Who Are the Palestinians? | Deep Dive with William Dalrymple

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> Historian William Dalrymple examines how Western education and colonial narratives have systematically erased Palestinians from their own history, despite extensive archaeological, documentary, and genetic evidence of deep continuity on the land across millennia.

SAŽETAK

William Dalrymple, a renowned British historian, explores the historical erasure of Palestinians in Western education and scholarship. He traces Palestinian presence in the region from at least 1200 BCE through continuities in language, religion, sacred sites, and DNA, revealing how successive populations—from Canaanites through Byzantine Christians to Arabic-speaking Muslims—remained rooted in the same territory across thousands of years. Dalrymple draws on archaeology, historical records, Ottoman tax documents, Byzantine sources, and recent genetic research to demonstrate that Palestinians were not newcomers or Arabs from elsewhere, but descendants of long-settled populations whose identity shifted through religious and linguistic transformation rather than wholesale displacement. He documents the specific case of Ashdod (Isdud), which stood for millennia before its inhabitants were expelled in 1948, and examines Gaza's historical significance as a centre of learning, trade, and culture. The conversation addresses how biblical and colonial narratives have dominated Western understanding, leaving Palestinians absent from their own history in schools and public discourse, and argues that understanding this history is essential to comprehending the present.

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> Palestinians have been systematically absent from Western historical narratives about the region, despite abundant evidence of their continuous presence and settlement from at least 1200 BCE onward.

> Archaeological and genetic evidence shows approximately 85% genetic continuity between modern Palestinians and Bronze Age skeletal populations from the same region, with Samaritans showing nearly 100% continuity.

> The region's population underwent successive religious and linguistic transformations (from Canaanite paganism to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and from Western Semitic to Aramaic to Greek to Arabic) while remaining largely rooted in the same territory and often the same families across millennia.

> The name Palestine has ancient origins dating to approximately 1200 BCE with the Peleset, persisting through Egyptian, Assyrian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Islamic, and Ottoman periods—spanning nearly three thousand years of recorded history.

> Multi-faith sacred sites throughout Palestine demonstrate long-term religious continuity, with shrines (often marking ancient Canaanite sacred locations) remaining venerated across different religious periods by the same communities.

> Gaza held extraordinary historical significance as a centre of Byzantine learning rivaling Athens and Alexandria, famous for its school of rhetoric and biblical scholarship, as well as for internationally traded wine and cultural sophistication.

> The Nakba of 1948 resulted in the sudden displacement and erasure of documented Palestinian communities like Ashdod, which had existed continuously for thousands of years; survivors' testimonies document the expulsion and remain available in archives at institutions like the American University of Beirut.

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The Absence of Palestinians from Their Own History

The rest of the world has learnt about Palestine for reasons other than the Palestinians who actually live there. The people who are actually tilling the soil, tending their herds, and looking after their vineyards remain in the background, distant and largely invisible. We do not learn their story. The Palestinians are oddly absent from their own history—in an extraordinary way. The story being told in this book, which emerged through research, is a story of peoples who remain largely rooted in the territory. Of course, like anywhere else, there are people passing through and administrations that change. The Turks come and go, and so on. But for most of history, the villagers have stayed on the land and farmed it. Palestinian history has been denied and erased for political reasons; it has been removed from the picture entirely. Despite that, the evidence is still very clearly there.

There have been amazing generations of Palestinian historians, including Walid Khalidi, who recently died. For anyone wanting to know about the villages of Palestine before 1948, the spectacular book All That Remains will tell you about every village in Palestine. The name Palestine itself goes back to about 2000 BCE with the Peleset and Medinet Habu. This was not something that was taught in British schools—it was a

major part of history that has informed the entire history of the Middle East ever since, yet people remain unaware of it.

Introduction: William Dalrymple on Palestinian History

William Dalrymple is one of Britain's most celebrated historians, bestselling author, and public intellectual. For decades, he has explored forgotten histories of empire, colonialism, religion, and the movements of peoples across continents. His work has challenged conventional understanding of history and revealed how power often shapes the narratives nations tell about themselves. At a time when Palestine has become one of the most debated and contested subjects in the world, questions about history have never been more important. Who are the Palestinians? Where do they come from? What does the historical record actually tell us about people who have lived in Palestine over thousands of years? And why has so much of this history been misunderstood, ignored, or even distorted in the West?

This conversation explores how history is taught in Britain, how colonial narratives continue to shape public understanding of Palestine, what archaeology, historical records, and even modern genetics research tell us about the region's past, and why understanding history remains essential to understanding the present.

The Personal Journey: Encountering Distorted Narratives in British Education

As a Scottish person who grew up in Britain, William Dalrymple has a very clear memory of a geography textbook from when he was about nine or ten years old. The textbook told the story—now much debated and dismissed—that the Israelis made the desert bloom. It contained pictures of olive trees that the Israelis had supposedly planted in the land. The same textbook featured pictures of Jaffa Oranges, which it credited as an industry that the Israelis created. This was taught in a Catholic school, with no obvious reason for such historical distortion. Yet in the 1970s, this was the kind of narrative being taught in British schools: the great miracle of an empty country suddenly becoming incredibly fertile when it had previously been only sand and desert. There was not a single mention of the Palestinians.

Later in his education, Dalrymple specialised in medieval history and chose an A-level syllabus focused on the Crusades, through which he learnt quite a lot about Palestine. But at no point did he learn about the Nakba or who the Palestinians were—they remained in the background of the Crusades narrative. The story centred on knights like Richard the Lionheart, and he learnt about Saladin, but never about any Palestinians. The narrative was something that happened in Palestine, yet the Palestinians themselves were absent. It was the Egyptians fighting, or the people of Damascus, Antioch, or Edessa in the foreground. The actual Palestinian villagers living in Bethlehem, Ramallah, Nablus, or Nazareth were absent from the story entirely.

