

Palestine and Israel - an overview

In the time we have this morning what is a very complicated history must be simplified. I intend and hope that the simplification will be of the sort that allows the real issues to stand out clearly rather than the kind of simplification that obscures them. My aim is simply to try to map out the route by which the present situation has been reached. I will do it by looking briefly at three time periods:

- From 1789 to 1917
- From 1917 to 1947
- From 1947 to today

From 1789 to 1917

I begin at 1789, the French Revolution, because that and its impact on European history marks the beginning of a new era for the Jews and, indeed, for all Europeans. Until then the historic status of Jews stretching back into the middle ages and earlier remained unchanged. The Jews were a religious minority subject to discrimination and periodic oppression, often of a cruel kind, by the majority Christian society. The phenomenon of conversion from Judaism to Christianity, despite often being forced rather than a free decision, nevertheless confirms that Jewishness was seen in European society as a religious rather than an 'ethnic' identity.

With the French revolution and the rise of Napoleon, however, the idea of a society in which there was religious freedom arose, and this was made part of the so-called Napoleonic Code of 1807, which was supposed to apply not only in France but also in those territories conquered by Napoleon. The code gave equal rights to Jews and Christians, and promised a society in which religious differences could exist among free citizens. In Western Europe at least this emancipation of Jews led in the direction of assimilation, by which is meant a situation in which Jews could play a regular part in civil society. Religious freedom, of course, implies the right to change ones religious affiliation, and some Jews indeed did seek baptism, but this was not the main route of assimilated Jews, far more likely was the fading of religious affiliation (as indeed happened over the 19th century with Christians as well), leading to the phenomenon of the secular Jew - someone with family or other connections with the Jewish religious community but no longer practising the religion themselves.

So much for Western Europe. Further East and in Russia attitudes did not change and the old regime continued - in the 1880's a new outbreak of large scale persecution of Jews in Russia, led to massive emigration mainly to the USA, a nation still at that time priding itself on being a place that welcomed the outcast and refugee.

Even in Western Europe old attitudes lay near the surface and they broke out in a dramatic way in the Dreyfus affair 1894. Captain Dreyfus was a Jewish officer in the French army, in other words a prime example of what emancipation should mean, who was accused of treason, by passing secrets to the Germans. He was found guilty and sent to a penal colony. The case split French society precisely because it raised the question of whether a Jew could actually be a proper French citizen, or whether they must automatically have a loyalty elsewhere. Evidence quickly proved Dreyfus' innocence, but the French establishment closed ranks and it was a hard fight to obtain his pardon. One has to remember that the idea of a 'nation' that we use today was still in the process of formation during the 19th century, so that what it meant to be French, say, or German was still in some ways an open question.

The Dreyfus affair convinced some educated Jews that assimilation would never be more than skin deep and that the Jews needed to look elsewhere for their future. Among these was Theodor Herzl, a secular Jew and a writer and journalist, who had actually covered the trial of Dreyfus for his paper. He is nowadays regarded as the father of Zionism.

Zionism is a movement for the large scale emigration of Jews from Europe to form a settlement elsewhere. At first the location of 'elsewhere' was not definite and Herzl himself does not seem to have felt a particular pull to Palestine. His motivation was one of escaping from oppression to a safe haven wherever that might be. Nevertheless for fairly obvious reasons many Zionists from the start saw the land of Palestine as the place where the refuge should be. The majority of European Jews, however, at least in Western Europe, did not view Zionism favourably - for those trying to become assimilated citizens Zionism seemed as if it might compromise their efforts, suggesting that their rightful place was somewhere else, and for the strictly orthodox it seemed to be an attempt to 'force God's hand' and turn the promised return to Jerusalem at the end of the age into a mere secular operation.

