



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

The West Bank is situated west of the Jordan River between Israel and Jordan. The West Bank covers 2,263 square miles (5,860 square kilometers), making it just larger than Brunei, or slightly smaller than the U.S. state of Delaware. It has a generally rugged terrain, with a series of north-south hills as its most prominent feature. There are few natural resources. The West Bank borders the Dead Sea, which, at 1,312 feet (400 meters) below sea level, has the lowest elevation on earth. Temperatures vary by elevation; Jericho (846 feet, or 258 meters, below sea level) can be very hot in the summer, with temperatures between 104 and 113°F (40–45°C). The highlands are cooler and more moderate. Summers are hot and dry; winters can be cold and wet.

The Gaza Strip is located on the Mediterranean Sea, near the Sinai Peninsula. Gaza's 139 square miles (360 square kilometers) make it about half the size of Tonga, or the same size as the U.S. city of Detroit. The territory is located on a coastal plain, with some areas covered by sand dunes. Temperatures vary by season; summers are dry and warm, and winters are mild. The Gaza Strip faces many environmental issues, including desertification, salinization of fresh water, and contamination of underground water sources.

History

Ancient Kingdoms

The area known to Christians as the Holy Land was named Palestine by the Romans. The history of the West Bank and

Gaza naturally is linked to the history of the entire area. Because of its central location between Asia, Europe, and Africa, Palestine was conquered by many nations. Some three thousand years ago, a Hebrew kingdom was established. It was later split into two states—Israel and Judah—that were destroyed by Assyria and Babylonia in the eighth and sixth centuries BC.

Early Conquests

After the Persian conquest of the Middle East, the Jews who were dispersed by previous invasions returned to establish a state and build a temple. But the area later fell to the Greeks and then the Romans. In the AD 600s, the Arabs conquered Palestine and subsequently settled the region. The Ottoman Turks ruled over Palestine from the 1500s until after World War I, when Palestine was declared a British mandate. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 pledged British support for the establishment of a national home for the Jews in Palestine, but it also insisted that nothing be done to prejudice the civil and religious rights of the existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine. These two goals conflicted and resulted in problems throughout the mandate.

UN Partition and Conflict

The United Nations (UN) voted in 1947 to partition the area into two states—one Arab and one Jewish; Jerusalem was given a separate status because of its significance to both groups. The Jewish State became the independent nation of Israel in 1948. Arab countries that had opposed the UN partition immediately declared war. Palestinian refugees fled to the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Israel withstood initial advances, but hostilities erupted again into open war in 1956, 1967, and 1973. During the 1967 war,

Israel occupied East Jerusalem, the West Bank (which was then part of Jordan), Syria's Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip, and the Sinai Peninsula. As a result of the 1979 Camp David Accords, the Sinai Peninsula was returned to Egypt and the final status of the West Bank and Gaza became subject to negotiation.

First Intifada

Peace negotiations during the 1980s broke down several times. Out of frustration for their situation, the Palestinian Arabs rebelled in late 1987 and declared an independent Palestinian state. Their uprising, known as the intifada, continued until 1993. It led to violent clashes between residents of the occupied territories and Israeli military forces but also resulted in peaceful demonstrations and other forms of resistance.

Oslo Accords and Peace Talk Failure

A Palestinian-Israeli peace conference convened in 1991. While talks frequently stalled, a final agreement, the Oslo Accords, was signed in 1993. The agreement granted the Palestinians limited autonomy and eventual self-rule in some occupied areas. Yasser Arafat, chair of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), was elected leader of the Palestinian Authority in 1996. Also elected was an 88-member Palestinian Council. Israel released many political prisoners, and many exiles returned to Gaza.

Palestinians and Israelis alike initially welcomed the agreement. However, conditions soon soured as opponents to it committed violent terrorist attacks, restoring a climate of distrust. The political environment allowed Israel's Likud Party to defeat the Labor Party, which had negotiated the agreement. Progress was brought to a halt in March 1997 by the expansion of Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem (traditionally claimed by Palestinians). Labor's Ehud Barak, elected on a peace ticket in May 1999 Israeli elections, ceded more territory to the Palestinians. He resigned as tensions arose from an inability to compromise on borders, expanding settlements, refugee status, and the sovereignty of Jerusalem.

Second Intifada

High expectations for peace, frustrated by inaction, resulted in a second *intifada* in 2000. Israel's security measures included blockading Palestinian areas, which virtually shut down the economy of the territories. Months of demonstrations and violence preceded the election of Likud's Ariel Sharon as prime minister in 2001. Suicide bombings by extremist Palestinians and offensives in the West Bank and Gaza by Israeli military forces claimed hundreds of lives and left thousands homeless.

