

Isn't it all about religion?

Religion is a big part of many people's lives in Palestine and Israel. Most Palestinians are Muslims, but there are Christian communities too. Most Jewish Israelis follow a form of Judaism.

Christianity, Islam and Judaism all share common history and beliefs. They are called the "Abrahamic" religions because they all count Abraham as a key figure.

There have been times of violence, but also long periods of history when people of these three faiths lived peacefully together.

Promised land

The Torah, the holy book of Judaism, tells of how God promised Jews a homeland. Jews found themselves slaves in Egypt before Moses led them to freedom, and later again in Babylon. The Romans again exiled Jews in the second century. This history of exile and return is important to Jewish identity and fed into the idea of Zionism, the movement for a Jewish homeland. Jews were spread around the world once more, but they wanted to return to the ancient homeland.

"This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you back the land of Israel again."

Ezekiel 11:17

Although Jews lived under different rulers in the "Holy Land" across the centuries, the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 had a religious significance for many.

Today, some Israeli settlers in the West Bank refer to the promises in the Torah as one reason they should be able to take Palestinian land.

Zionism

In the 19th century, Jews in Europe started thinking about a national home for the diaspora, their scattered community. This was driven by the exclusion and discrimination Jews experienced, as well as their religious beliefs.

"Zion" is the ancient Hebrew word for Jerusalem so people who were part of this new movement became known as Zionists. Though other places were considered, most Zionists hoped they could make their national home in Palestine, then ruled by the Ottoman Empire, because of the Jewish people's historical and biblical connection to the land.

There was a small community of Jews native to Palestine, having lived alongside the Arab majority for centuries.

An Austro-Hungarian Jew called Theodor Herzl led the growing movement.

"We shall live at last as free men on our own soil, and die peacefully in our own homes."

Theodor Herzl

Some Zionists were religious, some were secular, but the movement was united in a quest for a Jewish state. Jewish immigration to Palestine grew, particularly under the British Mandate after World War I, and Zionists organised the political campaign for a state. In 1948 the state of Israel was declared in Palestine, realising the Zionist goal.

While many Jews identified as Zionists, not all Jews agreed with Zionism, and some don't agree with it today.



RESOURCE 17-A

Jihad

Jihad is the Muslim concept of struggle, spoken of by the Prophet Muhammad. It is often divided into the 'greater jihad' and the 'lesser jihad'. The greater jihad describes the internal struggle all Muslims experience to live out their faith.

The lesser jihad refers to fighting against enemies of Islam.

Some Palestinians call the fight against Israel a jihad. One armed group is called 'Islamic Jihad'. There are other Palestinian armed groups that do not make the link with religion.

The Prophet Muhammad also spoke of the need for Muslims to defend themselves when attacked. Some Palestinians feel justified in violent jihad because they feel Israel attacked them.

Jerusalem

The city of Jerusalem is sacred to Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Abraham is a key ancient figure for all three religions and it was on the site that they believe he offered up his son as a sacrifice to God. There are also particular reasons each faith looks to the city.

Today, Muslims pray facing the city of Mecca, towards the Kaaba. This practice is called the 'Qibla'. But for several years, early Muslims, exiled from their home in Mecca, had prayed facing Jerusalem, a city long held holy by their neighbours the Jews. The change was made in the Prophet Muhammad's lifetime. Muslims call Jerusalem 'al-Quds', or 'The Holy'.

For Christians, Jerusalem is also significant, above all as the place where Jesus was crucified. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre and other sites mark this.

For Jews, Jerusalem has great religious significance. The first temple was built by King Solomon but destroyed by the Babylonians. The second temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt by 526BCE and renovated grandly by King Herod the Great in the 1st century BCE. The temple was the site of the Holy of Holies, the place you get closest to God. The second temple was the destination for many Jewish pilgrims, including

Jesus, but the Romans destroyed it in 70CE and it has never been rebuilt. Only the Western Wall remained intact. Some Jews believe the temple is destined to be rebuilt on this site.

In 705CE, when Muslim rulers controlled the city, al-Aqsa Mosque was built on the site of the temple. Today, thousands of Muslim Palestinians go to the mosque to worship. In 2002 the Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon entered the mosque with a large armed force, which was part of what led to the Second Intifada, or Palestinian uprising. In fact, it is sometimes called the al-Aqsa Intifada.

Next to the mosque lies the Western Wall. It is the last remaining part of the second temple, a place where Jews from across the world visit and pray.

For centuries, Muslims and Jews lived and worshipped alongside each other in Jerusalem, but today tensions are high. East Jerusalem is mostly Palestinian, but occupied and controlled by Israel. The future religious and ethnic make-up of the city is a source of conflict.

In 2017 thousands of Muslims protested and prayed in the streets when Israeli authorities installed new metal detectors at the entrances to al-Aqsa Mosque. There were clashes and Israel banned men aged under 50 from the mosque.