Why Palestine Has Been Written Out of Its Own History

The curse that Palestine has always had is that the rest of the world has learnt about Palestine for reasons other than the Palestinians who actually live there. Most obviously, the biblical narrative—the Old Testament—focuses on the holiness of the Holy Land and the stories of Abraham, Isaac, David, and Saul. Then came Christianity, with Jesus, Pontius Pilate, and the apostles. The Qur'anic version includes the night journey. But in none of these narratives does the actual Palestinian who is working the land, picking olives, or growing the vines that made the great wines of Gaza appear. They are absent from the narrative. Even in respectable history books that are not attempting to mislead or take a deliberately Zionist angle, the story of Palestine can often read, by default, as the story of all the other peoples that invaded it.

The story becomes one of the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Syrians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, the Turks, and the British. The people who are actually tilling the soil, tending their herds, and looking after their vineyards are in the background, distant. If they appear at all, they appear in an orientalist photograph or as biblical figures in a landscape. But their story is not learnt. The Palestinians are oddly absent from their own history in an extraordinary way. You can study three volumes on the Crusades and never meet any of the people that lived there, other than the knights in the halls or the sweeping down from the heights of Hattin. The new project is to answer the question: Who are the Palestinians?

Much of this erasure comes not from deliberate distortion but from sins of omission—the focusing elsewhere, the failure to mention. When you finish school with an education about Palestine that has been distorted or is simply missing the Palestinians, you carry significant gaps in knowledge. It is only when you begin your own research and education as a historian that you start to ask the right questions.

The Journey to Palestine: Starting from the Arab World

One of the advantages of attending Cambridge was access to travel grants that could fund summer holidays for students without the means to make expensive trips to Palestine, Syria, or other parts of the Middle East. Trinity College, Cambridge, was particularly generous with such opportunities—filled with posters offering bursaries and travel grants to engineers, medievalists, and others. As a medieval historian, Dalrymple applied for a Pacific travel grant and was awarded funding to follow the routes of his studies.

The first journey followed the route of the First Crusade. For the second trip, seeking a longer journey and more funding, he followed the route of Marco Polo, a journey that started at the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Both of these journeys involved extended trips through the countries of the region. For the first time, he traveled all the way through Syria, through Jordan, and only then finally into the West Bank and East

Jerusalem. He came from the Arab world, not flying into Tel Aviv, but entering Palestine through the surrounding Arab territories.

This approach completely changed his perspective. He was swept away by what he saw in Syria. For a historian, it is like a paradise. The region contains great castles like Krak des Chevaliers and Sahyoun, wonderful Roman ruins like Apamea and Palmyra. Syria, certainly before the civil war, was an absolute treasure chest for historical study and exploration.

First Encounters and Educational Gaps

When I first arrived in Jerusalem, I noticed that Palestinians occupied a very different social position than Arabs in neighbouring countries like Jordan or Syria, who had access to the full range of occupations. In Jerusalem, Palestinians were sweeping the streets—they held the kinds of jobs that Black people were forced into in the segregated American South. They were visibly the underclass. Like many people, I began asking questions, but it was only through witnessing this directly that I truly grasped the situation.

One work that profoundly shaped my understanding was a novel by the Palestinian writer Soraya Antonius, called Weather Djinn Consult. Her father was George Antonius, the famous figure who wrote The Arab Awakening in the 1920s and 1930s. Soraya was born around the time of the Nakba, or perhaps just before, and was raised outside Palestine—in Lebanon and then France. The novel centered on the Arab Revolt of 1936 and the Nakba, and it fundamentally opened my eyes to the Palestinian perspective and experience.

The novel is essentially the story of the Antonius family themselves—Christian Palestinians from Jerusalem. George Antonius was a major figure in the Arab revival of the 1920s and 1930s, and he died just before the Nakba. His wife, Katie, survived it. They were prominent Jerusalem socialites; Katie was a famous hostess in Jerusalem during the 1930s and 1940s. Like so many families, they lost everything—their homes, their possessions, their entire lives. They ended up living with a single suitcase in someone else's house in Lebanon.

It was this book that truly awakened me to the injustices suffered by the Palestinians. Soraya Antonius has since been rediscovered, and Selma Dabbagh, a wonderful Palestinian novelist of my generation now living in London, has pioneered a new edition of another of her works called The Lord, about the Palestinian Revolt, published by the New York Review of Books, which I strongly recommend. The original Weather Djinn Consult may be harder to find, but if you can get a copy, I would say it is the book that made me aware for the first time of the extraordinary story of how you can lose a country—how suddenly your house, your land, your bank accounts, everything you own ceases to be yours. That realisation has stayed with me.

The Nakba and Britain's Role

What struck me most was that this was not something I had been taught in school. The Nakba—this catastrophe—was a major historical event that has informed the entire history of the Middle East ever since. It has been the wound that has remained unhealed, festering, and has caused all the wars that followed; ultimately, they trace back to the unresolved Palestinian problem right up to the present day. Yet I had never been told about it. I had gone through a good British education, studied history, and specialised in it, but the word Nakba was completely absent from my learning.

The UK's involvement in this history is direct and cannot be overlooked. Britain had the mandate over Palestine and gave away the country to the Zionists. Balfour, who issued the Balfour Declaration, was Scottish—in fact, he came from very close to where I grew up, from a similar sort of family. My father even worked in a brewery in Edinburgh alongside Peter Balfour, who I believe was the grandson, nephew, or some relation of this figure. Because of these connections, Scottish people—and indeed all British people—should know about Palestine. The British public was misled rather than actively betrayed; we were certainly not told what we should have known about something so central to the region's history and so fundamentally absent from our education.