Conflict between Hamas, Fatah, and Israel

When Arafat died in November 2004, Palestinians elected Mahmoud Abbas as the new leader of the Palestinian Authority. In 2005, Abbas and Sharon agreed to a cease-fire, and Sharon launched a controversial plan to withdraw all Israeli settlers and troops from Gaza. Dissatisfaction with Abbas's Fatah faction resulted in victory for the Hamas faction in 2006 elections. Fatah and Hamas agreed to form a national unity government in early 2007, but it dissolved as Hamas militants ousted Fatah to seize control of Gaza in June. In response to Hamas's takeover of Gaza, Israel blockaded Gaza. Militants there fired rockets into Israeli

territory, and Israel retaliated with air strikes.

Fighting between Israel and Hamas escalated into a seven-week war in 2014. The fighting killed over two thousand Palestinians, mostly civilians, and destroyed many homes, schools, mosques, and businesses. Over 65 Israeli soldiers were killed and hundreds wounded; a handful of Israeli civilians were also killed. Later in 2014, Egypt brokered a cease-fire agreement that ended the Gaza-Israeli conflict. However, tension between Israel and Hamas continues today.

UN Recognition and Reconciliation Attempts

In late 2012, the majority of the UN General Assembly voted in favor of upgrading Palestine's status to a nonmember observer state; the United States and Israel voted against the resolution. Despite the status change, the Palestinian Authority faces many economic and political challenges, such as the ongoing rivalry between Fatah and Hamas. Both political parties have attempted to reconcile their differences and form a unity government but without a lasting solution. Israel considers Hamas a terrorist organization and claims that the peace process remains stagnant because of the ongoing political feud between Hamas and Fatah.

Recent Events and Trends

- **Massive protests:** In January 2017, more than 10,000 Gazans gathered to protest the lack of electricity and other public services under Hamas's government. The protest was one of the biggest demonstrations in the Gaza Strip in recent years. Gaza is continually without enough electricity for its citizens due to lack of government funding. Protesters called on Ismail Haniya, Hamas's leader, and Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, to address the poor living conditions in Gaza.
- **Reconciliation efforts stalled:** In March 2018, a roadside bomb injured several security guards in Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah's convoy in Gaza. The attack renewed tensions and stalled reconciliation talks between Fatah and Hamas. Over the years, many attempts at reconciliation by both Fatah and Hamas have failed.
- **Prime minister resigns:** In January 2019, Prime Minister Hamdallah resigned following growing public dissatisfaction with his government's failed reconciliation attempts and promotion of an unpopular social security law. The government will continue to serve until a new government is formed. Hamas is opposed to the formation of a new government because Fatah announced they plan to exclude Hamas.

THE PEOPLE

Population

The majority of the population in the West Bank is Palestinian Arab. Hundreds of thousands of Israeli settlers also live in their own communities in the West Bank. Gaza is nearly 100 percent Palestinian and densely populated. Gaza, Nablus, Hebron, Ramallah, and East Jerusalem are the largest cities. Millions of Palestinians live abroad, either as citizens of other countries or in refugee camps, some of which include permanent structures such as hospitals, homes, and schools.

Several Bedouin groups (exclusively Muslim and of different lineage than the majority of Palestinians) also reside in the Negev (southern Israel and Palestine). Today, the Bedouin, who were once nomadic, have settled into established communities. They retain some traditions but are no longer nomadic.

Language

Palestinian Arabs speak Arabi (Arabic), which has a phonetic alphabet consisting of 28 letters written from right to left. Palestinians speak a dialect of Arabic known as Palestinian; it is different than Modern Standard Arabic, which is used in news broadcasts, newspapers, and government speeches. Palestinian Arabic is a subgroup of the Levantine regional dialect spoken in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Dialectal differences exist between urban and rural Palestinians. Many Palestinians also speak English or French. English is required as a second language in schools, and French is a popular third language in many (especially private) schools. Israeli settlers speak Hebrew. Some Palestinians, mostly those who work or go to school in Israel, speak Hebrew.

Religion

The majority of people (about 99 percent in Gaza and 80–85 percent in the West Bank) are Muslim, mostly Sunni. Most Palestinian Christians (generally Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Protestant) live in the West Bank. Religion plays an important role, as its concepts and perceptions drive behavior in society, the home, and one's private life. Muslims and members of other religions typically respect each other's religions and holidays. For example, schools are out on Friday and Sunday (the respective Muslim and Christian days of worship). Shops close according to the owner's religion.

