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Newt Gingrich is Wrong

Newt Gingrich is tragically wrong about Palestinian identity.

When Newt Gingrich says that the Palestinians are an “invented people,” and that the Palestinians are “terrorists” he demonstrates a one-sided and simplistic reading of the history of the Middle East and a lack of knowledge about current and changing facts on the ground. Such an interpretation will not bring peace to Jerusalem for which so many of us pray.

With this kind of thinking, Gingrich falls into the tactical trap of thinking that if one denies Palestinian national identity, naming Palestinians Arabs, that one delegitimizes Palestinian claims to the land of Palestine as a national homeland. If Palestinians are Arabs, the thinking goes, then they can find a home in any Arab nation. According to this logic, the Palestinian homeland can as easily be Jordan. This means that all the land west of the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea is available for a Jewish state. This was not acceptable to the Palestinians after World War I, and it is not acceptable to them now.

Flash history. According the Encyclopaedia Britannica On-Line: “The word Palestine derives from Philistia, the name given by Greek writers to the land of the Philistines, who in the 12th century (BCE) occupied a small pocked of land on the southern coast between modern Tel Aviv-Yafo and Gaza.” The Philistines are identified with people descended from garrison troops and mercenaries of Ramses II of Egypt. (“Palestine” [Encyclopaedia Britannica](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/439645/Palestine) 13 Dec 2011 <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/439645/Palestine>). We read of the Philistines in the Bible. So, the people of Palestine were in Palestine before the arrival of the Children of Israel.

After Israel became an ancient kingdom, split and disappeared from history, many different empires conquered the land and ruled the people—Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Greece, Rome and Byzantium. Islamic conquest and the Crusaders ruled Palestine before the four centuries of Ottoman rule. In the early eighth century (CE), a small Jewish community returned to Jerusalem. The Encyclopaedia Britannica says:

“The predominantly Christian population gradually became predominantly Muslim and Arabic speaking. At the same time, during the early years of Muslim control of the city, a small permanent Jewish population returned to Jerusalem after a 500-year absence.”

The modern-day Arab population of Palestine is descended from the people that have lived on that land for millennia, before the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Just as words have multiple meanings, identity is a multi-faceted thing.

On national identity. The concept of a national identity is a relatively recent innovation in the history of human ideas. Before the concept of the nation-state, people found their personal identity

and political and economic loyalties in the city- state, feudal fief and lord, dynastic state, or religious group or sect. (“Nationalism” [Encyclopaedia Britannica](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/405644/nationalism) 13 Dec 2011 <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/405644/nationalism>). With the end of feudalism, the secularization of the Enlightenment, the use of the vernacular language in religious writings and in literature, increased importance of commerce, and ideas of the sovereignty of the people and human rights, came the rise of national loyalty and identity. The cultural aspects of the nation became linked to the idea of a political state that was the embodiment of a national history, present place among nations and future aspirations. Nationalism was a product of both the American and French revolutions.

With the rise of nationalism, peoples living under the Habsburg and Ottoman empires began to think of themselves in nationalistic terms. After World War I and the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, the British, were given a mandate to administer large areas of the former Ottoman Empire. The Middle East as we know it today is an invention of the British mandate. Influenced by their own reading of the Bible, the geopolitical real politique of the moment, and Zionist aspirations for a Jewish state, the British started the process of creating a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Palestinian nationalism that had been starting to take shape since shortly after the rise of nationalism as an idea found voice in its opposition to the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.

This opposition was expressed in a statement from a Congress held in Haifa in December of 1920. “The platform of the Haifa Congress, which set out the position that Palestine was an autonomous Arab entity and totally rejected any right of the Jews to Palestine, remained the basic policy of the Palestinian Arabs until 1948.” (“Palestine.”[Encyclopaedia Britannica](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/405644/palestine)) Opposition to the immigration of Jews to Palestine also showed itself in riots against the Jews. The British established the Peel Commission of 1937 that “declared the mandate unworkable and Britain’s obligations to Arabs and Jews mutually irreconcilable. In the face of what it described as “right against right,” the commission recommended that the region be partitioned.

The Commission also recommended forcible removal of Arabs from a Jewish state. The idea was that they be forced to move to what was then known as Transjordan. This did nothing to stop the Palestinian revolt of 1937 and 1938.

Then came World War II and the Holocaust and the necessity for a sanctuary for homeless European Jews and Jewish terrorist attacks upon the British in Palestine and 1948 and the Declaration of the State of Israel and the Palestinian al Nakba, the Catastrophe where Palestinians left their homes either through force by the Israelis and/or by the suggestion of their own leaders.

And refugee camps in neighboring countries and a paradox of a homeless, unwelcomed, stateless people causing others people to become homeless, unwelcomed and stateless and more war and 1967 and Israel’s defeat of an Arab army in six days and occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and more war and more occupations, 40 years and counting, and peace talks and more peace talks and a brave visit to Jerusalem by Anwar al Sadat and the Camp David Peace Accords.

And more blood and tears and more road maps to peace and more terrorist violence and Israeli structural violence against the Palestinians and a separation wall that cuts deeper into occupied territory

and humiliating check points for the Palestinians and Hamas and Hezbollah and Fatah and the PA and elections and Palestinian disunity.

And Seeds for Peace, young Palestinians and Israelis spending time together in the summer in the United States to learn about each other, and Combatants for Peace, former Israeli soldiers and former Palestinian fighters building playgrounds for children in the West Bank, and a little girl shot and killed by an Israeli soldier in the West Bank armed with weapons made in America and the bullying of Palestinians by young Israeli settlers and the building of more and more Israeli settlements, each settlement making a two-state solution more and more remote and the Israeli expulsion of Israeli settlers from Gaza.

And Palestinian and Israeli families who have lost loved ones to the violence working together for peace and a new commitment to nonviolent direct action by Palestinians on the West Bank and more war and more blood and tears and the continued blockade of Gaza and more rockets fired into Jewish towns from Gaza and more misery and hardship and resentment.

And the Arab Spring and a new government in Egypt and hope against hope that humankind can find the radical love that will make peace possible out of a tragic and impossible conflict of right against right and justice against justice.

And the last thing that Israelis and Palestinians need, the last thing that peace-loving people across the globe who are praying for the peace of Jerusalem need is historically inaccurate, intemperate, disrespectful bluster from a would-be nominee for president of the United States.