Research in the Middle East and Palestinian Christians

In the 1990s, I spent about five years researching in the Middle East, writing a book called From the Holy Mountain. This book began in Greece and travelled through Turkey, Syria, Palestine, Israel, and ended in Egypt, investigating the fate of Middle Eastern Christians and the varied stories of Christian minorities across these countries. Between approximately 1992 and 1996, I spent a long time in Jerusalem, living in the Armenian Quarter, travelling around the West Bank, and getting to know the region quite well. This research gave me a perspective on the Israel-Palestine issue that I had been completely unaware of before.

Living in the Armenian Quarter, which sits next to the Jewish Quarter, I witnessed scenes on Saturday nights—or perhaps Sunday nights—of large marches where people screamed "death to the Arabs." I also saw young Israeli conscripts, only 18 or 19 years old doing their military service, carrying enormous guns. Meanwhile, Palestinian shopkeepers would be there trying to sell olive wood, crucifixes, falafel, or other goods, dressed perfectly normally like people in any hot Mediterranean country. Yet these young soldiers carried Uzi guns and assault rifles—weapons you would normally expect to see only in a military campaign or war zone.

One image from that time particularly struck me: I was walking through West Jerusalem past a nightclub, and I could hear Jimi Hendrix's "Hey Joe, where are you going with that gun in your hand?" being played inside. And there were young recruits

with their guns entering the nightclub, carrying their assault rifles. It was surreal. Imagine in the UK having people with guns going into a nightclub on Charing Cross Road—it simply doesn't happen anywhere else, but it does there.

I spent considerable time in East Jerusalem and on the West Bank, visiting places like Ramallah, and became increasingly interested in understanding this situation. From the Holy Mountain remains one of the eleven books I have written that I feel most passionate about and most proud of. The story of Palestinian Christians became the crucial link to my later work, because I discovered something essential: the Palestinian Christians did not come as Arabs from any other country. They had always been there. They belonged to the oldest Christian community and maintained some of the oldest Christian traditions of any country in the world. But they were Palestinians—this is a crucial distinction.

The Deep Continuity of Palestinian History

It was through studying Palestinian Christians that I became aware of the profound continuities of Palestinian history, which contradict the conventional narrative fed to foreigners—a succession of invasions and conquests. There is a stark contrast between this official version and the actual historical reality. When you arrive in Israel, you are often given a book called Facts About Israel, which recounts the Syrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Byzantines, and then describes how the Jews returned to their homeland, followed by the assertion of being the only democracy in the Middle East. But the actual story is of the people who have always been there on the hillsides, looking after their springs and their land.

When you study the archaeology, you discover remarkable continuities: a Canaanite high place becomes a Byzantine Martyrion, which becomes a Sufi maqam—a shrine or burial place of a prophet. These sacred sites often remained in the same location across different religious periods and communities. I was particularly fascinated by multi-faith shrines while researching From the Holy Mountain. In the West, we are accustomed to separate religious institutions—a Catholic church, a Protestant church, a mosque, a synagogue, a temple—each serving different populations. But in Palestine, there were extraordinary sites where different communities shared sacred space.

Bezor is a particularly striking example. There is an ancient Byzantine church of Saint George that has stood there since the fourth or fifth century. Christians come on the day of Saint George and offer a sheep to the priest. Yet Muslims also come on the day of Jesus and offer a sheep to Kisa, who is another version of Saint George for them. According to the anthropologist Tewfik Kenan, originally an Ottoman military doctor who later wrote Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries of Palestine, Jews used to visit these sites as well. Kenan investigated this world of shared rituals where Palestinians, regardless of their different faiths, continued to visit the same folk shrines. These

shrines are often extremely ancient, predating both Islam and Christianity, and they trace back to previous cultic practices.

Religious and Linguistic Transformations Across Millennia

The story that emerges from this research is one of peoples who remained largely rooted in the territory across thousands of years. Of course, like anywhere else, people have passed through and different administrations have changed—the Turks came and went, empires rose and fell—but for most of history, the villagers stayed on their land and farmed it. What changed over the course of thousands of years was language and religion.

The earliest examples we have show people who followed Canaanite pagan deities like Baal and El's wife Asherah, along with a rich pantheon of pagan gods, and who spoke Western Semitic languages. Then came the Babylonian and Assyrian invasions, followed by a slow transformation toward a reformed monotheism. The other gods disappeared, and only Yahweh remained. This transformation was particularly marked when the Jews returned from exile in Babylon, possibly influenced by Persian monotheism and Zoroastrianism with its single God. They had also lost the temple through destruction and exile. A new, reformed Judaism emerged—essentially the form we know today—where there is one God, Yahweh, and other figures such as Asherah or other gods vanished from the landscape.

Then, at the time of Constantine, Christianity arrived. By this stage, languages had changed from Western Semitic through Aramaic to Greek. Later, Islam came with Arabic. In terms of language, the region moved from Western Semitic to Aramaic to Greek and finally to Arabic. In terms of religion, it moved from a rich Canaanite pagan pantheon to Judaism, then to Christianity, and finally to Islam. But crucially—and this is very important—the shrines often remained the same, and usually the families remained the same.

The Conventional Narrative and Archaeological Reality

This continuity is critically important because the current Palestinian narrative we hear claims that the Jews were there and only the Jews were there, and then the Jews left, and now they are returning. But what does the archaeological and historical evidence actually show? The story of Judaism reveals something rarely explained with clarity: the first references to Israel come from something called the Merneptah Stela, dating to around 1200 BCE. This is an Egyptian record from a period called the Bronze Age collapse, when the great empires of the Bronze Age—the Egyptians, the Hittites, the Mycenaeans in Greece—were all collapsing under invasions by nomadic and seaborne peoples.

Only 20 or 30 years after the Merneptah reference to Israel, you get the first mention of the Pelesit, the first version of the name Palestine. The Pelesit are mentioned in

1187 BCE by Pharaoh Ramesses the Third in a temple called Medinet Habu. So Israel and Palestine emerged, in a sense, like twins within 20 years of each other. They were not born at that time—both names appeared in the historical record almost simultaneously.