Muslims accept and revere all major Judeo-Christian prophets from Adam to Jesus but proclaim Muhammad to be the seal of the prophets, meaning he was the last prophet to receive revelation from Allah (God). Muslims believe the Qur'an (Islamic holy book) contains the word of *Allah* as revealed to the prophet Muhammad. Devout Muslims follow the Five Pillars of Islam: *shahada*, confessing *Allah* to be God and Muhammad to be his prophet; *salat*, praying five times daily while facing Mecca, Saudi Arabia; *zakat*, donating money to the poor; *sawm*, fasting during the holy month of Ramadan; and *hajj*, trying to make at least one pilgrimage to Mecca.

General Attitudes

Palestinian Arabs tend to value courage, freedom, generosity, and hospitality. They are known for their strong family ties and their sociability. Social status is often measured by one's family name, occupation, and education. Palestinians strongly believe they have the right to a sovereign state that provides them with basic human rights. For those who seek full independence, self-rule does not go far enough; an independent state is their ultimate goal. Since the Palestinian Authority has had difficulty bringing order and structure to society, many people are as critical of their leaders as they are of Israel. Most have shared a dream for a Palestinian state but

now are pessimistic about its future.

Most Palestinians say they respect Judaism, and even Israel's right to exist as a state, but they oppose Zionism (a movement to establish the area between Egypt and Jordan as the Jewish homeland). They point to the fact that they, too, have lived in the area for centuries. Palestinians are therefore sensitive to references to the Holy Land as "Israel" because they consider the Holy Land to be Palestine.

Personal Appearance

Western clothing is common in urban areas. Elderly men often dress in traditional Arab clothing like long, loose-fitting white robes and sometimes a *keffiyah* (a scarf, often black-and-white checked—a pattern unique to Palestinians). Elderly women, especially those in villages, wear traditional embroidered dresses. These dresses may also be worn by Palestinian women of all ages for special occasions. In villages, women generally wear scarves covering their hair and long-sleeved dresses. Young men dress casually, wearing jeans and T-shirts.

During the first intifada, urban women began to wear tightly drawn headscarves with long, loose-fitting dresses and sometimes even a veil. This switch to more conservative clothing was a way for individuals to show respect for those who were lost during the conflict. Today, many Muslim women continue to cover their heads with a scarf, although less-traditional women wear it loosely and some choose to go without. Christian women do not usually cover their heads.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Palestinians often smile and nod when passing each other on the street. Assalaam 'alaikum (May peace be upon you) is a common verbal greeting among Muslims. Marhabah, kef halak? (Hello, how are you doing?) is also common. Other expressions include Sabah al-khayr (Good morning), Masa' al-khayr ("Good evening," also used in the afternoon), and Ma asalama, deer balak (Good-bye, take care). Expressions of goodwill and welcome include Ahlan wa sahlan (You are welcome here) and Tafadal ("Please," meaning "Come in," "Sit down," or "Help yourself").

Women and close friends frequently greet each other with a handshake, a hug, and a kiss on each cheek. Men shake hands with each other. For religious reasons, most men and women, particularly those in villages, exchange greetings only verbally to avoid physical contact with members of the opposite sex. However, some urban women may initiate handshakes with men. A pat on the back or shoulder is considered a sign of affection between friends. Friends of the same sex commonly walk hand in hand.

First names are used when addressing close friends. Otherwise, Palestinians use the titles Anisah (Miss), Sayyidah (Mrs.), and Sayyid (Mr.) with first or last names. Parents are called by a *kunya* (nickname) referencing their oldest child. The *kunya* is made by adding the title abu (meaning "father of") for men and um (meaning "mother of") for women to the name of the oldest son (or daughter if the family has no sons).

For example, the father of Ahmad (the oldest son) is called Abu Ahmad; the mother would be called *Um Ahmad*. An uncle is called ammo if he is from the father's side of the family and khalo if he is from the mother's. Likewise, an aunt is called amto (father's side) or khalto (mother's side). A young person may sometimes address an elderly person as *ammo* or *khalto* as a sign of respect, even if they are unrelated.

Gestures

Palestinians usually stand close to each other and maintain eye contact when conversing. Hand gestures are used often. Placing all of the fingers together against the thumb with the palm facing upward means "Slow down," "Be careful," or "Have patience." When threatening punishment or warning others, Palestinians may lift the hand with the palm facing upward and the thumb closed against the index finger in a circle (similar to the "okay" signal in the United States).

