

What is Palestine? History and Terminology

by

Richard Bennett
Southern College of Technology

After a recent class in ancient history, a student asked about Palestine and its ethnic background. This was one of the more difficult aspects of terminology which I encountered when writing my dissertation.¹ As will be seen below, the nature of recent political and diplomatic activity relating to the Middle East, especially since the end of Desert Storm, has even further complicated the meaning and use of the word Palestine. Historically, there are two principal reasons for the confusion surrounding the use of this term. First, the word "Palestine" came into use long after the ethnic character of the region to which it refers was already well-established. Second, because it lacks an historical foundation rooted in either a particular culture or ethnicity, "Palestine" has been accorded a variety of meanings, especially during the twentieth century.

Any reference to Palestine focuses on the geographical region of the southern Levant.² Throughout history, this territory has been referred to by a variety of terms.³ However, it was not until 135 C.E., when the Roman emperor Hadrian had suppressed the second Jewish revolt against Rome (the Bar Kochba/Kosiba Revolt) that "Palestine" was used to refer to the region.⁴

During the second Jewish revolt against Rome, 132-135 C.E., the Romans suffered serious military losses. One Roman legion likely was destroyed, and at least two others were significantly diminished in strength and number.⁵ When Hadrian addressed the Roman Senate after suppressing the revolt, he omitted the usual phrase "and the army" in his official greeting, asserting only "I am well."⁶ Subsequently, Hadrian attempted to eliminate the very existence of Judaism. He proscribed the practice of circumcision and other Jewish ceremonies, and sought to burn Jewish writings and scriptures. In an effort to erase Jewish identification with their traditional homeland, the term Palestine (Latin: *Palestina*) was introduced to refer to the region of the southern Levant west of the Jordan river.

The derivation of "Palestine" comes from an ancient people, the Philistines, who were strangers to the Levant and, according to the Bible, often regarded as enemies of the Israelites.⁷ In the last fifty years, archaeology has greatly enhanced our knowledge of the Philistines. It is likely that they were ethnically part of the same population known to the Mediterranean world as the Mycenaeans, and to the Egyptians as the PLST.⁸ If this assumption is correct, they were Indo-Europeans who had established a wide-ranging commercial empire around the Mediterranean during the last half of the second millennium B.C.E. In the wake of the Trojan war, and at the time of the Dorian migration into the region of present day Greece, a wave of activity and destruction occurred around

the Mediterranean. Some Myceneans travelled to the west, settling in southern Italy and Sicily.⁹ Others, described in contemporary documents as the Sea Peoples, travelled toward the eastern Mediterranean. In their path lay ancient towns and civilizations, and in their wake lay destruction. The Hittite civilization was so completely destroyed that its existence, in all but literary references, was lost until the twentieth century C.E. At Ras Shamra, ancient Ugarit, clay cuneiform tablets containing diplomatic correspondences referring to the advance of the Sea Peoples were still being fired in the kiln when the city was abandoned and destroyed, presumably by the rapidly advancing Sea Peoples.¹⁰ Elsewhere along the eastern Mediterranean coast, with only a few curious exceptions, city after city lay in ruins following the movement of these Sea Peoples.

When the Sea Peoples reached the southern Levantine coast, about 1180 B.C.E., they apparently paused to prepare for an attack on Egypt. It may have been either at that time, or after the attack, that they established what would become a long-lived presence in the Levant.¹¹ Whatever may have been the case, after 1180 B.C.E. the Philistines had created a small state in the southwestern Levant, centered on the five cities of Ashdod, Askalon, Gaza, Gath, and Ekron, and for a time they seem to have attempted to expand the territory under their control.¹² Although the Philistines brought with them an Indo-European, Mycenean culture, archaeological remains suggest that they also quickly adopted Levantine customs.¹³

Until about 600 B.C.E. Philistia was one of a number of kingdoms in the Levant which at times sought to expand its territory and hegemony and at other times attempted to cooperate with its neighbors in resisting Egyptian or Mesopotamian efforts to control the Levant. It was the Babylonians that would eventually prove too strong for the Philistines. As a result, by 598 B.C.E., more than a decade before the Babylonian captivity of the people of Judah began, Philistia ceased to exist except as a memory. Although the exact fate of the Philistines is uncertain, they were probably either transported to other regions under Babylonian control, or they simply melted into an increasingly ethnically mixed population, probably intermarrying with Samaritans, Jews, Idumeans (i.e., Edomites), and later perhaps Greeks. In any case, by 598 B.C.E., the Philistines, and Philistia, lost all independent political and ethnic identity.

