring about demoralisation in Israel, by withdrawing and destroying Israeli communities in the territories to be handed over to the Palestinians, and causing a loss of Israel's international standing once further restricted territorially. This process for certain will weaken the political vitality of Israel and must be avoided at all costs.

Do you refer to the implications of a potential withdrawal from the Territories?

A Palestinian state in the West Bank, from the Israeli point of view, is a threat. There are people who believe that it is in Israel's interests that a Palestinian state be established, by dismantling what they call the regime of occupation, which is Israel's rule in Judea and Samaria; but this is a fatal mistake. Israel requires that land as a patrimony; Israel needs that land for security purposes; Israel requires that land in order to stop the Palestinian political tsunami that would flood into our gates.

We Israelis are reasonable people, aware of the Middle Eastern cultural and political milieu and how rhetorical statements are used to manoeuvre and confuse people and induce them to believe in things that are not true. This is really how I understand the meaning and implications of the idea of a Palestinian state.

You also use the expression "PLO state", arguing that the Palestinian struggle is a form of extremism, and therefore the establishment of a Palestinian state is against Israel's interest in terms of security. Additionally, you argue that the establishment of a Palestinian state is a lethal threat to Israel's existence in terms of political vitality. To what extent is it then a question of security or narrative?

When Israel was founded amid Arab opposition and warfare in 1948, the Arabs in the Middle East and in Palestine specifically lost in a practical and pragmatic sense: many of them fled, many of them lost their homes, they were without national independence, but they have never lost the sense of their just cause. And as befits the traditional tribal culture, they do not forget and do not forgive. Until today, those people who call themselves Palestinians or Arabs of Palestine, wherever they may be, they do not forget that they come from what they call Palestine, remembering the name of the village where they came from and even keeping the key of the house that they took with them when they fled. Therefore, they have never accommodated themselves from an ideological point of view to the reality that Israel defeated them in 1948, and that it is very unlikely that they will ever come back to where they lived, because their going back to where they lived lies on the ashes of Israel's destruction, which is not going to happen.

The Palestinians have articulated a certain narrative, and this term that you used is very congenial because it contains within itself the idea that one narrates, tells the story: from a personal point of view or from an objective reflection of reality. The narration of national identities also implies equality among them, but although they are equally meaningful to those who adopt them, they are not historically equal. The rebirth of the Jewish national narrative is based on history and it is very difficult today, in the post-modern period in which truth is considered to be very evasive, to talk about veracity, accuracy, facts; people talk about interpretations, narratives and meanings.

And what about the Jewish narrative?

However, to speak about the Jews in the Land of Israel and the rebirth of Israel as a Jewish state is to speak of what is really cast as the truthful chronological portrayal of human, national, and political history; meaning that from time immemorial, going back three-to-four thousand years, there is this reality that the Jewish people have a national existence in one particular piece of geography on the planet earth, which is identified biblically as Canaan, thereafter as Israel or Judea, and that the bond between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel bears the intrinsic authenticity of truth and validity. This is a building block of history.

Therefore, it means not only that Jews shall be recognised as a truth datum in history: when the Romans erased the name of Judea from the map, as I said at the beginning, they knew what they were doing and their intent was to erase the truth of history, by fabricating the replacement of Palaestina without a Palestinian people in place of Judea and the Jews. The world then accommodated itself by just the custom of language, but it is no more than that. There is no Palestinian people and no Palestine. The Crusaders for example, when they conquered this land knew there was no Palestinian people, just Arabic-speakers who identified as Arabs or Muslims.

You say that Jewish claims bear the truth of history. However, Jews are consistently requested to justify their existence as a people and as a nation.

In our time, the establishment of Israel is a re-founding and we should be cognizant of the fact that it is a “re-founding”, because Jews are coming back. As the Israeli Nobel laureate author Shmuel Yosef Agnon once said, ‘it is just because of the catastrophe of history that I was not born in Jerusalem’; and because Jews were often on the run, victims of exile, powerlessness, and wandering, I was personally born in Canada.

The only national meaning that we Jews carry as a people is that we came into being as a people in the Land of Israel, and we have come back to our land in the 20th century through extraordinary efforts and commitments and faith.

Is Jewish national identity explained through the bond with the Land of Israel?

