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Democracy Dies in Darkness

The dueling histories in the debate over 'historic Palestine'

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The Fact Checker

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"Without geography, you're nowhere."

— attributed to Jimmy Buffett

The New York Times recently came under fire when it accompanied [an essay](#) by Palestinian human-rights lawyer [Diana Buttu](#) with [an illustration](#) that showed a shrinking map of Palestine, from the borders of the British mandate for Palestine in 1947 to areas that would be under Palestinian control after adoption of a recent peace plan.

Patrick Healy, deputy opinion editor of the Times, [issued a statement](#) saying "it was not meant to be a literal, factual map … this was an illustration conveying a sense of shrinking space for Palestinians. It is art."

Still, [a version of this map](#) has been circulating for [almost 20 years](#), supposedly showing how "Historic Palestine" had been taken over by Israel. As a technical matter, the map is a confusing mélange of images: it includes something that did not exist (Palestinian control over all the territory), something that did not happen (the proposed United Nations partition) and something odd (pre-1967 occupations by Jordan and Egypt are depicted as Palestinian-controlled).

Presumably the artist borrowed from this map to underscore one of the points made in Buttu's essay about the burden of being a Palestinian who lives in Israel: "We are those who survived the 'nakba,' the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948, when more than 75 percent of the Palestinian population was expelled from their homes to make way for Jewish immigrants during the founding of Israel."

The Fact Checker has known Buttu for nearly two decades. When we tweeted her essay, we got many emails complaining about the illustration. The following missive is typical:

> I have to agree with the comment on Twitter calling you a "moron" for retweeting a tweet suggesting that Palestine has been destroyed by Israel. In fact, as was pointed out, Palestine was simply the European name for the British Mandate whose purpose was a Jewish state. So, there never actually was a native country Palestine populated by Palestinians. Pretty embarrassing that you're a fact-checker and you're ignorant about recent history.

It's actually not that simple. We often hesitate to delve into the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, as there are two competing narratives. History can be open to interpretation and not always easily fact-checked. But, as best we can, we'll try to summarize the two versions of whether there was a historic Palestine for readers who want to hear both sides of the story.

Pro-Israel version

Palestine was a provincial place name adopted by the Romans but it disappeared in the mists of history. Essentially, there was no "Palestine" before the British mandate was established after World War I. Before then, the region now known as Israel was a variety of administration areas in the Ottoman Empire, none of which had the name Palestine.

Although some maps in the late 1800s can be found with the name "Palestine" on them, that was a European invention, reflecting the rise in tourism to the Holy Land at the time. In fact, much of the area was known as Syria, not Palestine.

After the Ottoman Empire collapsed, the European powers carved up the Middle East among themselves. The British mandate was established specifically to create a Jewish National Home, consistent with the 1917 declaration issued by British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour. The British chose the name "Palestine," reflecting Christian European thinking, not any Ottoman designation.

The mandate for a Jewish homeland originally included what is now Jordan, but that land area (77 percent of the original mandate) was split off from the Jewish homeland in 1921 and eventually became an independent country.

The Arab population of the area did not rule themselves under either Ottoman or British control. Neither did the Jewish population — which was barred from making land purchases after 1939. When the British mandate ended in 1948 and Arabs rejected a United Nations plan to divide Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state, the state of Israel was declared. Israel was invaded by a coalition of Arab nations but its military forces defeated them. Many Arabs abandoned their homes at the urging of Arab leaders. Israel ended up with more land than would have been granted under the partition plan, though that was still only a portion of the original British mandate for a Jewish homeland.

(Sources for this version can be found here and here.)

Pro-Palestinian version

Palestine was the name used for the area as early as 12th century B.C. by the ancient Egyptians. The Assyrians called it Phalastu in the 8th and 7th centuries B.C., and Herodotus and other Hellenistic philosophers called it Palestine, after the Philistines. "Writing in the 5th century B.C., Herodotus was the first historian to describe vividly a multifaith country located naturally (geographically) between Phoenicia and Egypt, and to denote a geographical region he called Palaistinê," observes Nur Masalha in his 2018 book, "Palestine: A Four Thousand Year History."

Moreover, the area was called Palestine during the Islamic Golden Age and during the Ottoman period; one prominent Zionist called for the restoration of the Jews to "the land of Palestine" in 1840. A German historian in 1890 listed 3,515 books published between 333 and 1878 which dealt with the geography of "Palestine." In 1915, the National Geographic magazine published an article titled: "Former British Ambassador to the U.S., James Bryce, relates his impressions of a predominantly Muslim Palestine."

Masalha argues that contrary to the notion that Europeans re-created the term "Palestine" in the late 18th century, leading Palestinian Muslim jurists and writers used the term "Filastin" (Arabic for Palestine) to refer to the "country" as Palestine, or to "our country" in the 15th to 17th centuries. In the 18th century, the area saw the emergence of a new Palestine-based autonomous rule, spurred in part by the region's commercial dynamism, especially its trade in cotton and grain. In effect, between the 1720s and 1775 under the ruler Zahir al-Umar, there was an independent Palestinian state — longer than the British mandate.

In the late 1800s, a Palestinian national consciousness emerged, in part in response to the arrival of Zionists. By 1911, an anti-Zionist newspaper Filastin began to publish, followed by the creation of nationalist resistance organizations. Palestinians increasingly viewed the Zionists as White colonialists, even though the Jewish population in the region was much smaller — just 8 percent when the British mandate was established.

At the time of the proposed U.N. partition, Jews comprised only 33 percent of the population, owned 7 percent of the land and yet would have been given 56 percent of the former mandate. There was no reason to accept such a deal. Then when the state of Israel was declared, Jewish forces forced many Palestinian families from their homes. This is documented in a 1948 Israel Defense Forces intelligence report, which said the displacement of about 70 percent of the Arabs during this time should be attributed to military operations carried out by Jewish forces, compared to only 5 percent which could be attributed to orders given by Arab leaders.

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