Early References to Israel and Palestine

The first recorded reference to Israel in Egyptian sources dates to around 1200 BCE, documented in the Merneptah Stele, which mentions the defeat of Israel and its people. At roughly the same time, the Peleset—a coastal people—settled in the plains by the sea. Archaeologists initially believed the Peleset came from Greece or Mycenae, though more recent research suggests they likely originated from Cyprus or the region around Antioch and Aleppo in what is now the Hatay region in northern Turkey. A significant recent discovery from the last ten to fifteen years includes an inscription found in Aleppo referring to a king of Palestine and a memorial tablet praising the storm god. This is particularly notable because it shows a "king of Palestine" referenced in what is today northern Syria, outside the boundaries of what we would now call Palestine.

The name Palestine also appears in Assyrian sources. When Herodotus described the coast of the Levant, traveling inland where the early Israelite kingdom was emerging, he mentioned Syria, Phoenicia (modern-day Lebanon and Syria), and Palaestina, referring to the coastal plain of what is now Israel and Palestine. The Romans later transformed "Palestina" into "Palestine," which eventually entered Arabic as "Filastin."

The Pre-State Population: Canaanites and Town-Based Identity

Before both Israel and Palestine emerged as named entities, a diverse population inhabited the region. The Egyptians called these people Canaanites, though this was not a term the Canaanites themselves used for their identity. Similarly, the Phoenicians did not call themselves Phoenicians—that was the name the Greeks gave them, derived from the Greek word for palm trees. What is significant is that we possess external names for these peoples but lack their own self-designations.

The evidence suggests that the ancient inhabitants identified themselves not as members of a nation-state or tribe, but by their town of origin. They thought of themselves as the people of Ashdod, the people of Gath, the people of Beirut, Tyre, or Sidon. The entire region was organized into independent city-states rather than centralized kingdoms. This pattern of town-based identity remained the dominant way people understood themselves for centuries.

A crucial insight into understanding this region is recognizing that the concept of the nation-state is a nineteenth-century invention. Ideas of nationalism, whether applied to Bulgarians, Greeks, or any other group, developed in the mid-nineteenth century. Before that era, the landscape contained many different peoples who could shift their

language and religion over time. However, barring displacement or catastrophe, these populations generally remained attached to their land across long durations. In coastal ports and cosmopolitan areas, diverse peoples coexisted and intermingled.

DNA Evidence and Genetic Continuity

Archaeological understanding of this region has been substantially reinforced by recent developments in DNA analysis, which is fundamentally reshaping our knowledge of human migration and settlement patterns worldwide. David Reich, a researcher at Harvard, has conducted extraordinary work not only in the Middle East but also on the early peopling of India and other regions. What is now scientifically established and proven beyond dispute is that the peoples of Palestine show approximately an 85 percent genetic match with Bronze Age skeletal DNA from the same region.

The closest genetic match of all comes not from mainstream Palestinian Muslims, but from the Samaritans, a tiny minority living near Nablus who do not intermarry with neighboring populations and have never left their ancestral land. The Samaritans show an almost 100 percent match with Bronze Age skeletons. Following this are Palestinian Christians at 85 percent, followed closely by Mizrahi Jews and Palestinian Muslims. Ashkenazi Jews show approximately 40 percent genetic similarity with Bronze Age populations, reflecting substantial admixture with Europeans acquired during their historical dispersal and settlement in Europe.

These genetic findings demonstrate that all these populations are fundamentally related—they are cousins in biological terms. While neither Israelis nor Palestinians are necessarily pleased to hear this conclusion, the scientific evidence makes clear what is known at a deeper level: these are not two alien peoples fighting over land they have newly arrived in. Rather, they are two sets of cousins engaged in an inter-family conflict that has persisted for nearly four thousand years. In the course of this long struggle, many have largely forgotten that they are genetically related—a reality that the biblical and Qur'anic narrative of Ishmael and Isaac reflects in mythological form.

Religious Transitions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

The historical record shows clear evidence of religious conversion across the populations of the region. By approximately 2000 BCE, at the time documented in Egyptian sources, the Israelites appear to have been nomadic or small-scale farmers in the highlands. A major moment for the expansion of Judaism came during the Hasmonean or Maccabean period, when Israelite forces conquered surrounding peoples such as the Idumeans or Edomites and forcibly converted them to Judaism. Those conquered were offered a choice: exile or circumcision and religious conversion. This period was relatively brief before Roman arrival in the region.

When the Romans arrived, many of these converts reverted to their earlier religions. This was particularly true in Gaza and along the coast, where the Roman arrival was sometimes regarded as a liberation. Gaza and Ashdod maintained strong cult practices devoted to the god Dagon, with temples that had existed before and were eventually destroyed. Two massive Jewish revolts against Roman rule resulted in severe Roman reprisals and punishments administered by Roman legions. Many Jews left the region during this time, and in the aftermath of the second Jewish revolt, the Bar Kokhba Revolt, conditions became so catastrophic that the slave markets in Gaza became flooded—historical sources record that three slaves could be purchased for the price of a horse.

These dramatic upheavals primarily affected what is now the West Bank. Galilee and the central regions were less severely impacted, and Jewish life continued to flourish there. It was in Galilee where the first synagogues appeared and where a rich variety of synagogue architecture developed, many featuring beautiful mosaics with menorahs and other Jewish symbols. Over the subsequent three to four hundred years, the Jewish populations of Galilee appear to have slowly converted to Christianity. When the Roman state under Constantine made Christianity advantageous, many Jewish communities survived into the third and fourth centuries. Some did not convert at all and maintained their Jewish faith, but the weight of evidence suggests that many Jews in Galilee eventually became Christian and are now counted among the descendants of the Palestinian Christian community.