Pointing the bottom of one's foot toward another person or placing one's feet on a table or chair is considered impolite. People also avoid crossing the legs or placing the feet across the knees in front of an older person. Palestinians are careful to show respect to all elderly individuals, no matter their social status or level of education. Muslims usually pass and receive objects with the right hand or both hands.

Visiting

Visiting, including gift giving, is an important part of Palestinian culture and considered a social obligation. Palestinians visit each other to celebrate special events, socialize, and commiserate. Arranged visits are common, but unplanned visits also are expected. Relatives and friends may drop by at any time and often do. Hosts usually offer their guests drinks (commonly soft drinks, tea, or fruit juice) and snacks (cake, nuts such as almonds, or fruit), followed by coffee. Guests are expected to end their visit after coffee.

Guests usually bring gifts for special occasions. The type of gift varies according to the event. Chocolates or flowers commonly are given to those who are sick. Guests usually wait to be seated by the hosts. In conservative families, men and women sit in separate rooms. Men also enjoy visiting in coffeehouses to smoke water pipes, drink coffee, and chat. Women more commonly socialize in the home.

Eating

Breakfast usually includes milk, tea, eggs, cheese, yogurt, and bread dipped in oil and zaatar (a Middle Eastern herb, similar to oregano and thyme, mixed with sesame seeds and other spices). Lunch, the main meal of the day, is served around 3 p.m., when most people return home from work. In towns, the main dish usually consists of vegetables, rice, and either lamb, chicken, or beef. Salads and soup may accompany the meal, particularly during Ramadan (when Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset). Dinner, which is served around 8 p.m., is usually lighter.

Most families eat with utensils from separate plates. However, when eating traditional Palestinian food, many adults prefer to eat from one common dish with their right

hands; this gives them a sense of equality and union. In some cases, men will eat separately from women, but families generally enjoy eating at least their main meal together. The father is served first, followed by the sons and then the daughters. Guests are served first when present. It is polite for guests to accept additional helpings.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Structure

Palestinian families are often large in size and play an important role in the life of an individual. Traditionally, parents with many children enjoyed greater economic and agricultural opportunities because they had more help in the fields or markets. Today, family sizes are decreasing due to higher living expenses. Palestinians often live with or near extended family. Protecting one's family name and honor is important.

Parents and Children

Parents support their children until they finish college or get married. Sons are expected to help their father with his duties, and girls assist with household chores from an early age. Boys usually work with their fathers during summer vacations, learning a skill or trade that they may one day take over. Children usually live with their parents until they are married; divorced women and their children often return home to live with her parents. The relationship between a mother and son or between a brother and sister is particularly significant. Sons are responsible for caring for their mother and sisters socially and financially, if needed. Brothers and sisters are close, and a brother may serve as his sister's protector. When daughters get married, responsibility for their financial needs is assumed by their husbands.

Palestinians are taught to cherish their heritage and respect their elders. Children (beginning with the eldest son) expect to care for their parents in their old age. Widowed parents usually live with their eldest son or—if they have no sons—daughter. Culturally, it is not proper for a family member to die in anger or anguish, so efforts are made to keep the elderly happy.

Gender Roles

The father is the head of the family. The mother may work outside the home but is expected to take care of housework and children as well. Palestinian women work in many different fields but are often encouraged to pursue careers, like teaching, that will allow them to balance work and family. Women enjoy many political rights, including the ability to vote and run in political elections. Women have held several ministerial positions in the last few decades. However, women often face social and legal discrimination in regards to inheritance and wages. Some women are also vulnerable to domestic violence. This often affects women who marry at a young age.

Housing

Urban and Rural

In larger cities, people tend to live in apartment buildings.

Urban homeowners tend to value the location of a home, like being close to their jobs and urban conveniences, over the spaciousness of a home. The average apartment has a living room, kitchen, bathroom, balcony, and two or three bedrooms. Homes generally have a room for the parents and a room each for male and female children. Wealthy families may have an extra bedroom and bathroom for guests. It is common for extended families to live in the same apartment building, with grandparents on the bottom floor and children and grandchildren living on the upper floors.

In villages, homes tend to be larger, and many have gardens. Family members live close to each other, with the main family house, often the grandparents' home, in the middle. Most family events take place at the home of the eldest family member.

Most homes in the West Bank have running water and electricity. In Gaza, homes only have electricity, but the power supply is limited. Also, tap water is often saline and polluted, so Gazans must take it to a local desalinization station. Those who can afford it buy bottled water. The average family has many modern appliances, such as a refrigerator and a television. Waste management and sewage systems are generally inadequate, particularly in Gaza.

