

The 11 biggest myths about Israel-Palestine

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31–39 minutes

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Once you see the truth about a few widely held misconceptions, the conflict starts to make a lot more sense.

Myth #1: The conflict is too complex to possibly understand

This is, in many ways, the Israel-Palestine misconception from which all other Israel-Palestine misconceptions flow: that the conflict is an impossibly complicated [mess](#) so far beyond human untangling or comprehension that we should not really try.

It's true that Israel-Palestine is complicated, but it's not *that* complicated (you can [get the full primer here](#)). At its most basic level, the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is over who gets what land and how that land is controlled. Yes, there are some very thorny details — how to divide the city of Jerusalem, for example — but the list of such details is not impossibly long. And while these issues can be extremely difficult to resolve, grasping them is not.





A Palestinian woman walks past an Israeli soldier outside the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. (Uriel Sinai/Getty Images)

There are three main reasons the conflict can feel much more complicated than it actually is. First, it's been going on for several decades, which is a long time. That means hashing out any one detail means reciting through lots of history; while it can be tough to remember all that information, this does not make the issues inherently impossible to understand or resolve.

Second, each side has a very different narrative of the conflict, what's happened, what matters, and who bears what responsibilities. So you'll hear a lot of contradictory information, which can be confusing and exhausting; this effect is compounded by the fact that American public discourse also splits between the two narratives. But having two versions of history is not at all unusual in big conflicts, and it does not actually make the reality of what's happened somehow beyond human understanding.

Third, pro-Israeli/pro-Palestinian partisans often push the idea that the conflict is complex beyond outsiders' comprehension, or that it is exceedingly simple ("our side is right"). In both tellings, the conclusion is the same: you shouldn't think too hard or read too much about what's happening. This is a sadly effective way to shut down conversation; it make people want to ignore the other side's legitimate positions, ignore their own preferred side's abuses, or simply check out altogether.

The effect of all this, by the way, is to yield the conversation to the most vehement partisans, which is one of [several reasons](#) why that conversation is so toxic. It also helps serve the status quo of perpetual conflict, which is great news for extremists on both sides that want to see the conflict end through total military victory over the other. So consider it your civic duty as a citizen of the world to ignore the naysayers who insist you could never possibly understand this conflict — you can.

Myth #2: The conflict is all about religion

It is true that Israelis are mostly Jewish and Palestinians are mostly Muslim, but religion is pretty low on the list of direct drivers of the conflict. This is not, despite what your grade school teacher may have suggested, a clash between Judaism and Islam over religious differences. It's a clash between nationalities — Israeli and Palestinian — over secular issues of land and nationhood.

The European Jews who first encouraged and organized [mass Jewish migration](#) to what we now call Israel, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, were mostly secular Jews. Their movement, Zionism, treated Jews primarily as a nationality — like the French or Chinese — in addition to a religious group. While a number of Israelis are religiously observant, especially on the political right, the larger movement that created Israel was and remains primarily secular.

Initial Palestinian armed movements were largely secular, as well. They were not, despite common misconceptions, Islamic extremists; they were Palestinian nationalists not unlike the Irish Republican Army were Irish nationalists. Some early groups were even officially communist. It is true that more recent groups such as [Hamas](#), which formed in 1987, espouse Islamism. But beneath their language of jihad is, in significant part, the same nationalist drive of previous groups.

There is one aspect of the conflict with a more overt religious dimension: Jerusalem. The long-divided city has, in its ancient center, Islam's third holiest site (the al-Aqsa mosque compound) located physically on top of the much older Temple Mount, the Western Wall of which is Judaism's holiest site. That means both Israelis and Palestinians want access to the same area for religious reasons. (There is a similar, smaller dispute over the West Bank city of Hebron.) But the dispute over Jerusalem is, in practice, still experienced more as a political than a religious issue.

Myth #3: They've been fighting for centuries

This is by far the most common, and the most clearly wrong, of the Israel-Palestine misconceptions. It's so common that even Secretary

of State Hillary Clinton cited it, joking that the conflict has been going on for so long that it makes the 800-year-old British-Irish conflict look positively young.

But here's the thing: the Israel-Palestine conflict is a very modern phenomenon. It didn't really formally begin until 1948, or at the earliest you might say in the early 1900s. That's still a very long conflict, but it's about 100 years at most, significantly less than the 3,000 years you hear people cite.

This gets to a bigger misconception: that the conflict is between Jews and Muslims over religion. In fact, those two religious groups have been coexisting in the region, for the most part peacefully, since Islam was first born in the seventh century.