The Islamic Conquest and Gradual Language Shift

In the sixth and seventh centuries came the birth of Islam and the Messenger Muhammad, followed eventually by the conquest of Palestine by Arab armies. These were relatively small armies that had to extend their reach simultaneously across vast territories—from the Indus River on one side to Spain on the other. This was not a situation of a massive military presence arriving and systematically displacing the population. Archaeological evidence, as communicated by Michele Piccirillo, an Italian archaeologist who specialized in this period, reveals what he called "the invisible conquest." The Arabs are barely visible in the archaeological record. One town, Rumley, functioned as their capital and administrative center, but otherwise life continued much as before.

The transition from Greek and Aramaic to Arabic as the dominant language happened very slowly over approximately two hundred years, extending into the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries. While Sufism played some role in this transition, the primary driver was practical: Arabic became the language of advancement. Those seeking promotion or access to government administration needed to know Arabic, and increasingly, trade required knowledge of the language. It was not a rapid

transformation but a gradual shift of an entire population from speaking Greek and Aramaic to speaking Arabic.

The region remained majority Christian right up until the time of Saladin. It was only after the defeat of the Crusaders and the return of Islamic rule to Palestine that major mosque construction and the establishment of Sufi shrines accelerated. The great age of Sufi building and expansion occurred in the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries. Before this period, historical records show that Palestine contained only about twenty mosques while it had something like seven hundred churches and monasteries. This clearly demonstrates the religious composition of the population during the Christian-majority centuries following the Islamic conquest.

Successive Religious Transformations of Sacred Sites

When one examines holy places throughout Palestine, a pattern of successive religious transformation emerges. A given site may be sacred to Christians, Muslims, and Jews in the present day, but archaeological investigation beneath these sites frequently reveals that they were previously Canaanite religious locations. Often a sacred spring or similar natural feature marks the original site's spiritual significance. These locations pass through successive transformations of religious significance across centuries, yet they remain sacred throughout these changes. The same families tend to the same olive trees they harvest each autumn, worship at the same sites, and tend the same springs, maintaining continuity even as the religious framework around these practices shifts.

The claim that Palestinians are Arabs is therefore not entirely accurate. This is not a novel observation—Arab historians such as Albert Hourani have long made this distinction in their work, titling his major history "A History of the Arab-Speaking Peoples" rather than simply "Arabs." The same applies to Egypt and Syria. Both Syria and Egypt remained majority Christian until the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The transformation from a majority Christian, Arabic-speaking population to a majority Muslim, Arabic-speaking population occurred gradually across these regions.

The Twelfth and Thirteenth Century Transition

A recent book by Yossi Rapoport, an Israeli author teaching in London, explores this critical period of religious transition. His work, titled "Becoming Arab," investigates why a land that had been majority Christian and had been Arabic-speaking for four to five hundred years finally became predominantly Muslim in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Rapoport documents various motivations for this shift. One significant factor was social and political advantage: conversion to Islam offered higher social status in a society now ruled by Muslim dynasties. After the Crusaders were defeated and expelled, being Christian was no longer culturally advantageous—the Crusader powers

had failed. Conversely, Islam was at its height of influence and prestige, expanding from India in one direction to Spain in the other.

Another factor was the creation of genealogical narratives. People began to construct elaborate family lineages claiming descent from the companions of the Prophet or from early Caliphs such as Umar and Abu Bakr. Many Palestinian families developed such narratives to improve their social standing and access to power and resources. Historical records, particularly those preserved in the archives of Al-Aqsa, document these transitions. The Waqf records of Al-Aqsa detail villages granted to the mosque, and researchers can trace the names of these villages changing from Christian to Muslim names across generations. Additional evidence comes from papyri discovered in the Negev, which show individual families transitioning, for example, from the Greek name Stephanus to the Arabic name Stephanie.

These detailed manuscript records document the gradual transformation from the Byzantine world—which was extremely prosperous and Greek-speaking with a Christian population—to an Arabic-speaking Muslim population, yet remarkably these were often the same families. The archaeological and documentary evidence reveals continuity: the same people worshipping at the same sacred sites, tending the same land and springs, harvesting the same olive trees every autumn. This is the story of the region—not wholesale population replacement, but gradual religious and linguistic transformation of a rooted population.

The Historical Basis of the Name Palestine

In contemporary debates on social media about Palestine and Israel, a common claim appears: that Palestine did not exist as a country before its supposed invention by Yasser Arafat under KGB influence in 1965. This claim is not historically accurate. The name Palestine has ancient roots extending back to approximately 1200 BCE with the Peleset and their settlements in Medina. The name has persisted through Egyptian, Assyrian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Islamic, and Ottoman periods—a continuous nomenclature spanning nearly three thousand years of recorded history.

Palestinian Identity and the Rise of Modern Nationalism

The concept of Palestinian national consciousness as we understand it today did not emerge until the 1920s. During the Ottoman period, you cannot point to strong evidence of a Palestinian national spirit in the way modern nationalism functions. What you do find is references to the region as a geographical area. The Turkish travel writer Evliya Çelebi, for instance, noted that this area—part of what was called the Jund—was referred to as Palestine, much as Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan were all collectively known as Bilad al-Sham.

During Ottoman times, there was no administrative region formally designated as Palestine, though the term was used geographically rather than as a national

identifier. It is unlikely anyone would have identified themselves as Palestinian in Ottoman times. However, this changed dramatically in the early twentieth century under the influence of rising nationalisms across the region—a period when Greeks began identifying as Greek, Bulgarians as Bulgarian, and Arabs increasingly as members of distinct national groups. The Sykes-Picot agreement of 1915-1916 further crystallized this emerging nationalism, making these territorial divisions more concrete.

