

From whom are the modern Palestinians descended?

Prior to the mid-20th century, the term Palestinian was used as regional term, much like referring to residents of parts of the United States as “Southerners.” This usage dates back to several centuries before Christ. The word Palestinian has its roots in a Hebrew word meaning “Philistine.”

Until Israel was re-established as a nation in 1948, Palestine was the term for the territory between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. The word Palestinian was applied to anyone living in that area. As one of the longest continually inhabited places on earth, this region has changed political ownership numerous times and has been a nexus of migration for many different cultures. The modern-day “Palestinians” represent a mixture of local inhabitants and many other groups of Muslims brought from Bosnia, the Balkans, and the Caucasus by the Turks in the 16th to 19th centuries; and from the Sudan, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon by the British in the 20th century.

The term Palestinian did not take on its current popular meaning until the mid-20th century. In common use today, the term Palestinian is primarily applied to non-Jewish, Arabic-speaking residents of this region. This usage is highly controversial, however, since for most of human history a “Palestinian” was simply a person born or living in that land. When used in reference only to non-Jews, it implies an historical claim to the territory in opposition to Israel. In reality, the concept of Palestine as a nation-state in opposition to Israel or as a racial group predating the presence of Jewish inhabitants is historically false.

Recent genetic studies have confirmed that the ancestries of Jewish and Arabic inhabitants of Palestine are extremely similar. Geneticists have concluded that the

people living in these regions share a common ancestry, through people groups continually living in the Palestine territory. This directly contradicts the claim that certain inhabitants, particularly Jewish inhabitants of Israel, have no ancestral claim to the land. At the same time, there is no evidence suggesting that modern Palestinians are direct descendants of either the Canaanites or the Philistines of the Old Testament. Many Arabs are descendants of Ishmael; but, since the land of Canaan was promised to the sons of Jacob, Arabs have no biblical claim to the land of Palestine.

Regardless of definitions and precise lineage, Palestinians, like all human beings, are ultimately descended from the same original mother and father (Genesis 3:20). Human beings have often forgotten this when constructing cultural, geographic, and political lines. Much of the angst over who should or should not be called a Palestinian, or whether it matters where such a group came from, is based on divisions that forget our common heritage.