Ownership

For Palestinians, homes represent a connection to their origins and traditions and a place where family bonds are strengthened. Homes are viewed as an important inheritance for male children, who are responsible for providing a place to live for their future families. It is common for parents to buy neighboring houses so that their married children can live near them.

Home ownership is increasingly difficult to attain in cities, where land is more expensive. Many young couples rent their first home and try to save up to buy a home later in life. Young men are rarely able to buy their own home unless they come from a very wealthy family. Women usually do not buy homes. Most areas of the Palestinian territories, especially Gaza, are densely populated.

Dating and Marriage

Dating and Courtship

Dating is not common and is forbidden in conservative families. Generally, couples who do date are not allowed to spend time alone together; however, in cities—where families tend to be more liberal—couples may go on a few dates before formally introducing one another to their families. Families and friends play an important role in finding spouses: for example, family or friends may socialize as a group so the couple can get to know each other. Alternatively, many couples also meet at work or at school. Some couples may also be introduced through social media sites.

Engagement

When a couple decides to marry, the family of the young man first arranges to meet the family of the young woman at her home. The young woman's family then inquires after the family and reputation of the young man. A second meeting, including the man's extended family members, happens at the young woman's home, where an elder from the young man's family officially asks for the young woman's hand in a ritual

known as *jaha*. The oldest member of the woman's family consents (speaking for the bride and her parents, who have already consented). The families then set a date for an engagement party.

Engagement parties are often held in the bride's home. The groom offers gifts of gold to his bride called *al-shabkeh*, which is given to the bride publicly as a sign of the groom's family's wealth. Many families expect that the groom will financially support his fiancée throughout the engagement period.

Engagements are a time for the couple and the couple's families to get to know one another. Usually, weekly dinners and family gatherings are held so the man may visit with his fiancée and present her with gifts. Engagements rarely last longer than a year, except in circumstances where the couple are finishing their educations or are saving for the wedding costs.

Marriage in Society

Men usually marry in their late twenties, while women may marry in their early twenties. However, the costs associated with marriage and the expectations of financial stability often push back the marriage age for men and women. Although a mother is always aware of marriage possibilities for her son, she begins looking for a wife for her son in earnest when he is about 25, the age by which men are generally expected to be married. In rural areas, marriages are often arranged. Marriage between Muslims and Christians is rare.

Same-sex marriage is not recognized in the West Bank or Gaza. Though homosexuality is taboo in both territories, sexual relations between same-sex partners are illegal only in Gaza.

Weddings

Weddings may be held at a hotel, rented wedding hall, or the groom's house. Wedding celebrations tend to be large, with hundreds of guests. Wedding guests usually wear elegant outfits for the occasion; men, including the groom, wear formal suits, while women wear fancy dresses. The bride may buy or rent a wedding dress or have one custom made for the event. The Western white wedding dress is common, but some women may wear a traditional Palestinian embroidered dress instead.

Before the arrival of women in the hall, men meet with a religious leader, who speaks about the importance of married life and then officially announces the bride and groom as a couple. The wedding party begins in the early evening and ends between 10 p.m. and midnight. The wedding celebrations include socializing among relatives, dancing, and singing while the groom and bride sit on a stage at the front of the hall.

The father, brothers, male cousins, and uncles give money and golden necklaces or bracelets to the bride and take pictures with the bride and groom. The couple also receives *nukoot* (money given by wedding guests) to assist them as they start their new lives together. The groom's family may help cover costs associated with his wedding, including the celebrations, living arrangements, and furnishing costs.

Divorce

Divorce is not socially accepted, and both men and women find it hard to remarry. In conservative communities, divorced

women may be judged as having a bad reputation. Divorced women return to live with their families and have custody of their children until they are between 7 and 9 years old (boys) or 9 and 11 years old (girls), at which point they live with their father. A woman can retain custody of her children if she remarries. A divorced father is expected to contribute a monthly stipend to support his ex-wife and children.

Life Cycle

Birth

Palestinian society is generally patriarchal, so celebrations surrounding the birth of a son are often more pronounced than those surrounding the birth of a daughter. For example, seven days after birth, Muslim families hold a celebration called *aqiqah*, where family and friends gather to celebrate the newborn by sacrificing two sheep for a boy or one for a girl. The meat is shared with friends, family, and the needy. Firstborn sons are generally named after their grandfather on their father's side. Christian families have their babies baptized and celebrate the occasion with a party.