Borders, Geography, and the Palestine Exploration Fund

Among Arab populations, the understanding was that Syria, Palestine, and Lebanon were not separate countries but one continuous land that the British and French then divided. Part of this process involved the Palestine Exploration Fund, a British institution that created a map of Palestine in the 1880s based on biblical and earlier historical precedents. This map was subsequently reused by Sykes and Picot and solidified into the boundaries now recognizable on modern maps.

However, the historical reality of Palestine extends far deeper than modern nationalism or contemporary borders. Ancient references—whether to the Israelites, the Peleset (Philistines), or other peoples—describe borders that shifted over time and did not delineate clear geographical spaces in the way modern nation-states define frontiers. Instead, what emerges from archaeological, historical, and genetic evidence is a picture of one cosmopolitan, mixed population that remained on the land across millennia. DNA evidence confirms that the great majority of people in Palestine stayed on that land, though naturally, as in every country, migrations and movements occurred. Britain, for example, received Huguenot migrations in the sixteenth century. Yet the continuity of the Palestinian population is traceable through DNA, archaeology, and historical records—a continuity that ended abruptly in 1948.

The Story of Ashdod: A Well-Documented Village

The village of Ashdod (modern Isdud) serves as a particularly well-documented example of Palestinian territorial continuity. It is significant because its people ended up in Gaza, directly connecting the long history of the land to the contemporary Gaza narrative. Ashdod is the site where, in recent times, the Israeli navy brought in a flotilla, and commandos imprisoned people before transferring them to Ketziot.

Archaeologically, Ashdod is notable as one of the first settlements built by the Peleset (Philistines). The settlement contains distinctive ceramics that archaeologists once linked to Mycenaean Greece and the Aegean, though current scholarship points more toward Cyprus and cities such as Aleppo and Antioch. Though the Peleset came from elsewhere, they rapidly intermarried with the local population. DNA evidence confirms that within two or three generations, they were completely intermarried with the locals, becoming part of the indigenous fabric of the region.

Ashdod Across History: Religion, Language, and Culture

Ashdod was the major Philistine center, appearing in the Hebrew Bible in the stories of Saul and David. It is associated with Dagon, a storm god also linked with cereals and fertility. Historical records document its significance: it appears in Egyptian records, is referred to as Ashdod by the Assyrians in their stellar inscriptions, and becomes known as Asdud to the Greeks. In Arabic, it becomes Isdud.

The Maccabees attacked the Dagon temple at Ashdod, an event recorded in the Book of Maccabees, where they destroyed the pagan shrine. Another biblical reference describes the people of Ashdod speaking a language quite different from Hebrew, possibly the language of the Philistines themselves, indicating the distinct cultural and linguistic character of the settlement.

Ashdod is particularly well-documented because we have Byzantine references, early Islamic records, complete tax records from the Ottoman period, and detailed British Mandate records from the early twentieth century. The village had several mosques, olive oil production, vineyards, and a deep well that penetrated the limestone to access one of the region's major aquifers. It was a thriving, established community with roots stretching back thousands of years.

The Nakba and the Expulsion from Ashdod

In 1948, Ashdod was one of the last areas taken by the Israeli military. The Nakba—the mass displacement of Palestinians—occurred primarily in April and May 1948, with events such as the fall of Lydda, Haifa, and Jaffa. A second wave of attacks followed in the autumn. The people of Isdud watched as refugees passed by their village, many possibly fleeing from Jaffa toward Gaza, traveling by bullock cart, horse, and donkey down the coastal road. They hoped the violence would not reach them.

At that time, an Egyptian military force was present in the area, but it was underfunded, underarmed, and ineffective. In contrast, the young Israeli army had received a spectacular influx of weapons from Czechoslovakia, supplying it with modern weaponry and machine guns. When the Israeli army arrived in October 1948, only about 300 people remained in Ashdod—mostly elderly and infirm. Survivors have provided detailed accounts describing how soldiers shot two people in the village square, fired shots into the air, and ordered the remaining inhabitants into trucks for removal.

An Israeli spotter plane observed this final wave of people leaving Ashdod for Gaza, a distance of only twenty kilometers along the coast. Israeli historian Benny Morris documents this observation in his work. Additionally, a young IDF officer, believed to be named Avnery, wrote that when they arrived, the village was empty and they gave no thought to the people who had left just hours or days before, describing it simply as "another alien dirty village to us."

Living Memory: Survivors in Gaza

Decades later, journalist Sarah Helm conducted interviews in Gaza in 2014 with families originally from Ashdod, who were then living in Rafah. She interviewed a brother and sister who had helped their carpenter father in the fields. They recounted running into the fields when the Israeli trucks arrived, hearing that soldiers had shot elderly people, and fleeing for their lives. The elderly man from Ashdod told Helm: "I still have this connection to Ashdod in my dreams. I haven't left Gaza since 1948. But I remember where I used to go and hunt birds with my friend. I remember the fields and I remember our family's vines." He was still alive in 2014, though his current whereabouts are unknown today.

The Loss and Documentation of a Village

Ashdod stood for thousands of years as a living community, and then, suddenly, it was gone—its people, houses, mosques, and groves erased. This story forms the opening of a forthcoming book proposal, chosen specifically because it is so thoroughly documented. Israeli archaeologists who excavated the site described it as having an unbroken stratigraphic succession, never having been destroyed and rebuilt, establishing a clear archaeological continuity. The evidence from archaeology, history, and DNA all converge on a single conclusion: these people had always been there. Reading this account for the first time publicly was a deeply moving experience, particularly when hearing the testimonies of families describing the shooting of elderly people and the sudden, forced departure of an entire community.

Gaza's Historical Significance: Learning and Culture

The destruction of Palestinian communities represents the loss of an entire dimension of human history and culture. Those who have not visited Palestine and the West Bank may not fully grasp the significance of what has been lost. The West Bank, where much time was spent in the 1980s, reveals a landscape of striking beauty—for a British visitor, it bears an immediate resemblance to Tuscany, with villages perched on hilltops, olive groves in the valleys, vineyards dotting the landscape, and a fertile coastal plain producing grain and citrus fruits. This was a region with genuine contributions to world civilization.

