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Palestine, a history rich and deep

By Maen Rashid Areikat, Published: December 27

The issue of Palestinian identity and national history has become a source of controversy, with many Americans making deeply disturbing and alarming statements. [As the representative of my people](#) to the United States, I would like to tell you what the Palestinians, as a people, are all about.

We go far back, much further than those doubting our existence can remember. Jericho, my home town, goes as far back as 10,000 B.C., making it the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. We Palestinians also happen to live in a place that many consider important, at the crossroads of three continents and containing a site of holy reverence for more than half of the world's population. It has been a mixed blessing: Palestine managed to draw the good and the bad from what the world has had to offer. We lived under the rule of a plethora of empires: the Canaanites, Egyptians, Philistines, Israelites, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Crusaders, Mongols, Ottomans and, finally, the British. This has made our region rich in history, culture and heritage. Indeed, if our olive trees could speak — some are centuries old — they would have a lot to say.

This makes us very proud and appreciative of our special place in this world. That is why we are so attached to our land and to our identity. I can't think of a place that is quite like it. Yes, it is tumultuous, incomprehensible and, at times, very dangerous, but for us it is home. Centuries of rule by an eclectic assortment have taught us that empires come and go but legacies and values remain. We proudly carry those values today. Family is sacred, education is indispensable, and religious tolerance is innate. The fact that we outlived these empires is a testament to our resilience and strength.

Yes, as presidential candidate [Newt Gingrich said recently](#), we are also Arabs, the Arabs of the Holy Land. Infused with a mix of attributes from the civilizations that passed by, we are Arabs with black, brown and white skin, dark- and light-colored eyes, and the whole gamut of hair types. Like Americans, we are a hybrid of peoples defined by one overarching identity. Many in the United States forget that Palestinians are Muslims and Christians. They ignore the fact that Palestinian Christians are the descendants of Jesus and guardians of the cradle of Christianity.

Our recent history became intertwined with the plight of European Jewry seeking an end to centuries of persecution brought upon them by the West. Before World War II, Palestinians and Jews living in Palestine enjoyed times of great harmony. My

grandfather shared a bakery shop with a Jewish partner, Aaron, in Jerusalem's Bak'a Tahta neighborhood. My mother told me stories of the period of peace and tranquility they enjoyed with Jews during this time. That period ended in 1948, however, and a conflict began. The result was our subjugation to the rule of others and more than half of our people being dispossessed. It was a traumatic experience. It triggered our characteristic defense mechanism, which has stood the test of time — stout perseverance and a faith in the manifest destiny of those who uphold their values in the face of oppression.

We developed our political representation, engaged the diplomatic arena and produced a pragmatic national platform that addressed our legitimate demands as well as the concerns of all parties to the conflict. The two-state solution was this national platform. We agreed to confine our right to self-determination and statehood on only 22 percent of what used to be our historic homeland, and we did so for the sake of peace and with a sober realization that seeking “absolute justice” is a fool's errand. We also did not wait for the removal of all the shackles to our freedom before setting out for our goal. With our can-do spirit, we built the institutions of the state in preparation for the long-awaited day when we will enjoy the freedoms that other nations of the world enjoy.

We, the only remaining people under military occupation in the world, are ready and waiting for our moment to stand up and be counted. We are the Palestinians whose roots are so deep in our land. We are an old, rich and hopeful people whose emancipation is incomplete. A people with a state recognized by 129 countries yet not completely free. A state interrupted. That's what we're about.