Subsequent political rulers, be they Persian, Greek, Hasmonean, or Roman, acknowledged neither a uniquely Philistine presence nor an ethnic Philistine identity in the Levant. By the beginning of its Roman period (64 B.C.E.), the southern Levant had been divided into several geographically-based administrative regions under the supervision of the province of Syria. One of these was the former Philistine coastal area of the southern Levant between Ashdod and Gaza which the Greeks had termed "Palestine."¹⁴ Thus, when Hadrian used the term "Palestine", and applied it to the southern Levant, it was devoid of political, cultural, and specifically ethnic connotations. It was simply a term referring to an intentionally imprecise geographical territory which avoided any link between that territory and the Jews. On the other hand, if the ethnic character of a territory is based on the ethnicity of the majority of the inhabitants of a region (which currently seems to be the case), the Jews would necessarily have been the "Palestinians" of Hadrian's time.

After Hadrian's death in 138 C.E., the Romans discontinued their overt effort to rob

Jews of their identity. Jews then lived in "Palestine" more freely, and were permitted to renew their cultural and religious practices in the region.¹⁵ After the rise of Constantine (312-337 C.E.), the use of "Palestine" to refer to the region was mingled with other references, such as "Holy Land." Among the Jews, however, the region continued to be known as Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. After 325 C.E., Hadrian's Aelia Capitolina was purged of its pagan character in favor of its Christian and Jewish identity, and the former name of the city was restored: Jerusalem.¹⁶

In the seventh century C.E., after the Muslim conquest of the Levant, the southern and central sectors of formerly Roman "Palestine" (i.e. Judea and Samaria) were known as "Jund Filastin," which referred to the military district of Palestine.¹⁷ This designation was geographical in character and was discontinued after the Seljuk invasion of the region in the eleventh century. Under the Ottoman empire, the entire territory was part of the Vilayet of Syria. It was not until the late nineteenth century, that the Western world again commonly referred to the region as "Palestine," and the Middle Eastern world, in response to Zionism, renewed the use of the Arab equivalent: "Filastin."

When the Ottoman rulers, who conquered the region in the 1500s, divided the southern Levant west of the Jordan into administrative districts, it was based on three leading cities in the region, creating the sanjaks of Acre, Nablus, and Jerusalem. The Turks used the word "Filastin," but employed it as a vague and geographically imprecise term for a southern Levant in which the borders were not well-defined. In the 1880s, the Ottomans created a new Sanjak of Beirut, which then included Acre and Nablus.¹⁸ At that time, the Sanjak of Jerusalem gained a measure of autonomy, reporting directly to Constantinople (Istanbul). This arrangement served to further divide the already complicated southern Levant. Rather than create a unique "Filastin" identity among the inhabitants, Jewish or otherwise, the region remained an area of amorphous diversity.

Generally speaking, at the end of the nineteenth century, the inhabitants of the southern Levant, along with those elsewhere in the region, considered themselves to be Syrians. Nationalism, especially in relation to Palestine/Filastin, was virtually unknown.¹⁹ Loyalties were to family, religion, and either the Ottoman empire or one's own town or village.²⁰

After Britain's defeat of Napoleon at Acre in 1799, British interest in the region led to a gradual increase in her presence there. Initially, a considerable part of this interest was archaeological and religious romanticism, but after the building of the Suez Canal, the southern Levant increasingly became militarily significant as well.²¹ The word "Palestine" reappeared as a geographical term to distinguish the southern Levant from the larger territory in which Britain had relatively less interest. Politically, "Palestine" was expanded to include the region east of the Jordan River as well, though this addition would only be historically significant for a brief period at the end of World War I, when the notion of a Jewish homeland was still being developed.