Israeli police walk through Jerusalem's Old City in 2014. (Spencer Platt/Getty)

The conflict did not really begin until the early 20th century, as thousands of Jews left Europe to escape persecution and establish a homeland in what is today Israel-Palestine (it was Ottoman Palestine until 1920, when it came under British control). Communal violence between Jews and Arabs escalated into a crisis, and in 1947 the UN proposed splitting the land into a state for Jews (Israel) and a state for Arabs (Palestine).

Regional Arab leaders saw the plan as European colonial theft and invaded to keep Palestine unified. The Israeli forces won, but they pushed well beyond the UN-designated borders to claim land that

was to have been part of Palestine, including the western half of Jerusalem. They also [uprooted and expelled](#) entire Palestinian communities, creating about 700,000 refugees — the status of these refugees and their descendants is still a major component of the conflict today.

The 1948 war ended with Israel roughly controlling the territory that you will see marked on today's maps as "Israel." Palestinians mostly ended up in the West Bank and Gaza, which were controlled by the neighboring Arab states of Jordan and Egypt. In 1967 Israel fought another war with its neighbors, during which it militarily occupied the West Bank and Gaza. Today, the West Bank is still occupied (including eastern Jerusalem), Gaza is under military blockade, Jerusalem is officially divided between east and west, and there are 7 million Palestinian refugees. Palestinians still don't have a sovereign, independent state.

Those are the very basics of the conflict. As you can see, it's not ancient at all, and it's not really primarily about religion. It's about a century old at most, and it's predominantly about national self-determination.

Myth #4: Europe created Israel to apologize for the Holocaust

There are actually two misconceptions behind the idea that Europe created Israel to apologize for the Holocaust. The first is that Europe created Israel, and thus that Israel is an extension of European colonialism. The second is that Israel's creation was a response to the Holocaust. Both have elements of truth but are, on balance, not correct descriptions of Israel's founding.

First, Israel was not a creation of European colonialism: Israel's creation was in large part the work of Jews who moved to present-day Israel, despite European efforts to stop them, and who dragged the world into accepting them as a state. It is true that in 1917, Britain issued its famous Balfour Declaration promising the Jews a homeland in British-controlled Palestine as long as this did not undercut the rights of non-Jews there. But in the 1930s, as Jewish immigration and Jewish-Arab tension increased, the British tried to

sharply limit Jewish immigration into the area, forcing many Jews into refugee camps in Cyprus and elsewhere. Jews smuggled in large numbers of illegal immigrants in the 1940s; Jewish militias that formed to fight Arabs also conducted violent operations against the British, whom they saw as an enemy.

This was not, in other words, a European-Jewish joint project at all. The United Nations did come around to creating a Jewish state with its 1947 plan for partitioning Palestine, but that was in large part a reaction to the chaos and communal violence in British Palestine, which the UN hoped to solve by dividing the territory. And of the 33 countries that voted for the resolution, only 12 were European; 13 yes votes came from Latin and Caribbean countries. (Thirteen countries voted against it.) To be fair, it is definitely true that the UN ignored Arab and Palestinian objections to the plan, in a way that left them disenfranchised and feeling, with reason, that their land had been taken from them without their consent. But the point is that it was not a European or Western conspiracy.



The last British troops in what had been the British Mandate of Palestine lower their flag in Haifa harbor in June 1948. (AFP/Getty)

Second, Israel's creation was not just a response to the Holocaust: While it is true that Holocaust galvanized global public opinion in support of Jews, and accelerated Jewish immigration to Israel, it is also true that all the factors that led to the creation of Israel

were already well in place before the Holocaust happened. There were centuries of European anti-Semitism, a strongly felt Zionist movement among Jews, many thousands of Jewish immigrants in Palestine, and an international campaign to generate diplomatic support. In some ways, the Holocaust depressed Jewish immigration, because Nazi governments largely forbade it and because it left Europe with so many fewer Jews to emigrate. The question of how big a role the Holocaust played in leading up to Israel's creation is debated among scholars, but the point is that it was by no means, despite the widespread misconception, the only significant impetus for Israel's creation.

Myth #5: Palestinians/Israelis aren't a real nationality

You hear variations of this argument from partisans to the conflict who argue that the other side has an insufficient claim to the land because their nationality is made up.