Milestones

For some, marriage or graduation from high school marks the beginning of adulthood. However, young people are usually considered adults at 18; some families may consider young women to be adults by 16. At this age, young women begin learning to cook and maintain a house so that they will be prepared to manage those duties in the future. Young boys work with their fathers during summer vacations, learning a skill or trade that they may one day take over.

Death

Death is believed to happen at the will of God but is still treated with much sorrow. Burials take place very soon after a person dies. Muslims wash the body of the dead while reciting from the Qur'an (Islamic holy book), after which the body is wrapped in a white shroud and buried. Christians are embalmed and buried in coffins. Funerals usually include loud weeping and wailing. For three days after the funeral, the house of the deceased is open to friends and relatives, who offer condolences and sometimes bring meals. Most people are buried in public cemeteries.

Diet

Rice, beef, lamb, and vegetables with tomato sauce are staples in the Palestinian diet. Chicken, fish, chickpeas, fava beans, oranges, grapes, dates, figs, and olives are also common. Traditional specialties include *mansaf* (rice, lamb, cooked yogurt, bread, and nuts), *musakhan* (bread with fried onions, sumac, and chicken on top), and *waraq dawalee* (stuffed grape leaves). Also common are *maqluba* (vegetables, meat, and rice served with salad and yogurt) and *maftool* (*couscous*) served with *yakhni* (hearty chicken and vegetable stew).

Pita sandwiches filled with falafel (fried balls of crushed chickpeas mixed with oil and spices) are popular. Palestinians also enjoy spicy food, such as *qedra* (a rice dish with meat). Tea, fruit juice, and Turkish coffee are common. Observant Muslims do not eat pork or drink alcohol.

Recreation

Sports

Soccer and basketball are the most popular sports. Most cities have parks and fields where youth play soccer. In the Gaza Strip, the number of parks and fields is limited. Children in Gaza are more likely to play sports only in school.

Leisure

Men enjoy visiting in coffee shops, where they can drink coffee or tea, play card games, and discuss politics, religion, and society. Rural Palestinian women likewise gather in the morning over coffee or tea until it is time to prepare lunch. In urban areas, women are more likely to work outside of the home and reserve their socialization (which often happens at home or restaurants) until the weekend. In cities, recreational activities for men and women include shopping on weekends, dining at restaurants, and parties with family and friends, where the men and women usually socialize and dance separately from each other. Attending movies is popular in urban areas, where cinemas are available. Many people attend cultural arts performances when possible.

In the summer, people enjoy spending time outdoors barbecuing. Children like to play outside in the yard or at parks. Parks are often used as the main meeting places for young men on weekends and during summer vacation. At night in the summer, people gather to play music and sing folk songs while they smoke the *argileh* (also called *shisha*, a water pipe used to smoke fruit-flavored tobacco) and eat homemade desserts. During the winter, recreational activities are more limited. People generally entertain guests at home, where they play cards, drink coffee or tea, and smoke the *argileh*.

Vacation

Due to the number of checkpoints both within the Palestinian territories and at their borders, traveling can be difficult. Palestinians must often rely on social activities near where they live. Palestinians in cities may visit the countryside, often to visit an ancestral home or place where family members reside. During the summertime, families in Gaza enjoy visiting the beach.

The Arts

Artisans create pottery, paintings, and leatherwork. Carvings and ornaments of olive wood are common. Women embroider cushions, dresses, jackets, tablecloths, and other items in an ancient form of cross-stitch. Songs always accompany holidays and celebrations and are led by singers called *zajjaleen*. The *dabkah* is a traditional dance performed with handkerchiefs and accompanied by the pounding of feet to keep the rhythm. Storytelling and poetry are well developed, but theater is a relatively new phenomenon. Literature is valued, but many writers have emigrated.

Holidays

National days include Labor Day (1 May) and Independence Day (15 November). Islamic holidays include the prophet Muhammad's birthday and *Ra's al-Sannah al-Hijriyyah* (the first day of the Islamic year). National holidays are generally marked with a day off work and school. Labor Day generally passes with recognition of workers by the Ministry of Labor. For Independence Day, demonstrations are organized and speeches are offered regarding the history of Palestine. People

also wave Palestinian flags and green olive branches.

Ramadan

Ramadan is the Islamic month of fasting, and adherents go without food or drink from sunrise to sunset. Businesses have shorter hours during *Ramadan*, which allows for more time to be spent with family. Family gatherings are very important during *Ramadan*, and people often invite friends to dinner and *suhoor* (the meal eaten before sunrise). Christians are often invited to break the fast with their Muslim friends or neighbors. Muslims visit with each other and bring desserts as gifts for friends and family. They also attend prayers at the mosque together and read the Qur'an (Islamic holy book). Women receive gifts and sometimes money from their male relatives during *Ramadan*.