With the growth of competing Western interests in the region and in the face of increasing Zionist interest, after the Young Turk revolution of 1908 an incipient "Palestinian" nationalism began to emerge.²² In Cairo and Constantinople, the print media wrote with increasing frequency about Zionism. Eventually a diffuse Arab anti-Zionist movement emerged throughout the eastern Mediterranean world.²³ Objections

Technically, the term was also applicable to some Jews whose ancestors had, since ancient times, continued to reside in the four Jewish cities of Safed, Tiberias, Jerusalem, and Hebron. However, the British dealt with the Jews and Zionism via a separate branch of their military administration so that all Jews, whether Zionists or not, whether residents of the region for centuries or new arrivals, were treated as a separate ethnic and political entity, and not as "Palestinians." In so doing, these British officers essentially created the two ethnic elements of the modern period in the southern Levant.³⁰ By extracting a portion of the long-resident "Palestinian" population, and by expounding that term to include the newly arrived non-Jewish, mostly Muslim residents, "Palestine" was, for virtually the first time in history, imbued with a meaning that was more than geographical.³¹

British activities under the Palestine mandate, 1920-1948, served to confuse the meaning of "Palestine" still further. During World War I and the peace negotiations, the British considered "Palestine" as the regions of the southern Levant both east and west of the Jordan River. This understanding of "Palestine" was also in effect when the Balfour Declaration was issued in 1917.³² Then in 1922, at the Cairo Conference, Britain separated that portion of Palestine east of the Jordan River into a separate political sphere called Transjordan.³³ Very soon thereafter, "Palestine" virtually referred to only the territory of the southern Levant west of the Jordan River.³⁴ Throughout these changes, however, the so-called "Palestinian Arabs" continued to assert their self-identification as Syrian Arabs (even though Syria had become a mandated territory under French control, and Feisal had been driven out of Syria altogether), and rejected association with the term Palestinian. Negatively, this was in rejection of Zionism and of international decisions which separated the region of Palestine from Syria. Positively, they were asserting what they considered their own, true identity. In their perspective, the term "Palestinian" referred more to the Jews and Zionists who were increasingly entering the region than it did to them. This would continue to be the case until 1948.

In May 1948 the independent state of Israel was created within a portion of the territory previously included in Britain's mandate for Palestine, and the Zionist War of Independence erupted. This created as many, if not more, problems with identity than it solved. The ceasefire in 1949 left parts of former "Palestine" under Transjordanian control (the "West Bank") and Egyptian control (the "Gaza Strip"), with the remainder comprising the newly created state of Israel. Thousands of people had been displaced by the war. Jews, some of whose families had lived since ancient times in the territory which had come under Transjordanian control, fled to Israel. Some non-Jews who had lived in the territory which comprised the state of Israel fled to Lebanon, Syria, or Egypt. Others became refugees in the "West Bank" or the "Gaza Strip." Still others were to be found living inside the borders of the state of Israel. Those who had fled to Lebanon, Syria, or Egypt found themselves trapped in Muslim Arab countries which refused to absorb the refugees. Ironically, even refugees who had previously considered themselves part of Greater Syria found that they were unwelcome there. The Jews who resided in Israel were immediately absorbed into the state and identified as Israelis.³⁵ For the non-Jewish refugees, however, dispersal had created an identity crisis. For them, there was no separate, independent state, and never had been one, whether it be called "Palestine"

or something else. Syrian identity was also questionable. How would one retain a sense of identity not only among the refugees, but also with those who remained within the state of Israel? Furthermore, King Abdullah of Transjordan annexed the West Bank to Transjordan shortly after the ceasefire, renaming his kingdom Jordan. During the ensuing decade, the refugees from "Palestine" who lived in other Muslim countries, those who lived in the "West Bank" of the Kingdom of Jordan and in the "Gaza Strip," and those who had not fled during the war but continued to live within the borders of Israel, came to accept a common identification as "Palestinians." This occurred almost two decades after all Jewish association with the term had been vacated. The term "Palestinian" was one "thread" which united these diverse, non-Jewish communities to their common past as residents of the region the British called "Palestine."

