

Historical Analysis of the Palestine Question

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Abstract

The cause of the continued conflict between Israel and Palestine has been contested since the crisis began in the early 20th century. Countless studies have explained the origins of conflict. This paper analyzes the conflict from a historical perspective. This paper argues that the conflict emerged due to the conflict of interests arising from both parties- Jews and Palestinians. Israel is of the view that they are the rightful owners of the land originally occupied by the Palestinians. The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, to trace the origins of the Palestine Question. And second, to attempt a discussion taken by the crisis since the twentieth century.

Introduction

The matter is both relevant and important in view of the fact that the Palestine Question is one of the recurring decimals in contemporary international politics.¹ Since 1948 when the Jewish State of Israel emerged, Jews and Palestine Arabs have been at daggers drawn. And so hardly a day passes without reports in the newspaper, radio and television of bloody clashes between members of the two contending parties.² How to reconcile their conflicting claims and aspirations has become known as the Palestine Question.³ On the surface, the crisis appears to have been foisted on the world by the creation of Israel at the close of the Second World War. Actually the problem existed before then but in a much less explosive form. The analysis will be done in three parts. First, the origins of the Palestine question and the Jewish diaspora. Second, the Zionist movement. Third, the reactions and conduct of Israel and Palestine to foreign and domestic policies in the political system.

Origins of the Palestine Question

The origin of the Palestine Problem may be traced to ancient times.⁴ The Bible tells us how Abraham, in compliance with the Lord's command, led the Jews, a Semitic tribe in Chaldea, to the land of Canaan, Palestine. A section of the settlers later migrated to Egypt where they were enslaved and threatened with complete extermination.⁵ The Lord appointed Moses to lead the Jews out of bondage

¹ Harms, Gregory and Todd M. Ferry. *The Palestine-Israel Conflict: A Basic Introduction*, 4th ed. Pluto Press: London, 2005.

² Weizman, Eyal. *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation*. London: Verso, 2007.

³ Susan M Akram, Michael Dumper, Michael Lynk, and Iain Scobbie, eds. *International Law and the Palestinian Conflict: A Rights-Based Approach to Middle East Peace*. New York: Routledge, 2011.

⁴ Said, Edward. *The Question of Palestine*. New York: Vintage Book, 1992

⁵ Ali Abunimah, *One Country: A Bold Proposal to End the Israeli-Palestinian Impasse*. New York: Holt McDougal, 2007.

back to Palestine. For forty years, Moses and his followers were said to have wandered in the desert until they reached the Promised Land.⁶

Origins of the Jewish Diaspora

By 1100 BC, the Jews inhabited much of Palestine. King Solomon built a Temple in Jerusalem. After his death, discord between the tribes led to the division of the country into two kingdoms: Israel and Judea with Jerusalem as its capital.⁷ This weakening enabled the Chaldaean King, Nebuchadnezzar to conquer the country. By about the Sixth Century BC, he destroyed the Temple and deported Jews in large numbers to the banks of the Euphrates.⁸ Renewed internal squabbles in Palestine helped to prepare the ground for Roman intervention and conquest. The Roman conquerors erected a temple to Jupiter on the site of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. After several violent Jewish protests, Rome demolished Israel as state in 135 A.D. by ordering a compulsory resettlement of the Jews among all other peoples.⁹ Thus began the Jewish dispersion or Diaspora which ended in 1947.¹⁰ However a substantial Jewish population remained in Palestine until the Seventh Century AD when it was conquered by the Arabs.¹¹ Meanwhile many Jews lived as exiles in different parts of the globe always hoped to return some day to their ancestral homeland.¹² Jewish communities in Egypt and Spain flourished under Arab rule in the centuries following the emergence of Islam. On the whole they received more humane treatment under Arab rulers in the Middle East and North Africa than under Christian rulers in Western Europe. Some of the prominent leaders of the church in medieval times held and spread anti-Jewish views.¹³ For example, Cyprian declared in the third century AD that “now the peoplehood of the Jews has been cancelled; the destruction of Jerusalem was a judgment upon them; the gentiles rather than the Jew will inherit the Kingdom”.¹⁴ John Chrysostom was much more hostile. According to him, “The Jew sacrificed their children to Satan..... They are worse than wild beasts..... The synagogue is a brothel, a den of scoundrels.... a place of meeting for the assassins of Christ. The synagogue is a curse”.¹⁵