Eid al-Fitr

Eid al-Fitr (the Feast of Fast-Breaking) is a three-day holiday held at the end of *Ramadan*. Two days before the beginning of *Eid al-Fitr*, mothers prepare date- or nut-filled cookies, and fathers buy chocolate and Turkish delight (flavored gelatins with dates or pistachios) as part of the preparation for the *Eid*. During *Eid al-Fitr*, people prepare large meals and bake *ka'ak* (literally "cake," but refers to a number of different baked goods). Parents give their children new clothes and *eidia* (gifts of money). Children spend time at parks and eat special treats.

Eid al-Adha

Eid al-Adha (Feast of Sacrifice) is celebrated for four days at the end of the *hajj* (pilgrimage). *Eid al-Adha* commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son. On the first day, Muslims slaughter livestock, usually a sheep or goat, and distribute meat to neighbors and the needy. The rest of the days of celebration are spent enjoying food and the company of friends and family.

Christian Celebrations

Many Palestinian Christians attend Christmas celebrations in Bethlehem and Easter commemorations in East Jerusalem. Christian celebrations include church services and visits to family and friends. Occasionally, Christians and Muslims may celebrate religious holidays together. In the city of Bethlehem, for example, Muslims celebrate Christmas by decorating their houses with trees and lights.

SOCIETY

Government

Structure

The West Bank is governed by the Palestinian Authority, which is headed by a president. The president is usually elected to four-year terms, though the term for the current president has been extended indefinitely. The president nominates the prime minister. The 132-seat Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) is non-functional and has been unable to meet since 2007 due to disagreements between Hamas and Fatah and council members' limited mobility between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. While the Palestinian Authority oversees domestic affairs, Israel maintains security and borders. Palestinian Arabs living in East Jerusalem hold Israeli-issued identification cards (but not

Israeli citizenship), while Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza hold identification cards issued by the Palestinian Authority. Jewish settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem remain under Israeli jurisdiction.

The Gaza Strip is governed by the Islamic militant group Hamas, led by Yahya Sinwar. Hamas administers services through its social, political, and military branches. The West Bank and Gaza is recognized by the United Nations as Palestine and is a nonmember observer state.

Political Landscape

The West Bank and Gaza's political landscape has long been marred by a stagnant peace process with Israel and political feuds between the two main Palestinian political factions, Fatah and Hamas. Fatah is the largest faction in the multiparty confederation of the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Hamas is the largest of several Palestinian Islamic militant groups. Hamas does not recognize Israel's right to exist and maintains a staunch position of resistance. Some Palestinians in the West Bank have expressed their support for a Hamas-majority government.

Government and the People

The Palestinian Authority generally respects freedom of religion and education, but other freedoms are limited. Past elections have been considered fair, though no parliamentary elections have been held since 2006 due to multiple postponements. In the West Bank, recent municipal elections were dominated by Fatah party loyalists and boycotted by Hamas. Tensions between the major Fatah and Hamas parties often lower Palestinian participation in elections. The voting age is 18.

Economy

The economies of both the West Bank and Gaza are poor and struggling. Unemployment and inflation are chronically high and fluctuate according to political relations with Israel. Underemployment is also a problem. Frequent closures of Palestinian areas have severely damaged the economy. Any economic recovery or growth depends largely upon the access Palestinians have to places of employment in Israel and the West Bank and Gaza. Many skilled and educated workers emigrate due to the political situation. The standard of living is decreasing, and both regions are in need of substantial foreign investment. Most industries in the West Bank and Gaza are small-scale and family-operated. They include cement, textiles, fishing, and souvenirs. Agricultural crops include fruits, olives, vegetables, beef, and dairy products. The West Bank and Gaza rely heavily on foreign aid. The shekel (new Israeli shekel ILS), the Jordanian dinar (JOD), and the U.S. dollar (USD) are acceptable legal tender.

Transportation and Communications

Buses are the primary mode of mass transit. Israel provides a few bus lines designated for Palestinian workers traveling from the West Bank into Israel. Taxis and private cars are also common. A growing number of people own cars, adding to traffic problems. Roads generally are in poor condition. Donkey carts are still used to transport goods in some areas. Movement is contingent on Israeli political or security decisions. Travel between Gaza and the West Bank is

not allowed, except for rare humanitarian reasons. Palestinians in Gaza are often unable to leave, as they have difficulty acquiring travel visas, and border crossings between Egypt and Israel are usually closed. People, whether Palestinian or tourist, are not allowed to travel to the Gaza Strip.