Recently, it has become politically popular in some circles to attempt to "Palestinize" history, the post-Desert Storm vision of a "new world order" serving as a catalyst. Some "Palestinians" are suggesting that Jesus and the early Christian Church were not Jewish, but Palestinian (a century before the term was even used by Hadrian). They assert that Palestinians are pre-Christian, pre-Jewish inhabitants of a nation of Palestine - before even the notion of national states existed - and are therefore part of a very ancient ethnic heritage which they now call "Palestinian."³⁶ While sympathy and understanding for the lack of an ancient, historical self-identity for those now called "Palestinian" is appropriate, an inaccurate rewriting of history can never be the solution to a political problem. Never in history has there existed a Palestinian state, or anything remotely similar to it in the modern sense of the word, nor is there an historical, ethnic identity which can be linked to such a state. One simply cannot justify the creation of an independent state of Palestine today by trying to artificially create such a linkage.

This is not to deny modern day "Palestinians" the right to use the term and to make that the foundation of their identity. Indeed, whatever may be the future course of politics in the Middle East, for hundreds of thousands of refugees the geographic region from which they fled was at the time known by the world as "Palestine." It is this term which unites those who fled with those who remained in their communities. Certainly the use of the term "Palestinian" as an identifying name for these people is logical. In many ways they are experiencing a latter day genesis of a people, forged out of their relationship with a particular geographic region, similar to that which the Jews experienced millennia ago in the same area.

What is "Palestine"? Who are "Palestinians"? The problem of terminology has created a historical "shadow" which seems to have much deeper roots than really exist. Unfortunately, the complicated Middle East situation only frustrates what is basically an irresolute problem of terminology and ambiguity. As "Palestinian Arabs" now try to "Palestinize" history in support of their developing sense of identity, and the Israelis deny them any "Palestinian" identity before 1948, the entire situation is becoming even more riddled with inaccuracy and confusion.

NOTES

1. "The Anglo-Egyptian Sudanese Influence in the Occupied Enemy Territory Administration, South, 1917-1920," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Florida State University, 1993).
2. The Levant is approximately the region occupied by the current states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel including the West Bank and Gaza Strip. (The territory of the Sinai Peninsula is also sometimes included in the Levant.)
3. For example: Canaan, Retenu, Aram-Israel-Philistia-Ammon-Moab-Edom, etc.
4. The abbreviations B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) and C.E. (Common Era) are often used by scholars in place of B.C. and A.D., respectively, for dating historical events without implicit religious bias.
5. Emil Schürer, The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.-A.D. 135), A New English Version Revised and Edited by Geza Vermes and Fergus Millar, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, Ltd., 1973), 1:547-9. The Legio xxii Deiotriana disappears from the Roman army list sometime between 119 C.E., when it was in Egypt, and 145 C.E., when it is omitted from a listing of the legions. Scholars suggest the Bar Kosiba revolt was a likely cause for this unit's disappearance. Schürer lists nine other legions or units involved in suppressing this revolt - an indication of its severity.
6. Ibid., 1:553. Citation is from Cassius Dio, lxi, 14, 3.
7. The Israelites were, of course, the ancestors of the Jewish people, the latter reference being derived from the southern Israelite tribe of Judah. During the period 1180 to 586, the Israelites controlled, to a greater or lesser degree, the territory of the southern Levant between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River/Rift Valley. However, throughout most of this same period, the Philistines, newly arrived in 1180 B.C.E., carved a kingdom out of the southwestern part of this same region.
8. PLST is the transliteration into western characters of the word used in ancient Egyptian writings to refer to the Philistines.
9. Since one of the tribes is identified in Levantine archaeology as the Sikil, it is possible that the word Sicily may be derived from this source.
10. Claude F. A. Schaeffer, "The Last Days of Ugarit," Biblical Archaeology Review IX:5 (September/October 1983): 74ff. Also in this same issue, see Peter C. Craige, "The Tablets from Ugarit and Their Importance for Biblical Studies", Biblical Archaeology Review IX:5 (September/October 1983): 62ff.
11. Ramses III recorded the Egyptian account of the attack on a wall at his mortuary temple at Medinet-Habu. He claimed to have won the battle and subsequently settled the five tribes of the Sea Peoples in various frontier areas of Egypt as mercenaries. The historical record is less certain that this was the actual outcome, however. (This uncertainty is commonly expressed among historians and archaeologists of the Ancient Near East, and was communicated to me personally by Anson Rainey during a course in 1985 at the American Institute of Holy Land Studies in Jerusalem, Israel).
12. Only one of these five cities, Gaza, lies in a region of disputed control today. In ancient times, until the rise of the Israelite king David, the Philistines seem to have made significant attempts to extend their control to the entire Levant. Only after David was securely on the throne does it seem that they were thereafter confined to the original region in the southwestern Levant.