Gaza in particular holds remarkable historical importance often overlooked in contemporary discourse. During the Byzantine period, Gaza was among the most educated cities in the world, rivaling Athens and Alexandria in intellectual prominence. It was home to a renowned school of rhetoric and served as the educational destination for the children of elite Byzantine officials—the equivalent of sending a child to Harvard, Oxford, Cambridge, or boarding schools like Eton in later eras.

The school was particularly famous for biblical commentary, most notably the work of Procopius of Gaza. Remarkably, a book of biblical commentary written in Gaza was brought to Canterbury in the seventh century by Theodore of Tarsus, the second Archbishop of Canterbury, carried in his personal baggage as part of the foundational texts of the English Christian tradition. This represents a direct intellectual link between Gaza and the origins of Christianity in England.

Gaza's International Influence: Wine and Trade

Gaza was also famous throughout the ancient and medieval world for its sweet white wine, which was the most prestigious wine long before vineyards existed in France. Gaza was the center of the international wine trade in antiquity, the first known exporter of wine at scale. The wine is readily identifiable archaeologically by its distinctive amphora shape, which resembles a torpedo with a small nipple at one end—a signature that archaeologists can immediately recognize.

During the period when Gaza was under Egyptian influence, most of the wine was shipped directly to Memphis and Luxor, with the Pharaohs maintaining a monopoly over the supply. Later, during the Byzantine period, the wine was exported abroad, appearing in Merovingian France as late as the sixth century and in Cornwall, where it was consumed at sites such as Tintagel, traditionally associated with King Arthur. The wine grapes themselves were renowned for their exceptional taste, producing a sweet wine that became a luxury commodity across the Mediterranean and beyond.

In modern Gaza, the southern area known as the alkaline region remains full of grape groves, producing some of the tastiest grapes in the world. These grapes continue the ancient tradition that made Gaza famous throughout the classical and medieval world. However, this agricultural heritage has largely been destroyed since the Israeli occupation began.

Gaza's historical legacy encompasses both extraordinary learning and unexpected cultural sophistication. Beyond its reputation for rhetoric and biblical scholarship, Gaza was also known for an erotic literary festival—something that contemporary observers might not associate with Gaza, yet it speaks to a cosmopolitan, culturally vibrant society. Hearing of this history—of Gaza's learning, beauty, education, and cultural richness—stands in painful contrast to the events of the present day, making the loss and transformation of Palestinian society all the more heartbreaking.

Gaza as a Centre of Religion and Culture in Antiquity

Alongside Christian activity, Gaza remained a very firm centre of pagan worship right into the Byzantine period, much later than many other areas. The city had a rite of spring involving orgies and competitions for erotic poetry. As well as being famous as a great intellectual centre, Gaza had a reputation for being rather bawdy and lively in ways that might surprise Western observers today. This cultural character persisted

even in more recent centuries, with Gaza maintaining a reputation for being more lively than outsiders might imagine.

Byzantine Palestine as a Period of Wealth and Prosperity

Gaza and Jaffa were historically among the wealthiest cities in the region, and the Byzantine period represented a golden age in terms of regional wealth. There was a long period of peace between the Roman conquest around 60 BCE under Pompey and the arrival of the Arab Islamic conquest. Even the conquest itself did not involve a great deal of fighting. Archaeologically, there is no layer of ash indicating destruction from this period, suggesting a relatively peaceful transition.

During this era, many people in the Middle East were not orthodox Greek Christians but rather monophysites, Suriani, and Coptic Christians. After the Islamic conquest, there was actually an increase in church building because people no longer had to pay taxes to Byzantium and could construct their slightly heterodox non-orthodox Christian churches, which had been restricted before. This phenomenon is particularly evident in Jordan, where there was a massive spate of church building after the Arab conquest—a pattern that runs counter to common assumptions about the period.

Continuity and Decline in Regional Prosperity

This prosperity continued right up to the eighth or ninth century. The period when decline began was the tenth and eleventh centuries, marking a shift from roughly 900 years of great prosperity. The region was exceptionally wealthy during this time, which is why so many Roman ruins are visible throughout the region today. However, modern Israeli archaeology and presentation of history has tended to highlight Jewish history while sometimes obscuring other periods. There are accusations that the Israeli archaeological establishment destroys Ottoman castles and Byzantine churches in order to reach synagogues, which are then displayed to the public while the other discoveries remain recorded only in scholarly literature but not open for public viewing.

The diversity of the region's past is not always fully appreciated in modern presentations, yet it was one of the richest regions of the Byzantine Empire. A crucial historical point is often forgotten: when the Islamic conquest occurred, it was the richest areas of the empire that were taken—Syria, Egypt, and Palestine—leaving the less wealthy areas of Turkey, Greece, and the Balkans, which were considered less prime lands.

Sources and Documentation of Palestinian History

Palestine is an exceptionally well-documented region in terms of historical sources. The Hebrew Bible is an extraordinary source for the ancient period, and though it is not history in the modern sense, it provides names and concepts that would otherwise

be lost. Archaeology has added immense knowledge, and while the early Israeli archaeological establishment was sometimes criticised for nationalism, the modern generation of Israeli archaeologists produces high-quality work. Scholars like Gideon Avni have made spectacular contributions to understanding the Byzantine-Islamic transition.

Palestine is one of the most studied regions not only in the twentieth century but also in the nineteenth, largely due to its biblical and Christian significance. Europeans established scholarly missions including the École Biblique, German archaeological teams, and the Palestine Exploration Fund from the 1880s. There remains a British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem. The latest transformative evidence comes from DNA analysis, which provides new perspectives on the region's human history.