What I want to say is that the Jewish narrative is not just a story narrated through generations. It is perhaps deeply mysterious in history that we were bound only to this Land as a people, when no other people was bound to this place, and we retain that connection in our heart and in our memory that we are a national people but only in the Land of Israel.

Here, in the Land of Israel, our national life has developed. This is what the Jewish people are about: we are grateful to our ancestors, who kept the idea of a Jewish people in connection to the Land of Israel as part of our identity and *raison d'être*.

It seems then that “Palestine” has evolved from being a mere geographical concept to a political concept, but how does this reflect on the Jewish people and Israel?

Quite so indeed! There are different explanations for this development. One is the historical explanation, which is the place of the Jewish people in history, implying by that that the Jewish people have always had to undergo a testing in order to justify who they are, what they believe in, how they conduct their life, how they see their place among the nations of the world.

The Jewish people are bound to divinity as part of our appearance in history. It is not a question of personal faith, but a question of the ancient emergence of the Hebrew or Israelite people in history, bound to the idea of G-d. The Jewish people was not formed or did not appear as a kind of sociological development of families and tribes merging and unifying by carving a certain common identity based on language or territory.

Uniquely, the Jewish people's emergence is based on the idea that G-d and Abraham and his descendants are bound in a covenant, which has been internalised by the Jewish people for thousands of years. When a Jewish child is born, on the 8th day he is circumcised: this goes back thousands of years to the time of Abraham our patriarch and Jews when they have a baby and circumcise it, they are doing something which is not a choice, but rather something which is deeply internalised in the Jewish faith, custom, and way of being.

Despite the various attempts to eliminate Jewish identity, Jews have persevered and retained our specificity, also fulfilling the national aspirations by the establishment of the State of Israel. Israel as the Jewish state exists amid international hostility. So my first explanation is historical: we cannot escape what is apparently our Jewish fate, while the world cannot free or cleanse itself of marginalizing and despising the Jews alone.

Is there a political explanation as well?

A second level of explanation, more contemporary, is de-legitimation. The assumption is that there are different wars that you can conduct against an enemy: Israel is the enemy, against which the Arabs conducted unsuccessful military wars, economic wars of unsuccessful boycott and the recent method of psychological warfare by demonizing the Israelis and politically de-legitimising Israel in the world. Basically, it is a campaign, and the result of this campaign will define the success of the Arabs' struggle against Israel. Campaigns aim at convincing people of something and altering their behaviour— take for instance the anti-smoking campaign: everywhere smoking is prohibited now, because people are convinced that smoking in public is a socially illegitimate behaviour.

Here you have a campaign initiated by various actors, including Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims in general, sustained by European and even Jewish supporters, the goal of which is to de-legitimise Israel by stereotyping Israel in a very negative fashion and using some slogans, including the occupation, the defacing of Muslim identity in Jerusalem, the mistreatment of Arab Israelis, the illegality of settlements.

Just repeat those slogans in the media, in public discussions, in political arenas, and you have an impact, which is when people believe not in what is real but in what they hear over and over again. The main goal is to undermine Israel's sense of national justice, but it has so far been unsuccessful.

You claim that Palestinians do not have a legitimate right to establish a Palestinian state in the historical Land of Israel, including Judea and Samaria. Even if you deny Palestinian national identity, Palestinian Arabs have a legitimate right to statehood. In particular, what would you consider a fair and just solution to the question of Arabs living in the territories?

Because Palestine is used as a term and a name in place of and in rejection of Israel, it is in Israel's national interest to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state. The Palestinians call it Palestine, while we call it Israel: if we give them part of the land, they will consider it as a victory, and continue and try to liberate all of what they consider Palestine. It is an "either-or" conflict.

Jews, who were portrayed in history as a people with a moral mission, have a deep consciousness of justice having brought the idea of law as a means for governing human communities. Jews struggled for liberty and self-determination for African-Americans in the USA and Blacks in South Africa. In this sense too Israel represents a moral enterprise, for Jewish liberation from humiliation, persecution, and subjugation, and therefore a Jewish state was and is a question of justice.