13. See, for example, Avner Raban, Robert R. Stieglitz, "The Sea Peoples and Their Contribution to Civilization", Biblical Archaeology Review XVII:6 (November/December 1991): 34ff.
14. At the beginning of the Roman period, this arrangement was not entirely the case. The declining Hasmonean state remained in control of the region but under the tutelage of Rome and the supervision of Roman authorities in Syria. Only after the death of Herod the Great, and the deposition of his son Archelaus in 7 C.E., did the southern Levant indeed become a collection of small states under a Roman provincial official.
15. This freedom was primarily limited to Galilee, however. As late as the fourth century C.E., Jews were being permitted into Jerusalem only once each year - to mourn the loss of their temple (Schürer, 1:556-7). On the other hand, there are indications that by the later second or early third century C.E., the Jewish community may have even gained imperial favor.
16. This was the Roman city built on the ruins of Jerusalem after 135 C.E. It forms much of the basis for the Old City of Jerusalem's architecture yet today, and many remains of Aelia Capitolina are still in evidence.
17. Neville J. Mandel, The Arabs and Zionism Before World War I (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), xxii.
18. Mandel, xx.
19. Mandel, 40. In response to Jewish immigration after 1881, voices of concern were occasionally raised by a notable to the Ottoman government, but not in conjunction with concerns of nationalism or "Palestinian" identity.
20. This statement actually telescopes a complicated problem. Jews preferred to retain their own identity as Jews, and under the Ottoman millet system, there was provision for doing so among non-Muslim peoples. There were also Druze and eventually Bahais, as well as nomadic Bedouin, all of whom held to their own identities. In addition, neglect characterized Ottoman policy toward the Levant throughout much of its hegemony in the region, with the result that the region was actually only sparsely populated. Mandel suggests estimates of 500,000 to 700,000 persons (Mandel, xxi). However, as late as 1910, probably over 90% of the population was Muslim. Nevertheless, all regarded themselves as dwelling in the Ottoman province of Syria.
21. Britain's interest was due to the Suez Canal which afforded better access to India, which she regarded as the jewel in the crown of her colonial holdings.
22. In addition to Great Britain, France and Russia had religious interests in the southern Levant, and France held a broad interest in the region, derived from the period of the Crusades.
23. Mandel, 223-227. There was no consistent voice among the media. Some supported the Zionism for the new possibilities it might bring to the Levant; others were neither strongly supportive nor resistant. It was only after two or three years of such activity that a significant anti-Zionist voice was sounded. It is well to remember that most of the population throughout the region at this time was illiterate. Hence, the use of print media was primarily targeted at a relatively small elite, whether in the Levant or the general region of the Middle East.
24. Mandel, 128-9. Initially the periodical even accepted articles from Jews. It became focused against Zionism only after the Committee on Union and Progress, which controlled the Ottoman government after 1908, appeared open to Zionism because of the potential financial support it could bring from European

Jewry. See Mandel, 172.