Zionism

The propaganda that the Jews were solely responsible for the murder of Jesus Christ found expression in anti-Semitism. Ghettos were created in European cities as places where Jews could live. Professions they could enter were restricted. They were not permitted to own land and were frequently blamed for society's ills.¹⁶ In 1492 Spain expelled its Jewish and Muslim residents. Some of the Jewish refugees fled to Eastern European and Russia. But wherever the Jews went, they clung to their laws, customs and religion. Their exclusiveness reinforced by persecution helped them to maintain not only their identity but the hope of returning to Palestine someday.¹⁷ Late in the nineteenth century, this hope was transformed into a political doctrine – Zionism. Zionists advocated for the establishment of a Jewish

⁶ Beinun, Joel and Rebecca L. Stein, eds. *The Struggle for Sovereignty: Palestine and Israel, 1993-2005*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, with the Middle East Research and Information Project, 2006.

⁷ Matthew Abraham, *Out of Bounds: Academic Freedom and the Question of Palestine*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.

⁸ Rubenberg, Cheryl A., ed. *Encyclopedia of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2008

⁹ Khalidi, Walid, ed. *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948*. Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992.

¹⁰ Zakim, Eric. *To Build and Be Built: Landscape, Literature, and the Construction of Zionist Identity*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.

¹¹ White, Ben. *Palestinians in Israel: Segregation, Discrimination and Democracy*. London: Pluto Press, 2012.

¹² Whitelam, Keith W. *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History*. London: Routledge, 1997.

¹³ Suárez, Thomas. *Palestine Hijacked: How Zionism Forged an Apartheid State from River to Sea*. Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2022.

¹⁴ Swedenburg, Ted. *Memories of Revolt: The 1936-1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

¹⁵ Yiftachel, Oren. *Ethnocracy: Land and Identity Politics in Israel/Palestine*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.

¹⁶ Sokolower, Jody. *Determined to Stay: Palestinian Youth Fight for Their Village*. Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2021.

¹⁷ Schanzer, Jonathan. *Hamas vs. Fatah: The Struggle for Palestine*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

homeland in Biblical Palestine. In August 1897, Jewish intellectuals led by Theodor Herzl organized the first Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland. It was that congress that launched the World Zionist Organization.¹⁸ At this time Palestine was part of the Ottoman Empire and was inhabited by about 600,000 Arabs and some 60,000 Jews.¹⁹

Balfour Declaration

During the First World War, the British army occupied and administered Palestine. It was probably this development that prompted Sir Herbert Samuel, a Jewish member of the British cabinet, to draw attention to his kinsmen's desire for a homeland in Palestine pointing out that the only obstacle was the small number of Jews in the territory. Yielding to pressure from the Zionist organization, the British Government issued a declaration in November 1917, the Balfour Declaration which "viewed in favour the establishment in Palestine a National Home for the Jewish People", promising to use its best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this objective. To retain the goodwill of Arabs in whose territory the Suez Canal is located, the Balfour Declaration added that nothing should be done which might compromise the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.²⁰

In view of Great Britain's declared interest in a Jewish homeland in Palestine. It was not surprising that the League of Nations gave her the mandate for Palestine with effect from, September 1923. Article 2 of the mandate for Palestine laid on the British authorities the responsibility of placing the country under such administrative, political and economic conditions as would secure the establishment of a Jewish National Home without prejudice to the rights and position of the rest of the population. In general spokesmen of the British Government gave the impression that the Balfour Declaration provided for only a Jewish cultural and religious home.²¹

To this, the Arabs of Palestine offered no objection since they accounted for 85% of the population. But the Zionist leaders had their own plans. They aimed at obtaining a Jewish majority as quickly as possible through massive emigration to the Biblical homeland. When a majority was achieved they would ask Britain to relinquish her mandate and Palestine would become a sovereign Jewish national home.²² Between 1922 and 1939, the Palestine problem was seen mainly in terms of the number of Jewish exiles to be admitted to Palestine. It caused continuous anxiety and unrest. Whenever Jewish immigration reached a high level, Palestinian Arabs protested violently. Britain would close the gates for a few months.²³ Zionist activities and sympathizers would pressurize London into unlocking the gates again. There were numerous Commissions of Inquiry, reports and White Papers. In 1937 the Peel Commission recommended partition of the territory between the Arabs and Jews. Neither the Zionist Congress nor the Arabs supported the idea. The Muslim League of India also rejected it.²⁴