The pro-Palestinian argument is that Israelis are actually European Jews who trumped up the idea of an Israeli identity in order to steal land, but who actually belong in Europe and need to go back. The pro-Israeli argument is that Palestinians are just Arabs who trumped up the idea of a Palestinian identity in order to claim land they weren't fully using, but who should instead be absorbed into the neighboring Arab states of Jordan and Egypt.

There is obviously a real degree of racism implicit in both of these arguments, and both arguments fundamentally ignore the actual experiences of Israelis and Palestinians. Israelis are in Israel, and not in Europe, in significant part because Europe spent centuries violently rejecting them as not European. They had little choice but to adopt a distinct national identity, which they began doing in the 1800s. This movement became Zionism.





Palestinian youths wave flags at a 2006 rally in Rafah, Gaza. (SAID KHATIB/AFP/Getty)

Likewise, Palestinians began developing a distinct national identity [in the early 1800s](#), also as a reaction to oppression, in their case the centuries of Ottoman domination. As with Israelis, that sense of a common Palestinian national identity grew into the desire, as is their right, for a state of their own. While it's true that Palestinians are ethnically Arab, as are many other Middle Easterners, this is not the same as a nationality; the idea of a unified pan-Arab identity is a relatively new phenomenon, and one that faded quickly after its peak in the early 1960s.

Both sides argue that they have claims to the land going back centuries. And they both have a plausible case. But the argument over whose family tree goes back further elides that this conversation is much more about modern national identities than about ancient religious roots. This also misses a fundamental but uncomfortable truth that neither side is eager to admit.

Here is that truth: all national identities are, to some extent, artificial. And strong national identities as we know them today are largely a modern phenomenon. The American national identity obviously did not exist 300 years ago; neither did a [specifically Nigerian](#) national identity, for example, exist just 100 years ago. Both are relatively modern inventions, stitched together from prior identities and groupings and land claims. And yet we all agree that the American identity is real and valid and that the Nigerian identity is real and valid.

Similarly, while Israelis and Palestinians do have ancient heritages, there is also some truth to the idea that these identities are in many ways modern inventions. But so are many other national identities. And here's the thing: the world is organized on an idea called national self-determination, which says people are allowed to determine their

own national identity and then organize politically around it. Israelis and Palestinians clearly each see themselves as holding a strong national identity, so the world should respect that.

Myth #6: Most Israelis and Palestinians hate everyone on the other side

There is certainly hate on the fringes of both Israeli and Palestinian politics, and those fringes are not small. But the more common feeling among mainstream Israelis and Palestinians could probably be better described as somewhere between apathy and antipathy.

The commonly expressed view among Palestinians is not that they wish to see all Jews driven into the sea; it's that they want just and fair treatment of Palestinians, which they see as requiring that the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories end (and, for many, that Palestinian refugees and their descendants be allowed to return to their former homes in what is now Israel). They are outraged about the costs occupation imposes on Palestinians, and have next to no faith that Israel will withdraw or generally do the right thing. They believe Israelis will never voluntarily allow them a state.

The commonly expressed view among Israelis is that peace would be great in theory, and establishing an independent Palestinian state would be great in theory, but that they have next to no confidence that Palestinians or Palestinian leaders will actually take the necessary steps to get there. They believe Palestinians will never stop wanting to kill Israelis, and that allowing Palestinians a state would bring unacceptable dangers for Israelis.

Both of these views developed over many decades of conflict, broken deals, and lost opportunities. But they really crystallized during what's called the [second intifada](#), in the early 2000s. Palestinians, outraged that the Oslo Peace Process had failed to bring peace and had seemingly institutionalized the occupation, staged mass protests. Both sides blame one another for the Palestinian protests and Israeli crackdowns that escalated into horrible violence, including Palestinian terrorist attacks and brutal Israeli military assaults. When it was over, roughly 3,000 Palestinians and 1,000 Israelis [had been killed](#).





Palestinian youth throw stones at an Israeli tank in 2003, during the second intifada. (SAIF DAHLAH/AFP/Getty Images)

Ever since, Israelis have generally believed that peace is desirable but not workable because Palestinians would reject it in favor of violence. Palestinians, who have seen the smothering force of the occupation greatly deepen since the second intifada, and have seen Israeli settlements in the West Bank grow, increasingly believe that Israelis wish to make the occupation permanent.

This does not mean that Israelis and Palestinians broadly hate one another or are racist against one another. The occupation-enforced separation does mean that even outside of the extremist fringes, [misunderstanding runs deep](#) and empathy does not. And the rough history between Israelis and Palestinians has engendered a lot of distrust, but that's not hate. However, this antipathetic relationship does allow the truly hateful, the extremists, to fester on both sides and to exploit the broader mainstream's apathy toward the other side's needs.