Palestine, the southern part of the Levant coast, was at this time part of the Ottoman, (Turkish) empire, as it had been since 1517. It extended northwards from Galilee down to the Sinai desert and from the coast through to the desert east of what is now the state of Jordan, and was broken into a number of administrative zones by the Turks. When the Zionist writers spoke of Palestine it was this whole region they had in mind, although often their aspirations were less definite.

How did the Zionists imagine dealing with the indigenous inhabitants of wherever the new settlement would be? Here is Herzl:

We must expropriate gently the private property of the estates assigned to us. We shall try to spirit the penniless population across the border, by procuring employment for it in the transit countries, while denying it any employment in our own country.

(From the Diaries, quoted in Ghilan 'How Israel lost its soul')

In evaluating a statement of this kind we must remember that this was still the age of imperialism, when Europeans of all kinds regarded the 'natives' as second class human beings with no political rights, so that the idea of displacing inhabitants of some region to achieve an ulterior political aim would not seem illegitimate.

As I have said above most emancipated Jews at that time did not regard Zionism fondly, but an active minority worked tirelessly for it and made considerable political progress with their ideas, especially with the British, who in 1903 offered Uganda as a homeland for the Jews. This was at first provisionally accepted, but with the death of Herzl in 1904 was definitely declined.

As an aside at this point we might conjecture that the particular support of the British - more precisely of a number of British politicians - perhaps stems from what we can perhaps slightly anachronistically call Christian Zionism. The Bible-reading Protestant would be fully aware of the many Old Testament references to exile and return which, read in the uncritical manner of the 19th century as a literal story of return in this age, would tend to support the Zionist narrative. One would not expect to find the same sort of views amongst the Catholic French where Bible reading was less prevalent, or perhaps among the Germans much more inclined to listen to their highly educated clergy.

From 1904 to 1906 Russia was in the throes of its first revolution. The Tsarist authorities tried to displace the widespread dissatisfaction with their own rule onto the Jews, with the

result that something like 5 million Jews emigrated, some to Western Europe but the majority to the USA. Many settled in Germany where the presence of assimilated Jews already established in the universities encouraged those seeking an education. A few Jews at that time did settle in Palestine, but it was not the destination of choice for the majority. First, the Ottoman authorities would certainly have prevented large scale immigration, and secondly there was nothing in Palestine, a run-down 'third world' nation, to attract refugees, when the dynamic new world of the USA was open to them. Western Europe was less open to refugees - in 1906 Balfour (the British prime minister) passed a law restricting Jewish immigration. Here we perhaps see one tacit strand in British support for Zionism in the twentieth century - support the Jews settling somewhere as long as it's not here. This need not be a position based upon anti-semitic views among the politicians themselves but merely their judgement about what the electorate would accept.

The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 began a process that has led to the Europe we see today, and at first presented the Zionists with a dilemma - which side to support. The Ottoman Empire, the established power in Palestine, was allied with the Germans and the Austro-Hungarians, whilst their opponents, including the leading great power, Britain, was the nation where the political voice of Zionism had made most progress.

The Zionist strategy with the British and French (and later the Americans) was to present the Jews as a great international force whose financial empire could give substantial support to the allies. This point of view, which is questionable at the least, was however treated seriously by various allied politicians, and was, as we now know a desperate error in that it fed into the later Nazi view of an international Jewish conspiracy. Nevertheless, this position with its tacit bargain of 'we can help the allied war effort, in exchange for support for the Zionist aims' could have been a factor in the crucial changes that were to come.

From 1917 to 1947

In 1917 Balfour, now Foreign Secretary, sent a memorandum to Lord Rothschild, a prominent member of the British Jewish community containing the words:

'His majesties government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a National Home for the Jewish people, ... it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice 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'.

As Arthur Koestler said:

'Here was one nation promising another nation the land of a third nation' (quoted in Tom Segev's book 'One Palestine, Complete Jews and Arabs under the British Mandate')

The tone of Koestler's remarks might blind us to a real question - did the British have the right to make the sort of promises they did? A question equally applicable to the later (1947) United Nations resolution (see below).