The Question of Kinship and Contemporary Conflict

DNA evidence carries an optimistic message: ultimately, everyone in the region shares common ancestry. However, the contemporary reality is more complex. While acknowledging genetic and ancestral connection, it is necessary to distinguish between historical kinship and present-day violence. There is currently one side doing the killing and another trying to live without killing. Genetic connection does not negate the right to resist violence or demand justice, even against those who may be distant relatives.

Documentation After 1948: The Nakba and Beyond

The history of Palestine after 1948 and the Nakba is substantially documented, though not equally well-known. The author's own book ends in 1948, as the post-Nakba period is not his primary area of specialisation. However, there are significant resources available, such as the Nakba archives at the American University of Beirut, which contain deep resources of interviews with elderly people in camps and other materials accessible online. Similar resources exist in Jordan relating to the Palestinian community. While the stories have been recorded, there remains a disparity in how widely this history is understood.

It is undeniable that Israelis have been very successful at telling their story, while Palestinians have been less successful in getting their account across. This imbalance stems partly from the existence of the Bible, which is the single most extraordinary thing that changed the history of the region. The Bible is not only a spectacular religious text containing remarkable poetry, but it has weighted everyone's perception of the region towards the Judaic story. This biblical narrative echoes into the Christian world through Christian Zionism and is present in the Qur'an through references to the holiness of the land, the night journey, and the stories of Abraham and Isaac.

The Erased Presence of Palestinians in Historical Records

The region has a uniquely well-documented story, yet one where the Palestinians—who lived there in the background with their olive groves, vineyards, sheep, and donkeys, carrying on their lives in small-scale agricultural settlements and villages, with their shrines, maqams, churches, and mosques, following the annual rhythm of the agricultural year—have had to be deliberately brought forward into historical consciousness. The rise of social media has made documentation of history easier, and Palestinians are now actively documenting their own history. There is substantial literature from both sides, particularly from the Israeli side but also increasingly from the Palestinian side, creating a vast body of work to study.

Historians can provide maps of where societies have come from and where they are now, which can help imagine possible futures, but they cannot predict the future with certainty. The future takes strange and unexpected turns. However, understanding the past is essential for comprehending the present situation and the possibilities ahead.

The Misconception of Palestinian Non-Existence

The basic misconception about Palestinians and their history stems from Golda Meir's statement that "there is no such thing as the Palestinians." This was a controversial statement even at the time, but its impact was significant because it erased Palestinians where power most mattered—in London, Washington, and New York. Enough people were willing to believe this assertion for it to become politically powerful. Many, particularly in Jewish diaspora communities seeking to show solidarity with the Jewish nation, accepted this narrative for understandable reasons of family loyalty. Additionally, the history of Palestinians is not taught in Israeli schools, leading to widespread beliefs that Palestinian identity is a fabrication invented by the KGB or Yasser Arafat, or that it only emerged after 1960.

This book project exists to counter these claims with evidence. The historical record is clear: inscriptions exist at Medinet Habu from 1187 BCE referencing the people of the region; Herodotus wrote about Syrian-Palestinians; there are references to Kings of Palestine and Aleppo in the Neo-Hittite period; and the Assyrian archives contain inscriptions about Ashdod and the people who lived there. None of this information is new to scholars of ancient history—they all know this material. Some scholars may have concentrated their efforts on other areas or had family reasons to focus on Israeli, Jewish, or Israelite history, all of which is fascinating and understandable. However, Palestinian history has been deliberately denied and erased for political reasons and removed from the picture, even though the evidence remains very clearly available.

Among the remarkable Palestinian historians who have preserved this history is Walid Khalidi, who recently passed away. His book "All That Remains" is an extraordinary

resource documenting every village of Palestine before 1948, including information about every mosque, church, and lost shrine in each village, population figures from 1900, and what Ottoman tax records reveal. Anyone watching can download this resource from the Institute for Palestine Studies website or purchase a copy. It provides an impression of the world that has been erased from historical consciousness and public memory.

Historical Precedent for Reconciliation

When we look at conflicts that seemed insurmountable to previous generations, we find reasons for cautious hope. Northern Ireland is a case in point. The conflict there was not perfect, and it certainly is not perfect now, but there has been a transformation that my generation believed completely insolvable. Growing up, the conflict was incredibly embittered and polarized, marked by great hatreds and great violence. Yet today, a cohabitation exists that would have seemed impossible in my childhood. This moment in Palestine and Israel feels very dark, but history rolls on and peace can be made.

The precedent extends further back in European history. The Germans and the French fought 150 years of wars—from the Franco-Prussian war of 1877 right through to 1945. Now they are incredibly close allies. It can happen. While I do not think Palestinian-Israeli reconciliation will unfold in the same way, the underlying principle remains: what seems impossible at one moment can shift across time.

The Human Cost and Universal Desire for Peace

No one in the world wants the bloodshed to continue. It is not in anyone's interest for the killing to continue. The killing is mainly happening on the Palestinians. I am the one who most calls for peace, and most importantly, for justice. We all need justice. Everyone shares a fundamental desire to see this bloodshed stop, even as the path forward remains uncertain and contested.

Upcoming Work and Continued Dialogue

The conversation that has unfolded today feels like the beginning of much longer engagement. A book titled The Palestinians from the Neolithic to the Nakba is in development, though still at least two years away from completion. There is genuine excitement around this project. These extended conversations on substantive historical and contemporary topics deserve more time and space than a single session allows. When the book is ready, a return to deeper discussion over several hours would allow for fuller exploration of these themes.

#Palestinian history and origins #Western education and historical erasure #Archaeological evidence and continuity #Genetic research and population genetics

#Religious and linguistic transformation in the Levant #The Nakba and 1948 displacement #Gaza's historical significance #Colonial narratives and biblical framing

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