As the Nazi persecution began to drive the Jews out of Germany, the British authorities had difficulty every year as to the number of refugees to be allowed to settle in Palestine. While the Jews demand a higher quota, the Arabs wanted a complete halt to further entry. Finally, a British White Paper of May 1939 provided for independence in five years. Until then 75,000 Jews were to be admitted: 25,000 at

¹⁸ Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, ed. *The Arab-Israeli Confrontation of June 1967: An Arab Perspective*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970.

¹⁹ Herzl, Theodor. *The Jewish State*. New York: Dover, 1989 (original published by the American Zionist Emergency Council, New York, 1946).

²⁰ Segev, Tom. *One Palestine, Complete: Jews and Arabs under the British Mandate*. New York: Henry Holt, 1999.

²¹ Alam, M. Shahid. *Israeli Exceptionalism: The Destabilizing Logic of Zionism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

²² Khalidi, Rashid, et al., eds. *The Origins of Arab Nationalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

²³ Rubenberg, Cheryl A. *The Palestinians: In Search of a Just Peace*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2003.

²⁴ Sahliyeh, Emile D. *The PLO after the Lebanon War*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986. Said, Edward W. *The Question of Palestine*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

once in view of Hitler's excesses and thereafter 10,000 a year until 1944.²⁵ The purchase of Arabs land by Zionist circles inside Palestine was forbidden. Financed by Jewish tycoons abroad, this business had been going on quietly and briskly with the clear aim of carrying out a consolidated Jewish areas in the country. Great Britain declared that after the entry of the additional 75,000 Jews, her commitment to the establishment of a national home for the Jews would be deemed finally and completely fulfilled, needless to add that Britain's proposal fell short of the expectations of both the Arabs and Jews. The Permanent Mandates Commission of the League of Nations considered the arrangements incompatible with the obligations of the British authorities.²⁶

There were two major and constant factors in the Palestine equation. One was Arab fear of Jewish numbers, the other Britain's reluctance to use force to impose a solution. Britain's attempt to stabilize the situation by an artificial preservation of the status quo was unrealistic. Having invested enormous fund and energy and made countless sacrifice, the Jews would not be expected to be satisfied with a national home under Arab supervision. Nor did it make much sense, if any at all, to expect them to accept limitation of immigration at a time when they were exposed to complete extermination. For many Arabs too, mere limitation of Jewish immigration no longer sufficed. They saw Jewish immigration as an influx of foreigners rather than a return of exiles. These settlers professed a foreign faith, held key positions in the country owned large farms and factories sustained by Arabs labourers. The new comers lived apart from the authentic indigenous inhabitants. As far as many politically conscious Palestinian Arabs were concerned, the Zionist settlers are new colonial rulers in disguise.²⁷

The Zionist settlers brought to Palestine a vibrant culture, highly sophisticated technology and science. Their amount of rapid economic progress was seen as a threat by the Palestinians. The War provided a breathing space for the two contending communities. With the cessation of hostilities, violence more dreadful than ever flared up. Both sides trained terrorists. There were bombing incidents attacks and reprisal. Succumbing to pressure from pro-Zionist European and American public opinion, the British Government decided to return their mandate as quickly as possible to the United Nations, the successor of the League of Nations. It did so in April 1947 with the firm intention of washing its hands off the whole problem. In November the same year, the United Nations recommended partition of Palestine into a Jewish State and an Arab State. Jerusalem would be internationalized. The Arabs objected to the partition of a country they considered their own. The next month, Britain announced that she would terminate the mandate on 15 May 1948, while the UN was still debating an American proposal for a temporary trusteeship that would allow tempers to cool, the mandate expired and the independent state of Israel was declared on May 16, 1948.²⁸

