

How Should We View the Conflict in Palestine?

Roland Rance, 10 March 2009

The great Jewish teacher Hillel the Elder, a contemporary of Jesus, was once asked to sum up the whole of Jewish law while standing on one foot. He is said to have replied “That which is hateful to you, do not unto another: This is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary”. If I were to be challenged similarly to sum up the conflict in Palestine in one sentence, I would reply that it is the liberation struggle of an oppressed people against a colonial settler society which has displaced and subjugated it; the rest is commentary.

Despite countless media and propaganda simplifications, this is not a simple border dispute between two independent states. Nor is it an expression of an ever-lasting religious conflict between Judaism and Islam. In the development of this conflict, European states, including Britain, have played a central and deleterious role.

It was European states who divided the Arab world into separate states, and colonised and subjugated them; and it was European states that, through their murderous racism towards the Jews, created the conditions in which the Zionist movement grew. Britain bears a special responsibility, because of its direct rule in Palestine, its duplicity towards both Arab nationalists and Zionists, and its introduction of the repressive laws still used by Israel towards its Palestinian subjects.

The area now known as Palestine was, like all of the states in the Arab world, the product of imperialist manipulations. At the beginning of the twentieth century, an Arab nationalist movement was emerging to challenge the rule of the declining Ottoman empire. Largely secular and westernising, this movement originally sought greater autonomy and use of Arabic

within the empire, rather than independent states.

During the First World War Britain, France and Tsarist Russia drew up a secret agreement to partition the Middle East into spheres of influence and direct colonies. At the same time, Britain was openly encouraging an Arab nationalist uprising against Turkey, and promising support for the establishment of a united Arab kingdom; while it was also promising the Zionist movement its support for the establishment of a “Jewish national home” in Palestine.

Zionism had arisen as a response of a minority of European Jews to the wave of antisemitic pogroms that swept across Russia following the assassination of the Tsar in 1881. In contrast to the masses of Jews who responded by joining the revolutionary movement, or seeking refuge elsewhere, the Zionists argued that antisemitism was a rational and reasonable response to what they saw as the anomalous existence of Jews in Europe. There was therefore no point in fighting it; and Jews would themselves carry it with them wherever they went. The only solution was to establish a Jewish state, and to this end they would make an alliance even with the worst persecutors of the Jews. In the words of Theodor Herzl, founder of the Zionist movement, “the antisemites will become our most dependable friends”.

This was very much a minority response: of the 2 million Jews who fled the pogroms between 1881 and 1914, only some 50,000 went to Palestine, and half of these left within five years. Nevertheless, the British government sought to make common cause with them. This, though, did not result from any concern for Jews. Indeed, the very same Balfour who gave his name to

the notorious 1917 declaration of British support for Zionist aims had in 1905 introduced in Parliament the first Aliens Act, designed to limit immigration of Jewish refugees. According to Balfour, “a state of things could easily be imagined in which it would not be to the advantage of the civilisation of the country that there should be an immense body of persons who, however patriotic, able, and industrious, however much they threw themselves into the national life, still, by their own action, remained a people apart, and not merely held a religion differing from the vast majority of their fellow countrymen, but only inter-married among themselves”, and he warned Parliament about “the undoubted evils that had fallen upon the country from an immigration which was largely Jewish”.

The Balfour Declaration, by the way, was opposed by the only Jewish member of the British government at the time, Secretary for India Edwin Montagu, who wrote a memorandum denouncing it as “the Anti-Semitism of the Present Government”. On the other hand, it was supported by Minister of Munitions Winston Churchill, who wrote: “among the Jews ... this world-wide conspiracy for the overthrow of civilisation and for the reconstitution of society on the basis of arrested development, of envious malevolence, and impossible equality, has been steadily growing ... Zionism offers the third sphere to the political conceptions of the Jewish race, in violent contrast to international communism”.

It was clear to both sides that the cooperation between Zionism and its imperial sponsor was based on a common interest. Herzl wrote in 1895 of forming in Palestine “a portion of a rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism”, while the British Military Governor of Jerusalem Sir Ronald Storrs, noted in 1917 that the Zionists would form for England “a little loyal Jewish Ulster in a sea of potentially hostile

Arabism”. The indigenous Palestinians were of no account. This was confirmed by Balfour in a 1919 memo, in which he wrote:

In Palestine we do not propose even to go through the form of consulting the wishes of the present inhabitants of the country, though the American Commission has been going through the form of asking what they are. The four great powers are committed to Zionism and Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long tradition, in the present needs, in future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land.

Under British colonial rule over Palestine, the Zionist project flourished, creating a virtual state-within-a-state. The watchwords of this project were the slogans “conquest of the land” and “conquest of labour”. The Zionists proceeded to acquire land from absentee landlords and, ignoring all custom and precedent, to evict tenant farmers rather than tithe them. From the beginning of the 20th century, Palestinians were being removed from the lands which they and their families had farmed and lived on for centuries. At the same time, a systematic campaign of boycott and self-sufficiency enabled the Zionists, when Palestinian opposition to British colonialism and Zionist dispossession erupted in the 1936 uprising and a six-month general strike, to replace the numerically much larger Palestinian community as the dominant economic force in the country.

