**Who Are the Palestinians?**

The Palestinians are a group of people, usually defined as [Arabic](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-arabic.htm)-speaking, with their origins in historical Palestine. The class is somewhat contentious, as its existence and definition plays a large role in the Israel-Palestine conflict. Palestinians are mostly Muslim, of the Sunni branch, although there are a number of Christian Palestinians as well.

There are somewhere around 10 to 11 million Palestinians worldwide, with the majority lacking [citizenship](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-the-process-for-us-citizenship.htm) in any recognized nation, making them one of the largest stateless populations in the world. This half live in parts of the West Bank, Gaza, Israel, and Jerusalem, in what is sometimes referred to by pro-Palestinian groups as Occupied Palestine.

Nearly 3 million Palestinians also reside in Jordan, which has the largest Palestinian population outside of the territories. Almost 500,000 live in Syria, and just over 300,000 live in Chile. From there the numbers drop to below 100,000 for countries such as the United States, Egypt, Honduras, Brazil, and Kuwait.

The Palestinians, although technically stateless, have two major bodies that represent them in the world at large. The Palestinian National Authority, which was established during the Oslo Accords, is responsible for governance in the occupied territories, and functions much as a state government. The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) represents the Palestinians before various world bodies.

The Palestinian concept of self is a complex one. The history of Palestine is long and convoluted, and attempting to trace one ethnic group back to residence in the region is problematic, at best. Palestine was settled by the Romans, the Byzantine Empire, the Umayyad and Fatima Muslim populations, Crusaders, the Ottoman Turks, and administered by the British Empire well into the 20th century. Over this time the Arabic lines intermingled freely with indigenous people, and the cultures intertwined. Many of these residents included ancient Hebrews, making the modern dichotomy of Palestinian and Jew somewhat simplistic.

The modern Palestinian identity began to form near the end of the 19th century. A number of people under the sway of the Ottoman Empire forged strong self-identities to mark themselves as distinct from other pockets of the Empire. When the Ottoman Empire was carved up after World War I, and Palestine was demarcated with hard lines, this emerging identity became even more solid.

Following the rise of [Zionist](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-a-zionist.htm) interest in the region of historical Palestine, the Palestinians began to form an even more cohesive sense of self, in response to what was often perceived as an outside force move into their lands. Much of this early identity formation was centered around a negative reaction to Zionism, and the legacy of these early years can still be seen to this day.

The Palestinians have never, at least since the formation of a strong self-identity, had actual control over their own lands. The region of Palestine was administered first by the Ottoman Empire, then by the British, and finally by Israel. Even following the seizure of some parts of the newly-formed Israel in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, those regions were administered by Egypt and Jordan, never by a Palestinian population itself.

The Palestinians have, in recent years, been recognized more and more by the international community as a group with a right to self-determination. The General Assembly of the United Nations, the Security Council of the United Nations, and the International Court of Justice all recognize Palestine. Additionally, more than 100 states recognize Palestine as its own state, although much of the land it claims continue to be largely under the control of Israel, which claims a right to self-defense, although Israel is one of the states that recognizes Palestine.

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