Myth #7: The US could force Israel to end the conflict if it wanted





US Secretary of State John Kerry meets with Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas in 2014. (Thaer Ghanaim/PPO/Getty Images)

There is a common trope, especially on the left, that the Israel-Palestine conflict would end overnight if only the US were not so unflinching in its support of Israel, and instead used its influence to bring the conflict to an end.

There are two misconceptions here. The first is the premise: that the onus for the conflict and its perpetuation is entirely, 100 percent on Israel. While it is true that Israel today has far more [control over the conflict](#) than do Palestinians, and thus bears more responsibility for its perpetuation, Palestinian groups are also plenty active in keeping the conflict going. It is a canard to argue that the conflict would end if only Israel withdrew from it unilaterally, because without an agreement with the Palestinians, Israel couldn't magically get groups like Hamas to give up on the conflict.

The main misconception, though, is the idea that the US is so unflinchingly pro-Israel, and such a crucial Israeli ally, that it is the de facto sponsor of the conflict, and thus could end the conflict by simply withdrawing its support for Israel.

This is wrong on several levels. First, Israel was already engaged in the conflict before it enjoyed so much US support; the two countries had a [poor relationship](#) up [until 1973](#), before which Israel's lack of close American support did not stop it from occupying the Palestinian territories. Second, the US and Israel since 1973 are [not nearly as close](#) as you might think; they bicker frequently and spy on one another openly. During the Obama and George H. W. Bush

administrations, they reached points of [overt antagonism](#). Third, while the US does provide Israel with an awful lot of military, financial, and diplomatic support, Israel has proven over and over again that this aid [does not buy much real leverage](#) on Israel-Palestine conflict issues. Fourth, when the US has overtly pressured Israel on the conflict, as Obama did during his first term, Israel's response has often been to defy the US by doing the opposite of what is asked.

There is a common view in the United States, on both the right and the left, that the US government gives Israel so much support because it loves and supports Israel's role in the conflict. (On the right, the view is that this policy is correct; on the left, the view is that it is a mistake and a result of pro-Israel lobbying or other distorting forces.) Both sides are wrong: the US position has long been and remains that supporting Israel is the only way to nudge the Israelis to the negotiating table, and to make democratically elected Israeli leaders feel politically secure enough that they will take the necessary risks for peace. This is the same reason the US gives heavy financial and political support to the Palestinian Authority.

There is a valid case to be made that the high level of American support for Israel does, to some extent, enable its policies in the conflict. There is also a valid case, though, that withdrawing American support would make Israelis and their leaders feel more threatened and isolated, thus [empowering anti-peace politics](#) and making peace that much less likely. Either way, it is not the case that American support for Israel is so overwhelmingly decisive that switching it off would end the conflict.

Myth #8: A Palestinian Gandhi could bring peace

There's a popular view among Americans that Palestinians have rejected nonviolent resistance, and that if only they took up the lessons of nonviolent Indian independence leader Mohandas Gandhi, then that would bring the conflict to an end.

Logically, this is a confusing argument. It assumes that Israel is driving the conflict, as the British did by colonizing India, while simultaneously putting the onus for ending it on Palestinians. It also conveniently overlooks, as Westerners often do, the fact that Gandhi

was an outlier. Most colonial-era independence leaders to some extent endorsed violence, including South Africa's Nelson Mandela.

More fundamentally, though, this is wrong because there are lots of Palestinians who have used, and continue to use, nonviolence to organize against the Israeli occupation. They consistently fail, because they are ignored, because they're put down by Israeli security forces, or because they lose momentum against the overwhelming force of the occupation itself.

Don't take my word for it: watch a nonviolent Palestinian campaign unfold, and mostly fail, right before your eyes in the award-winning 2011 documentary *Five Broken Cameras*, filmed by a Palestinian man as his village tried to stop Israel from building a wall that would cut off villagers from their olive groves.

Palestinians attempted nonviolence en masse in the late 1980s and early '90s, during which the [first intifada](#) (uprising) challenged the occupation using protests, strikes, and other mass demonstrations. The first intifada did also include Palestinian violence against Israelis, though, and in the early 2000s Palestinians launched the second intifada, which was defined by widespread violence, including terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians.