However, one must not forget that Israel is a state, and vis-à-vis the Palestinians it should not operate on the basis of abstract moral principles, but rather on the basis of national interest. Therefore, granting the Palestinians something because they have nothing is depicted as a wonderful moral gesture, but it is essentially detrimental to Israel's interests. We have moral, political, and pragmatic criteria of decision-making, whereby a state should not do what harms it.

In this regard, one can say that Palestinians, as they have chosen to call themselves and their political future could and should be across the river in Jordan. Jordan as a state is an illegitimate state: British colonialism established it in 1920 on an area inhabited by different Arabic-speaking tribes. There is no Jordanian national literature or lore, no Jordanian history, no Jordanian people, since it is an artificial entity. In the past Arab families and peoples from the West Bank of the Jordan River used to migrate to the East Bank, in what was once called Transjordan, which eventually became the Kingdom of Jordan in 1950. There in Jordan, the Palestinians are the majority of the population and Amman the capital of Jordan is the largest Palestinian city in the world. Approximately two-thirds of Jordanians identify themselves to be Palestinian in origin.

There is no other solution, regionally and globally, but to see Jordan as the political focus of the Palestinian people: that is their home, where they are the majority and it should be their state. Jordan, with or without the Hashemite Kingdom, ought to be recognised as the state of the Palestinians, and this would draw Palestinians from the West Bank as well as Palestinians from refugee camps in Lebanon and Syria to come to Jordan because that would be their home, with their flag and their sense of political empowerment, national dignity and national sovereignty.

The Jordan River should be considered as a political border, and hopefully a peaceful border, between Israel the Jewish state west of the river, and an Arab state east of the river, called Palestine. This solution fits with the illegitimacy of the Hashemite Kingdom; it fits in with historic migratory movements of Arabs from what is now Israel to what is now Jordan; it fits in with the demographic status of Palestinians there as well as with the Oslo agreements whose intention was to separate the Jews from the Arabs. This would be a good solution to the conflict, which seems to be irresolvable, but in order to resolve it we have first to accept the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish state, the right of Israelis to a normal life, and to think of Palestine as East and not West of

the river. This requires, however, a dramatic shift in thinking, and therefore “Jordan as a Palestinian homeland” should be promoted as a new paradigm for solving the conflict.

Interview with Eli Hertz, President of “Myths and Facts” <http://www.mythsandfacts.org/index.asp>



Politically, the term “Palestine” is used with the meaning of “homeland of the Palestinian people”. However, it has not been always so. What is the original meaning of “Palestine”?

Palestine is a geographical area, not a nationality.

The Arabs invented a special national entity in the 1960s (rather than a geographic delineation) called the Palestinians, specifically for political gain. They brand Israelis as invaders and claim the geographic area called Palestine belongs exclusively to the Arabs.

The word *Palestine* is not even Arabic. It is a word coined by the Romans around 135 CE from the name of a seagoing Aegean people who settled on the coast of Canaan in antiquity – the *Philistines*. The name was chosen to replace Judea, as a sign that Jewish sovereignty had been eradicated following the Jewish Revolts against Rome.

In the course of time, the Latin name *Philistia* was further bastardized into *Palistina* or Palestine. During the next 2,000 years, Palestine was never an independent state belonging to any people, nor did a Palestinian people, distinct from other Arabs, appear during 1,300 years of Muslim hegemony in Palestine under Arab and Ottoman rule.

But Palestine also refers to a people...

Palestine was and is *solely a geographic name*. Therefore, it is not surprising that in modern times the name ‘Palestine’ or ‘Palestinian’ was applied as an adjective to *all* inhabitants of the geographical area between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River – Palestine Jews and Palestine Arabs alike. In fact, until the 1960s, most Arabs in Palestine preferred to identify themselves merely as part of the great Arab nation or citizens of “southern Syria.”

The term ‘Palestinian’ as a noun was usurped and co-opted by the Arabs in the 1960s as a tactic initiated by Yasser Arafat to brand Jews as intruders on someone else’s turf. He presents Arab residents of Israel and the Territories as indigenous inhabitants since time immemorial. This fabrication of peoplehood allowed Palestinian Arabs to gain parity with the Jewish people as a nation deserving of an independent state.

What does the political use of “Palestine” imply?

In a March 1977 interview in the Dutch newspaper *Trouw*, Zahir Muhsein, a member of the PLO executive committee, admitted: “Only for political and tactical reasons do we speak today about the existence of a Palestinian people, since Arab national interests demand that we posit the existence of a distinct Palestinian people to oppose Zionism.”