The West Bank and Gaza have more cellular telephone subscribers than landlines. The number of smartphone users is also increasing. Many Palestinians access the internet through their smartphones. The primary news medium is television; most families have a television. Radio stations and newspapers also operate. Though guaranteed by law, press freedoms are limited, and many journalists practice self-censorship.

Education

Structure and Access

Palestinians highly value education, and parents often sacrifice much to get their children an education. Palestinian Arabs have a relatively high literacy rate, and many Palestinians pursue college degrees. Children are required to attend school for 10 years. Primary school includes grades 1 through 6 (ages 6–12), preparatory school is made of grades 7 through 9 (ages 13–15), and secondary school includes grades 10 through 12 (ages 16–18). Most children begin kindergarten at age 3. About 97 percent of children complete primary school. In keeping with Islamic tradition, the government in the Gaza Strip requires all schools to segregate classes for boys and girls after the age of 6. Schools in the West Bank are not mandated to segregate classes by gender, but many public schools do.

Both public and private schools are available. Some private schools are funded through Muslim or Christian organizations. Public schools are generally less well funded and may lack adequate space, materials, and teachers. While private schools may have unique curriculum at the primary level, public and private secondary education is unified under the direction of the Palestinian Ministry of Education.

School Life

Students call their teachers *ustaaaz* (for male teachers) or *ustaaazah* (for female teachers). In the Gaza Strip, male teachers are not allowed to teach in all female schools. The relationship between students and teachers is formal in and out of the classroom. Teachers rely on traditional teaching methods, like memorization, which is expected particularly in religious studies, history, and other social science classes. Homework is a major element in Palestinian education. Parents are typically involved with helping their children with homework from a young age.

In grade 10, students choose either a scientific emphasis or a social studies emphasis. Parents often encourage their children to pursue the scientific emphasis because these graduates generally have a larger variety of career options. At the end of secondary school, students take the *tawjihi* exam (General Secondary Educational Examination). The results of the *tawjihi* exam enable students to apply to universities or community colleges. Good scores allow students to select the most prestigious majors—engineering and medicine. Tutoring is very important to securing a good score on the *tawjihi*

exam.

Higher Education

Major universities are located in Bethlehem and near Ramallah. Students may also attend university in Jerusalem, Egypt, Jordan, or Algeria. Some students study in the United States or the United Kingdom through international scholarships. Study abroad opportunities can be difficult to capitalize on due to travel restrictions on Palestinians, especially those in Gaza. Not all students can afford to attend higher education. Vocational schools attract youth from rural areas and offer diplomas in fields such as manufacturing, nursing, commerce, education, and agriculture. Family traditions can play a significant role in the selection of an academic path; the child of a doctor, for example, may be encouraged to pursue medical education.

While more liberal families might encourage their daughters to pursue advanced degrees (abroad if necessary) and work in any field that interests them, many rural female students study to be teachers, as there may be more opportunity for them to work in their hometowns. Women also tend to study education because teachers have set schedules and extended periods of time off, which enable them to spend time with their families. Most families believe that educating daughters is equally important as educating sons. An educated woman is typically believed to positively influence the way children are raised.

Health

Many health concerns in the West Bank and Gaza are compounded by the political situation with Israel. Palestinians, particularly Gazans, suffer from a lack of medicine, and medical facilities are subject to power outages. Existing facilities are often inadequate. Patients needing specialized health care outside of the West Bank and Gaza must be referred by their doctor and wait for approval by the Palestinian Authority Health Ministry and Israeli authorities, which is not usually granted.

Health conditions are better in the West Bank than in Gaza. The United Nations sponsors some medical care programs. Life expectancy rates vary, depending on gender and territory.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

Permanent Observer Mission of the State of Palestine to the United Nations, 115 East 65th Street, New York, NY 10065; phone (212) 288-8500; web site <https://palestineun.org/>.

Country and Development Data

Capital	None
Population	4,997,349
Area (sq. mi.)	2,402
Area (sq. km.)	6,220
Human Development Index	109 of 189 countries
Gender Inequality Index	NA
GDP (PPP) per capita	NA
Adult Literacy	99% (male); 96% (female)
Infant Mortality	NA
Life Expectancy	72 (male); 77 (female)
Currency	Israeli New Shekel

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