

Session 1

Here we are



You have probably heard of Israel from the Bible. But where is Israel and where is Palestine, and what do we mean by Occupied Territory? Let's look at a globe or a map of the world and see what we can find out.

Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory (IOPT) covers an area much smaller than the UK – it would fit into Britain about seven times – and over 11 million people live there compared with over 67 million in the UK. The region borders Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan and Syria and its coast lies on the Mediterranean Sea. Israel is a state. Not all countries recognise Palestine as a separate state – the UK does not but currently 136 countries do.

The climate here is very varied. There are snow-capped mountains in the north and hot desert in the south.

The narrow land near the Mediterranean Sea to the west is where over half the population lives. The Dead Sea between Israel, the West Bank and Jordan is the lowest point on the Earth's surface at 416 metres below sea level. The water is so salty and full of minerals that no plants and animals can survive there and you can float on it easily without sinking. The water is warm all year round.



In the south and east, the land is hot and dry. In Southern Israel you will find the Negev Desert, which gets only about three centimetres of rain a year, while in Galilee in the north you will see fertile farmland. This variety means the region has all sorts of animals, including boars in the damp oak woodlands, gazelles in the mountains, Caspian turtles in the coastal marshlands and hyenas in the desert.

The area is famous for olive trees, which produce olive oil and which many Palestinians use to make olive wood carvings. Beautiful pottery is also made in this region.

The region has a long and complicated history. There are two main groups of people who live there. Arab people are not only from this area but throughout Western Asia. Many, but not all, of the Arabs who call this region home are known as Palestinians. Arab peoples have lived in the land for centuries and there have continuously been Jewish and Christian communities here too. The Jewish people we read about in the Old Testament lived here. Jewish people live in other countries too but, throughout history, Jews around the world were treated badly. They wanted a safe place to live, a country that they could call their home. Many more Jewish people started to move into Palestine, the land their ancestors came from, especially after the Holocaust during World War 2, when millions of Jews in Europe were murdered.

But what was to happen to the Arab people who had lived throughout the land, now that the Jewish population was increasing rapidly? In 1947, The United Nations suggested setting aside two areas within Israel for Palestinian people – the West Bank and the Gaza Strip – with Jerusalem being shared. They drew up a new map creating the state of Israel. The land was partitioned (separated) into two and many Palestinians were forced to leave their homes.

Over time Israel has taken more of the land that was given to the Palestinians by the UN. (See the history page for more detail.) Many Palestinians have become refugees. Many have resisted and tried to defend their homes and their land. A separation barrier has been built in some places because Israelis felt threatened. This means Palestinians can't travel without going through checkpoints where soldiers check who they are and where they are going. Since 1967 Israelis have been building houses and living in settlements in Palestinian lands. While occupying an area to keep it safe is allowed, there are certain rules to follow. Sadly, the Israeli government is not making sure that these rules are observed so the UN says that aspects of the occupation are illegal.

Most Palestinian and Israeli people feel afraid and want peace; they just don't all agree on how that peace should be brought about and what they might have to give up to bring peace.



Bible link Genesis 13:9-12

“We should separate. The whole land is there in front of you. If you go to the left, I will go to the right. If you go to the right, I will go to the left.” Lot looked all around and saw the whole Jordan Valley. He saw that there was much water there. It was like the Lord’s garden, like the land of Egypt in the direction of Zoar... So Lot chose to move east and live in the Jordan Valley. In this way Abram and Lot separated. Abram lived in the land of Canaan. But Lot lived among the cities in the Jordan Valley.

Who were Abram and Lot? Can you find out? See if you can find on a map which area Lot chose.

Prayer

We thank you, God, for our homes, the places where we feel safe, the places where we belong. We pray for all families and people who worry about having somewhere safe to live. We pray for peace in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, so that people can share fairly and live without fear.

Active Prayer

Olive oil is not only used for cooking, it’s also used for anointing. Anointing means putting oil on someone’s head or hand when you bless them. Use a bowl with a drop of olive oil in it and some cotton buds. (Check where the oil comes from – the bottle should be clearly labelled.) In turn, dip the cotton bud into the oil and touch it into the palm of each hand and draw a cross on the forehead of a partner. As you do it, say, “God bless you and use you to do good things.”

Game

Water is scarce in IOPT. At one end of the hall have two buckets for each team, one filled with water and the other empty. You may want to put some protective covering on the floor for this and have a mop handy for spillages, or go outside. In turn, runners race to the buckets, dip a sponge into the bucket of water and wring it out into the empty bucket. Then they run back and hand the sponge to the next runner. When the whistle blows, see which team has the most water. You could encourage discussion by giving one team a smaller sponge or further to run and explain how Palestinian access to water is controlled by Israeli authorities.

Activity

We sometimes see Palestinian ceramics for sale in this country, especially at Christmas markets. They have very distinctive colours and patterns. One lovely pattern is a very traditional one. The whole design of blue flowers is drawn with just one single line to represent the circle of life. Use paper plates with crayons or felt tips or use cheap plain ceramic plates with ceramic pens. Make your own circle of life design without lifting the pen from the surface of the plate. You might put flowers in your design or something different. You could use these plates to serve food on at the intergenerational celebration!



Greta Wonders...

- Does it matter where you live? What makes your home special?
- How might children in IOPT feel about where they live?
- How is IOPT different to where you live? How is it similar?

Action Point

By buying things produced by Palestinian people (rather than from the illegal Israeli settlements) we can help families there. Try to remember to read the labels in supermarkets to see where the things you buy come from. This is especially important for products like olive oil or dates. Please note the URC General Assembly resolutions do not suggest a boycott of Israeli goods, only items produced in the settlements.

Watch

This video might help you learn more about Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory <https://youtu.be/Y58njT2oXfE> *Israeli Palestinian conflict explained: an animated introduction to Israel and Palestine* (Jewish Voice for Peace) – suitable for older children.