The rise of the Nazis in the 1930s led to another huge wave of Jewish flight from Europe. Once again, they found many doors closed; Japanese-occupied Shanghai accepted more Jewish refugees than Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand and South Africa combined. The Zionist movement actually lobbied in support of

this denial of refuge. They were committed to establishing a Jewish state in Palestine, and rejected the possibility of a fight against antisemitism. Nazi antisemitism and genocide acted as a further justification for the Zionist project argument. Zionist leaders Chaim Weizmann, later to become Israel's first president, described European Jews as "economic and moral dust... only a branch will survive. They had to accept it", while David Ben-Gurion, later Israel's first prime minister, stated "If I knew that it would be possible to save all the children in Germany by bringing them over to England and only half of them by transporting them to Eretz Israel, then I opt for the second alternative".

It should have been clear by this time that Zionism offered no real response to European antisemitism, and that territorial concentration in Palestine could not provide a safe haven for Jews. Had the Nazis arrived there, the fate of the Jews would have been no different than of Jews across Europe; what saved them was the allied victories at Stalingrad and El Alamein, not their own resistance

Nevertheless, the war provided the essential background for the establishment of Israel. Several factors contributed to this. There was a huge feeling of guilt and shame at the failure – even refusal – to rescue Jews from genocide. This was exploited by the Zionists, despite their dishonourable role during the holocaust. At the same time, there were tens of thousands of traumatised displaced Jews, who still found doors closed, and who were often coerced to settle in Palestine. And, unusually, there was a coincidence of interest between the United States and the Soviet Union, who collaborated to end Britain's Middle East empire; and who both hoped to assume the role of sponsor of a Jewish state in the region.

Mounting violence in Palestine, with Zionists and Palestinian nationalists waging a vicious war, and both attacking

the British rulers, led to proposals for a partition of Palestine, and ultimately to the United Nations decision of 29 November 1947. Although the Jews formed only 1/3 of the population, they were allocated 55% of the land; even within the proposed Jewish state, Jews formed a minority of the population.

The Palestinians, who had consistently opposed partition and demanded independence, rejected the plan. The Zionists publically affirmed their acceptance, while in effect planning the further expansion of their state. Following the 1947-8 war, the state of Israel was established on 78% of the land of Palestine. 800,000 Palestinians were removed from their homes and land; they and their descendants are still living in the wretched refugee camps of Gaza, the West Bank and elsewhere in the Middle East.

Following the war, some 500 Palestinian villages were destroyed, and their lands and remaining buildings transferred Jewish use. All over Israel, so long as you know what to look for, you can see signs of this previous ownership. Despite this, many Israelis and their supporters deny this obvious truth. In an admonition to them, and an explanation of why they must always be ready to fight Palestinians, former chief-of-staff and the Defence Minister Moshe Dayan told a meeting of university students in 1969 that:

We came to this country, which was already populated by Arabs, and we are establishing a Jewish state. Jewish villages were built in the place of the Arab villages. You don't even know the names of the Arab villages, because those geography books no longer exist. Not only the books do not exist, the Arab villages are not there either — there is not one place built in this country that did not have a former Arab population.

About 150,000 Palestinians remained within the new Jewish state. Until 1966,

they lived under military rule, and they are still today far from equal citizens, although they now form about 20% of the population. Some of them are actually considered refugees, since at one stage in the war they lived in areas outside Israeli control, and thus their lands were forfeited to the state. Israel has invented the term “present absentees” to describe these people, many of whom live close to their own homes, which they are forbidden to own.

They are forbidden because state land in Israel – which forms over 90% of the land area of the state – is administered on behalf of the state by bodies such as the Jewish National Fund and the Jewish Agency. These bodies, which are subsidiaries of the World Zionist Organisation, are bound by their regulations to provide services and resources for Jews only. At the same time, under a complicated network of legislation and contracts, they are responsible for land use and allocation in the state. They are not answerable to the citizens of Israel; not even to its Jewish citizens. Rather, they are answerable to the fictive entity “the Jewish people”. Thus, more than 90% of the land in Israel is legally reserved for Jews alone. The Jewish National Fund is still a registered charity in England.

In 1967, Israel further extended its borders, absorbing all of the British mandate area of Palestine as well as the Egyptian Sinai Desert (since returned) and the Syrian Golan Heights. These areas have been under direct or indirect Israeli military rule ever since. Numerous Israeli settlements have been set up; there are now about 500,000 Israelis living in more than a hundred of these illegal settlements. For more than 2/3 of its existence, Israel has maintained this military occupation.

Despite early Soviet illusions (and it should be remembered that it was Czechoslovakia which armed Israel in 1948), Israel has remained a dependable ally of the western states since its establishment. Unlike other states, as a

colonial implant in the region it has no other option. To abandon its alliance with imperialism would require Israel also to abandon its Zionist underpinnings – to allow the return of Palestinian refugees, to become a state of its inhabitants, and not the state “of the Jewish people”.

This alliance is not a product of any “Jewish” or “Israel” lobby; it is a common interest between the Israeli regime and the western powers in dominating the Arab world, and maintaining control over its resources – principally of course its oil. The Israel lobby is more a product of, rather than an influence on, US foreign policy.

The Palestinian people, as well as their land, have been partitioned into communities with different, and sometimes conflicting, immediate interests, but one pre-eminent aim and need – reunification. Without enabling this, without allowing the return of the Palestinian refugees dispersed across the Middle East, without ending the increasingly brutal Israeli military rule over the areas occupied in 1967, without abolishing the discriminatory laws which privilege Jews and removing the ability of extraterritorial bodies to control significant parts of the Israeli polity, there can be no possibility of a just and lasting settlement of the Palestine conflict.

I do not see any possibility of achieving this through a continued partition of Palestine. Only in the context of a unitary Palestine, integrated in the Arab world, and with full individual and collective rights for all ethnic and religious minorities, can we hope to resolve this conflict.

The rest is commentary.