A common variation of this argument is to acknowledge that some Palestinians are nonviolent but point out that other Palestinians are violent, and conclude that Palestinian nonviolence won't be effective until all Palestinians adopt it. There is a degree of merit to this — Hamas is indeed a large and very violent Palestinian movement, among others, and violence speaks much more loudly than the nonviolence it can drown out — but it makes some fundamental mistakes. First of all, British India had violent independence movements as well as Gandhi's nonviolence, so clearly violence does not cancel out nonviolence. Second, were all Palestinian violence suddenly to cease, there is no indication that the conflict would magically resolve. Observers often point out that Gazan leaders chose violence, and they got a full Israeli withdrawal in 2005, but West Bank leaders have chosen peaceful compromise, and their reward has been ever-expanding settlements and occupation.

None of this, to be clear, is to argue that Palestinian violent resistance

works or is commendable. It does not and is not. The Gaza-based militant group Hamas, by launching rockets and other attacks at Israelis, has only deepened the isolation and suffering of Gazans. The second intifada left Palestinians much worse off than they were before it began. The point is that nonviolent resistance is certainly commendable and important, but no matter how many Palestinian Gandhis emerge, that is not enough on its own to end the conflict.

Myth #9: Things are basically peaceful during periods of relative calm

There is a pleasant fiction in the United States and parts of Israel that the Israel-Palestine conflict exists in a sort of suspended animation, on pause and simply awaiting diplomatic resolution. But the truth is that the conflict never really goes away for most of the 12 million people in Israel and the Palestinian territories.

“One of the biggest misconceptions is that when there isn’t an upsurge in violence, like right now, all is more or less well in Israel-Palestine,” Matt Duss, president of the Foundation for Middle East Peace, told me during the most recent Gaza War, in the summer of 2014. “While we find ourselves in a particularly acute crisis right now, the ongoing occupation/blockade of the West Bank and Gaza is itself an ongoing crisis, a situation that no country would tolerate (to use a familiar formulation).”



Israeli border police patrol the Arab quarter of Jerusalem's Old City on July 23,

2010. (Ahmad Gharabli/AFP/Getty)

Part of this misconception, Duss says, is that there are “only so many stories to write about, ‘occupation now entering 17,189th day, remains horrible way to live.’”

Another factor is that after the second intifada of the early 2000s, Israel built up huge walls around Gaza and West Bank communities, physically separating Palestinians from Israelis. While Israelis who live in the country's south are well aware of the rockets fired from Gaza into their communities, most Israelis live physically separated from the conflict, and that is the perspective Americans [are more familiar with](#).

Tel Aviv feels like a peaceful, prosperous Mediterranean beach city, which it is. But less than an hour drive away are Palestinian towns in the West Bank where the conflict is [absolutely palpable](#) even in periods of “calm.” In Gaza, the blockade has driven unemployment as high as 40 percent, made legal imports or exports next to impossible, and even cut off fishermen — once a big industry there — from their fish. In the West Bank, beyond the daily humiliations of Israeli military checkpoints, the occupation has severely constricted movement and trade. The stifled economy is the easiest thing to measure, but many other aspects of Palestinian life suffer, as well.

Periodically the situation will escalate so rapidly, with such relatively slight provocation, and to such a level of severity that the rest of us can't ignore what every Palestinian and many Israelis already know: the conflict may be quieter some days than it is on others, but it is still active, still destroying lives and communities, and still scarring these two societies every day.

Myth #10: Israel is explicitly seeking Palestinians' total destruction

The status quo of the Israel-Palestine conflict is bad for everyone, but it is especially bad for Palestinians, who are under a suffocating blockade in Gaza and military occupation in the West Bank. They do not have a state or full rights, while Israelis have both. And the longer the conflict drags on, the tougher it will be to change that.

So you can see why some might think that all Israelis want this to

happen and want the conflict to drag on forever or to end it by permanently expelling or subjugating Palestinians — but when you look at how Israel makes decisions, and what Israeli voters want, it becomes pretty clear that this is not the case.

As is true of any country, especially a parliamentary democracy, Israel's actions are less the result of a single calculated strategy than they are about messy internal politics, short-term thinking, and strategic drift. Take, as a micro example, [Israel's approach to Gaza](#) since Hamas took over in 2006. Israel has invaded or launched extended bombing campaigns in Gaza every few years; this costs many Israeli lives, in addition to the much higher Palestinian death toll, and it never actually solves the underlying problems. Clearly Israel does not have long-term strategy here at all, much less a nefarious secret plan. That lack of a strategy is bad and helps perpetuate the cycle of violence, but it is a cycle that's painful for Israelis, as well.