This memorandum, the so-called 'Balfour Declaration', fell short of the Zionists' aim that post-war Palestine as a whole should be declared a state for Jews, but nevertheless was a very significant step in the achievement of the Zionist aims, especially since by the end of the war the British had conquered Palestine and, along with the French, held the whole Levantine coast. At the same time Britain had given a number of assurances to Arab leaders in the Middle East about their aims for independent statehood when the war was ended. The

assurances to the two groups were hardly compatible, and a number of British statesmen and civil servants pointed that out at the time.

The British who now had de facto rule nevertheless had no very clear policy about Palestine itself - its importance for them lay in it forming part of a chain of dependencies across the middle east to India - but in 1920 the League of Nations (the precursor of the United Nations) gave Britain a mandate to govern Palestine and lead the peoples there to statehood. (The French were placed in a similar position in the Northern part of the Levant - Lebanon and Syria).

It has been said:

'The British entered Palestine to defeat the Turks; they stayed there to keep it from the French; then they gave it to the Zionists because they loved "the Jews" even as they loathed them, at once admired and despised them, and above all feared them'

(Tom Segev ref. as above)

During the 1920's and 1930's Jews began to settle in large numbers in the mandated territory. To give some idea of the scale of settlement, in 1880 there were approx. 25,000 Jews living there, mostly Arabic speaking, ultra-orthodox and anti-zionist, and approximately 300,000 Arabs - (population figures are not always easy to interpret owing to uncertainty over exactly which geographical area is being considered, so figures used here must be treated as a guide to orders of magnitude only). By 1947 in the Mandate territory these figures had become 650,000 Jews and 1.5 million Arabs.

At first the Palestinian population did not oppose what seemed to be a small-scale influx of Jewish settlers, since they had not grasped the full implications of the Zionist project. And in the early years of settlement some Jewish writers took the view that the Palestinians, despite their present adherence in the main to Islam, were in fact descendants of the inhabitants of the land from Roman times and before - in other words were 'ethnically' Jewish and would be expected to become part of the new 'Jewish' state. But after 1929 when large-scale sectarian violence broke out between the settlers and the established population this view was abandoned. The Palestinians were now regarded as having arrived after the Islamic conquest in 636 AD. It being supposed that at some time after the conquest the historic population had been driven into exile. The present 'official' Israeli view seems to be that the Palestinians are Arab immigrants who settled in the 19th century into an almost 'empty land'. Hence the old Zionist adage 'a land without a people for a people without a land'.

Here is a place to flag up the question 'who is a Jew?' Is Jewishness primarily a religious identity (like being a Catholic), or is it an 'ethnic' identity - i.e. a matter of common descent from a group of ancestors? The governing idea of the Zionists today is the latter, even though it can lead to hard cases - can an 'ethnic' Jew convert to Islam and still remain a Jew, i.e. still retain their 'Jewish' status in Israel? The Zionist view of Israel as 'the Jewish state' means that any 'ethnic' Jew, anywhere in the world, is a potential citizen of Israel and has the right to Israeli citizenship. One can see why prominent British Jews at the time of the Balfour declaration ensured that it contained the words about not affecting the rights of Jews 'in any other country', for there was a worry that if a 'Jewish state' were to be created it might become a policy to pressure all Jews to settle there, even those well assimilated into their European and American homes.

From 1929 onwards the British, the Jewish settlers, and the Arab population (both Muslim and Christian) were increasingly at loggerheads, with both Jews and Arabs involved in arts

of terrorism not only against each other but also against the British occupying forces. The Second World War naturally was a period in which no real progress with solving the problems could be made. But in 1945 with Europe full of displaced persons many of them fleeing Jews a new urgency arose, leading in 1947 to a United Nations plan for the partition of Palestine into a 'Jewish' state and an 'Arab' state with Jerusalem becoming an 'international' free city accessible to all. The UN resolution was not unanimous, with the Arab states amongst the opponents.