25. Filastin ii, 66, 31/8/1912. Cited in Mandel, 128, n 55.

26. Mandel, 231.

27. Initially this came in the Balfour Declaration, issued by the British government on November 2, 1917. This asserted Britain's support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine, and was issued with broad agreement among Britain's western allies. This was eventually adopted by the San Remo Conference of 1920 and provided a legal basis for the subsequent developments of Zionism between the wars.

28. "Sharif" was a traditional title, akin to ruler or governor, for the individual controlling the Hijaz, where these cities were located. However, in June 1916 Sharif Hussein had declared Hijazi independence and launched an Arab Revolt against the Hijazi's Ottoman rulers. In part, British support for Feisal's desire to be king of Syria stemmed from negotiations carried on by Britain and Sharif Hussein during the early years of World War I. Though never fully concluded, the Arab Revolt was associated with Britain's eventual drive into the Levant at the end of the war.

29. "Anglo-Egyptian Sudanese" refers to Egypt and Sudan, which had come under British control in the late nineteenth century. Through a "condominium" arrangement, the Sudan was an autonomous territory under the British Consul-General in Cairo. British officers serving in this region are commonly referred to as Anglo-Egyptian Sudanese officials, and frequently crossed between the two regions in carrying out their duties.

30. As has been shown, the idea was not entirely new or unrecognized before the British controlled the region. On the other hand there is little continuity between prewar "Palestinian nationalism" and that of the postwar period. The context was different, the leadership changed, even the religious venue shifted from the Christian to the Muslim sphere. The war had rearranged many alliances and may have enabled a political state to develop despite the heterogeneity of the population. This remains an open question. Clearly there were many who would have supported this approach, both among the Jews and the non-Jewish inhabitants. However, the administration set up by Britain's military officials "created" two factions so that the possibility for unity had already passed by late 1918.

31. Even the Palestine National Covenant of the Palestine Liberation Organization, adopted 28 May 1964, recognizes the right of certain Jewish segments to continue to dwell in the region (Article 7). The interpretation of which Jewish segments are intended is open to question, however. Does it include only those who lived in, or are descended from those who dwelt in the land before 1914-1917? Or are those who dwelt in the region, and their descendants, until the 1948 Israeli War of Independence also "Palestinians"?

32. In official correspondence between London, Cairo, and Jerusalem, "Palestine Arab" seems only to have been used with reference to the region west of the Jordan River. Since there were so few Jews, or almost anyone other than Bedouin living east of the Jordan River, it was really unnecessary that the distinction of Palestinian Arab be extended to that territory. The ultimate effect was to make Palestine all the more ambiguous, however. British officials also eventually disavowed that inclusion of the territory east of the Jordan River had ever been intended in that region which was covered by the Balfour Declaration.

33. This decision angered many Zionists (though they had little choice but to accept it) as well as many Arabs (who chafed at the Western concept of national boundaries).

34. Until Transjordan received its independence from Britain, it continued to be officially included in the mandate for Palestine. However, when reference to the territory east of the Jordan River was intended, it was subsequently by the term "Transjordan". "Palestine" then was almost exclusively used to refer to that

region west of the Jordan River. This decision was also the basis for the development of a radical wing in Zionism, the Revisionists, who, under Jabotinski and later Menachem Begin, advocated restoration of the area of Transjordan to "Palestine."

35. Virtually no Jews continued to live in the "West Bank" or "Gaza Strip" after the war.

36. See, for example, the following articles in the Jerusalem Post International Edition: "Lutheran and other Triumphalism", January 2, 1993, p. 13; "One Way Thinking", February 20, 1993, p. 7; "Terminology - the Ultimate Weapon", February 27, 1993, p. 13; and "Abraham was a Moslem: Arab Professor", April 3, 1993, p. 3. In addition, this author has personally heard both Arabs and Palestinians make the assertions reflected in these and other articles on the subject.