Israeli policy has changed over time; just like American politics, it has been different depending on who is leading the government. In the early 1990s, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin signed a peace deal with the Palestinians, even though Israel's concessions for the deal were so unpopular among Israelis that a far-right extremist assassinated Rabin. In 2008, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert [offered](#) the Palestinians a two-state peace deal. There were valid reasons the offer failed (Nathan Thrall has written [a good history of what happened](#)), but the point is that Israel would not have offered this plan if it secretly desired the permanent occupation of the West Bank.

There are certainly extremists in Israeli politics — sometimes quite [prominent extremists](#) — who want to permanently annex the West Bank and make Palestinians second-class citizens, or to systemically expel Palestinians from their land en masse in an act of 21st-century ethnic cleansing. And Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has at times indulged these extremists in a cynical ploy to keep himself in power. But there are also prominent Israeli politicians who [want](#) and push publicly for a [two-state peace deal](#) that would grant Palestinians independence and full rights. There are other political factions involved in this, as well; they fight all the time, and very

publicly, pushing and pulling Israeli government policy in one direction or another. When you watch that happening, and watch Israel's short-term thinking on problems like Gaza, it becomes clearer that Israeli policy on the conflict is often formed day to day and week to week by a messy process.

To be clear, none of that is to absolve Israel of responsibility for its actions, only to honestly assess how those actions come to be. It is also not to absolve Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is clearly *not* a peacenik. But he has often seemed more interested in managing internal Israeli politics, keeping his parliamentary coalition together, catering to Israeli public opinion, and delivering short-term security, all over taking difficult steps toward long-term peace. That is a massive failure in its own right, and it has contributed to the perpetuation of the conflict regardless of his motive, but it is also not the same thing as a deliberate, continuous Israeli strategy to achieve the destruction of the Palestinian identity — even if it may one day be the effect.

Myth #11: Everyone knows what a peace deal would look like

When Middle East experts talk about how to resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict, they often say that everyone broadly agrees on the terms of a peace deal, and the challenge is just getting everyone to trust one another long enough to see it through. If only this were true.

It is true that the main parties have at least publicly endorsed the idea of a two-state solution, which means that Israel and Palestine would form two separate, independent states very roughly along the armistice lines set after the 1948 war, plus what are called “land swaps” in which Israel would claim some West Bank land that is dominated by Israeli settlers, and in exchange Palestine would get some land from Israel.

In execution, though, there are a few extremely thorny details that would make this really difficult to see through. Here are, just to give you a sense of how difficult finding peace is, two of the toughest:

Jerusalem: How would Jerusalem be divided between Israel and

Palestine? Both claim the city as their capital; it's also a center of Jewish and Muslim (and Christian) holy sites that are literally located physically on top of one another, in the antiquity-era Old City that is not at all well-shaped to be divided across two countries. It used to be formally divided between East and West Jerusalem, but in 1967 Israel [annexed](#) about 27 square miles of East Jerusalem. Making the division even tougher, Israeli communities have been building up more and more in and around the city and around Jerusalem suburbs.

[Refugees](#): There are, officially, 7 million Palestinian refugees, who are designated as such because their descendants fled or were expelled from what is today Israel, places like Ramla and Jaffa. Palestinians frequently ask for what they call the "right of return": permission to return to their land and live with full rights. That sounds like a no-brainer, but Israel's objection is that if it absorbs 7 million Palestinian returnees, then Jews will become a minority; Israelis, after everything they've done to finally achieve a Jewish state after centuries of their own persecution, would never surrender that state and willingly become a minority among a population they see as hostile. Palestinians, for their part, could not accept a peace deal that does not address the millions of Palestinians living as refugees around the Middle East. There are ideas to work around the problem, like financial restitution, but no agreement on them.

And there are even more issues. How can Israel guarantee that an independent West Bank would not, like Gaza, be taken over by a hostile anti-Israeli militant group that will use the territory to launch rockets at Israeli neighborhoods? How could Palestinians accept a peace deal that required them to curb their own sovereignty by giving Israel, for example, control over Palestinian airspace? And on and on.

To be clear, this does not mean that a two-state peace deal is *impossible*. It just means finding a deal that simultaneously addresses the most fundamental needs of Israelis and Palestinians, much less convinces leaders on both sides to make the painful concessions necessary to see it through, is really, really hard.