After some 2,000 years, Israel again became a nation with Weizmann as president. Troops were dispatched from Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Iran, Transjordan and Lebanon to crush the new state. The Arabs were defeated. Israel became 50% larger than UN partition plan. Many Palestinian Arabs became refugees. About 700,000 of them fled Israel, 60% of these settled in Jordan including the West Bank; 20% in the Gaza strip and another 20% in Lebanon and Syria. Still others remained in refugee camps within the Jewish State. Raids into Israel were launched from Egypt, Jordan and Syria. By 1953 a pattern began to unfold; Arab infiltration followed by massive Israeli retaliation. The tit for tat policy has continued to this day. Israel achieved spectacular victory in 1967 in the Six-Day War, occupying the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights in Syria and the West Bank in Jordan. This war brought nearly one million additional Palestinian Arabs into the West Bank and the Gaza Strip under Israeli control.²⁹

²⁵ Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, *The Transformation of Palestine: Essays on the Origin and Development of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1971.

²⁶ Gans, Chaim. *A Just Zionism: On the Morality of the Jewish State*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

²⁷ Zertal, Idith and Akiva Eldar. *Lords of the Land: The War Over Israel's Settlements in the Occupied Territories, 1967-2007*. New York: The Nation Books, 2007.

²⁸ Al-Haj, Majid. *Education, Empowerment, and Control: The Case of the Arabs in Israel*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995.

²⁹ Ali Abunimah, *The Battle for Justice in Palestine*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2014.

At an Arab summit in 1973, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLD), formed in 1964, was designated as the official representative of the Palestinian people. Before then, the fate of the Palestinian Arabs was left mainly in the hands of other Arab leader. In December 1987, the Palestinian Question entered a new phase as the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza launched a popular campaign resistance to Israel rule. The resistance movement is known as the Intifada. The resistance began without the prior knowledge of the PLD and its leader Yasser Arafat. Israel's attempt to suppress the resistance was met with critical world public opinion. Also condemned was Israel's policy of building Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In November 1988, the PLD declared an independent Palestine State.³⁰

For the PLD and its leader Yasser Arafat, a settlement with the Israelis soon became thinkable owing to drawing prominence of Palestinian hard-liners associated with Islamic fundamentalist groups, such as Hamas. Hamas often challenged the authority of Arafat. Additional pressure was placed on Arafat by the PLD's growing financial difficulties resulting from dwindling financial support from wealthy Arab countries who disapproved of Arafat's support of Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War.³¹ After behind-the-scenes negotiations in Norway Israel and the PLD agreed to formally recognize each other as legitimate representative of their people. At a ceremony hosted in the White House by Bill Clinton on September 13 1993, Arafat shook hands with Mr. Rabin, the Israeli Prime Minister and leader of the more conciliatory labour party then in power in Israel. By a declaration of principles signed that day, Israel agreed to grant self-rule, that is authority for education, health welfare, and taxation, to "authorized Palestine" in the Gaza strip and on the West Bank around the town of Jericho. Both parties also agreed that self-rule would be extended by generally throughout the West Bank over a period of five years.³²

Israel would be responsible for external security and the PLD would police the territories granted self-rule. The PLD also formally renounced the use of violence. The agreement includes the formation of a joint Israeli-Palestinian Liaison Committee and an Israeli-Palestinian Economic Cooperation Committee to plan regional economic development. Whether the Israeli-PLD Agreement will eventually bring peace to the region remains to be seen. Meanwhile extremists on both sides maintain an uncompromising posture. The hawkish Likud Party, now in power, favours the building of Israeli settlements throughout the West Bank and its eventual incorporation Israel.³³

Conclusion

Analyzing the origins and causes of the Israel-Palestine conflict has always been the focus of attention. It has been 72 years since the creation of the State of Israel, but no one has ever been pleased with the efforts of different scholars and writers on the subject matter. The reason for Israel and Palestine's interests escalated into this never-ending conflict. This paper however has given a background to the origin of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Arabs and the different dimensions it has taken since the creation of Israel as a Nation in 1948.

³⁰ Kirisci, Kemal. *The PLO and World Politics: A Study of the Mobilization of Support for the Palestinian Cause*. London: Frances Pinter, 1986.

³¹ Mishal, Shaul. *The PLO under Arafat: Between Gun and Olive Branch*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986.

³² Shafir, Gershon. *A Half-Century of Occupation: Israel, Palestine and the World's Most Intractable Conflict*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017.

³³ Tessler, Mark. *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2nd ed., 2009.