You said that “Palestinian” once referred to Arabs and Jews alike. Indeed, the famous Zionist poster designed by Franz Kraus for the Jewish Agency reports the call “Come Visit Palestine”.

Historically, before the Arabs fabricated the Palestinian people as an exclusively Arab phenomenon, no such group existed. This is substantiated in countless official British Mandate-vintage documents that speak of ‘the Jews’ and ‘the Arabs’ of Palestine – not ‘Jews and Palestinians.’

Ironically, before local Jews began calling themselves Israelis in 1948 (the name ‘Israel’ was chosen for the newly-established Jewish state), the term ‘Palestine’ applied almost exclusively to Jews and the institutions founded by new Jewish immigrants in the first half of the 20th century, before independence. Some examples include:

- The *Jerusalem Post*, founded in 1932, was called the *Palestine Post* until 1948.
- Bank Leumi L’Israel was called the “Anglo-Palestine Bank, a Jewish Company.”
- The Jewish Agency – an arm of the Zionist movement engaged in Jewish settlement since 1929 – was called the Jewish Agency for Palestine.
- The house organ of American Zionism in the 1930s was called *New Palestine*.
- Today’s Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, founded in 1936 by German Jewish refugees who fled Nazi Germany, was called the “Palestine Symphony Orchestra, composed of some 70 Palestinian Jews.”
- The United Jewish Appeal (UJA) was established in 1939 as a merger of the United Palestine Appeal and the fundraising arm of the Joint Distribution Committee.

If you watch the blockbuster 1960 hit movie “Exodus,” based on the novel by Leon Uris, you will see how recent this appellation is. The hero, a native-born Jewish pioneer called Ari ben Canaan, talks of his love for Palestine.

Near Eastern Arabs define themselves as “Palestinians”. You claim, however, that this is a fabricated identity. How has the Palestinian national narrative developed?

Encouraged by their success at historical revisionism and brainwashing the world with the ‘Big Lie’ of a Palestinian people, Palestinian Arabs have more recently begun to claim they are the descendants of the Philistines and even the Stone Age Canaanites. Based on that myth, they can claim to have been ‘victimized’ twice by the Jews: in the conquest of Canaan by the Israelites and by the Israelis in modern times – a total fabrication. Archeologists explain that the Philistines were a Mediterranean people who settled along the coast of Canaan in 1100 BCE. They have no connection to the Arab nation, a desert people who emerged from the Arabian Peninsula.

As if that myth were not enough, Arafat has also claimed “Palestinian Arabs are descendants of the Jebusites” displaced when King David conquered Jerusalem. Arafat has also argued that “Abraham was an Iraqi.” One Christmas Eve, Arafat declared that “Jesus was a Palestinian,” a preposterous claim that echoes the words of Hanan Ashwari, a Christian Arab, who in an interview during the 1991 Madrid Conference said: “Jesus Christ was born in my country, in my land,” claiming she was “the descendant of the first Christians” – disciples who spread the gospel around Bethlehem some 600 years before the Arab conquest. If her claim were true, it would be tantamount to confessing that she is a Jew!

Is the Palestinian claim to peoplehood also fabricated?

Culturally, Palestinians cannot distinguish their endeavors from other Arabs. The only innovations Palestinians can take credit for are using skyjackings – which they initiated in 1968 as a political instrument, and suicide bombers – refined since the advent of the Oslo Accords in 1993 as a political weapon that now cynically is turning Arab’s own youth into suicide bombers that target other civilians. There is absolutely no precedent elsewhere in the world for the Palestinian 6th grade language primer that contains a poem exalting: “I will take my soul into my hands and hurl it into the abyss of death.”

In the wake of the Palestinians’ newest guerrilla warfare against Israel, the al Aqsa Intifada launched by Arafat in September 2000, people are closely examining Palestinian claims to nationhood. Barry Chamish, Dov B. Fischer, and countless others seek to ascertain the truth. If there is an ancient Palestinian history, why can’t they find any world-renowned Palestinian artists or scientists, or at least one Palestinian literary masterpiece or breakthrough invention – anything that distinguishes Palestinians as a people?