Religion in Palestine and Israel

Alongside the Jewish majority, 18 per cent of Israelis are Muslim; 2 per cent are Christian. In the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, most Palestinians are Muslim; 2 per cent are Christian.



Journaling

- How big a factor do you think religion is in the conflict for Palestinians and Israelis?
- Can religion be part of the solution?
- Do you think Zionism was driven more by Jews' religious identity or the everyday experience of antisemitism around the world?

Isn't it all about politics?

Israel consistently offered to give up land for Palestinians to realize their national aspirations. Unfortunately, Palestinian leaders, supported by a global network, said no to every offer and often followed these rejections with violence. The Jews, a historically oppressed minority, liberated and empowered themselves to protect their people, their rights, and the nation they re-established. They have used power with restraint and continually searched for peace.

Checkpoints save lives. They were a direct response to the brutal wave of violence... Israel put up its barrier to protect Israelis of all backgrounds from racist violence.

The hardships endured by innocent Palestinians are a by-product of the attacks Israelis continue to face, not a result of Israeli cruelty.

Stand With Us, pro-Israel international organisation
www.standwithus.com

I say: the time has come for my courageous and proud people, after decades of displacement and colonial occupation and ceaseless suffering, to live like other peoples of the earth, free in a sovereign and independent homeland.

Mahoud Abbas, Palestinian President (2011)

Jews, Christians, so many others can agree on one thing – Israel is a miracle, a state in the heart of the Middle East that has known democracy, pure democracy and liberty every day of its 70-year history, a pluralistic, open society, a democracy where diversity is celebrated, not feared.

Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel (2018)

Since its foundation in 1948 the state of Israel has established a body of laws, policies, and practices that have systematically oppressed Palestinians. 1.7 million [Palestinians in Israel] live as second class citizens... subject to over 65 laws that discriminate against them because they are Palestinian. In the West Bank, 2.1 million Palestinians are governed under a discriminatory, unjust system of military law, face home demolitions, and severe restrictions on their freedom of movement. In Gaza, 1.9 million Palestinians live under a brutal siege.

Palestine Solidarity Campaign, pro-Palestinian organisation in the UK
www.palestinecampaign.org

As a young soldier in the Six-Day War, I saw exactly what it means to defend such a narrow strip of land... If [the West Bank] was given to the Palestinians, Israel would be very vulnerable... Since 9/11, there have been no more than 20 terror attacks in America and Europe. Meanwhile, there have been thousands of attacks in Israel. You have to fight terror effectively here and that means controlling the envelope."

Uzi Dayan, Likud politician and former general in the Israel Defense Forces

Israel has one choice... either a one-state or a two-state solution. Recognition of Israel as a Jewish state would deny the right of the Palestinian people who are citizens of Israel and that is totally unacceptable. Israel cannot be a Jewish and a democratic state at the same time."

Mustafa Barghouti, Palestine Liberation Organisation (2016)

RESOURCE 17-B

We are here to stay, forever. There will be no more uprooting of settlements in the land of Israel. It has been proven that it does not help peace...We've uprooted settlements. What did we get? We received missiles. It will not happen anymore...

So we will not fold. We are guarding Samaria (Israeli term for the West Bank) against those who want to uproot us. We will deepen our roots, build, strengthen and settle.

Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel (2017)

Peace will not come if we stay neutral, We should be biased in favour of the oppressed. Occupation is the main cause of violence. Israeli leaders are not defending Israel, they are defending the occupation, Israeli apartheid, racism, and discrimination...

Issa Amro, Youth Against Settlements

In Israel, there is a peace camp that can convene 200,000 people in central square of this city, on very short notice, and there is a major movement among academics, politicians, thinkers, and public leaders for peace, even at a painful price. On the Palestinian side, you can find them individually here and there, but there is no public movement. There is a real need to begin preparation on the ground.

Ehud Barak, Prime Minister of Israel (2000)

We don't have a state, neither in Gaza nor in the West Bank. Gaza is under siege and the West Bank is occupied. What we have in the Gaza Strip is not a state, but rather a regime of an elected government. A Palestinian state will not be created at this time except in the territories of 1967... Our conflict is not with the Jews, our problem is with the occupation.

Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas leader (2008)

We see what Hamas, what kind of this organization, how radicals, their ideology, and we see the consequences every day. You know, the rockets on Israel – and I don't know any other countries that they will accept reality with, every day, rockets on their towns, cities.

Avigdor Lieberman, Israeli Defence Minister (2018)



Journaling

- Look at the political statements from Palestinian and Israeli leaders and supporters.
- Find two examples of persuasive language and explain why it is effective.
- What are the key points? Try summing up two statements in ten words or fewer.
- Try listing the basic needs or rights the politicians want for their people. For example, Israelis need safety from rockets.