'It seemed illogical as well as tragic to the Arabs that the Jews, who owned about 6% of the total land area of Palestine and comprised only 33% of the population, were granted a state consisting of over 56% of the country. Moreover, the proposed Jewish state was to have more Arabs (509,780) than Jews (499,020) under its jurisdiction'

(Naim Stifan Ateek 'Justice and only Justice - a Palestinian Theology of Liberation)

When the British withdrew in 1948 the Jews declared the state of Israel, and the surrounding Arab states reacted with military action. The result of the ensuing hostilities was a large scale displacement of Palestinians, either fleeing conflict or forcibly ejected. With the cessation of hostilities in 1949, these displaced people were denied the right to return to their homes and land, creating one of the most intractable features of the present impasse. There may be 'realpolitik' reasons for Israel's position on the return of the refugees, but we also see here the shadow of another contributory factor in the situation - the belief that the land has been divinely granted to the Jewish people so that the Palestinians actually have no title to it.

From 1947 to today

The peace of 1949 was always fragile, so that Israel always felt under threat. Under threat that is from the surrounding Arab states, not particularly from the Palestinians themselves who had been thrown into disarray by the events of 1947/9, and anyway had little in the way of political organisations.

In 1956, in response to the Egyptian nationalisation of the Suez canal, and the blockade of Israel's Red Sea access, as well as ominous troop movements, Israel launched a 'preemptive' strike against Egyptian air bases, whilst Britain and France attacked Port Said. This 'last gasp' of British and French colonial power proved to be a debacle since pressure from the Americans and the Russians led to a fairly swift withdrawal, underscoring who were the new masters of the world. Here we see the arrival of a new factor in the situation - cold war politics - which eventually led to Israel being regarded as a US ally whilst further north Syria became closely allied with the USSR. In these circumstances a balanced view of the issues of justice in Palestine would prove hard to come by. The ending of the cold war led to another wave of Jewish immigration with somewhere on a million people coming from countries previously behind the Iron Curtain - many of these in fact not strictly Jews according to the Israeli definition.

In 1967 again there was a threatening build-up of military forces by Arab states surrounding Israel and that again led to pre-emptive action by Israel. This time, however, the hostilities led to Israel's occupation of the Arab parts of Palestine (the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem) as well as the Golan Heights (Syrian territory), and Egyptian parts of Sinai. This, effectively, is the situation today, despite the failed attempts by Egypt and Syria in 1973 to retake the lost territory.

This is something of an impasse for both sides in the dispute. For Israel it presents them with effective rule over a large non-Jewish population, a population that has no representation in the Israeli political system. Were they to attempt to move in the direction of full annexation there would be an Arab majority compromising the Zionist view of a 'Jewish' state. For the Palestinians the problem is one of stagnation. After 40 years of being in political limbo no real sense of future can be seen. The outbreak in 1987 of the 1st intifada - concerted civil disobedience - is hardly surprising given the levels of frustration. The 'iron fist' response of Israel has only made the situation worse, leading to the rise of radical Islamic groups like Hamas.

At least two American presidents, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, have been involved in attempts to break the deadlock. In the early 1990's a process of negotiation, at first secret, was initiated involving meetings between the Israeli government and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), held in Norway. These meetings led to the so-called Oslo Accords (1993,1995) in which Israel recognised the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people, whilst the PLO recognised the state of Israel. The Palestinian Authority was set up giving a limited self-government to the West Bank and Gaza with a promise of eventual full autonomy and the withdrawal of Israeli military and administrative personnel. This would leave the Palestinians with 22% of the area of historic Palestine. This peace process, however, foundered; right wing Zionists feared it would mean an end to Jewish settlements in the occupied territories, whilst left wing Arabs feared it would betray the refugees still in exile. A more widespread criticism is that the process was never even-handed with Israel holding all the cards and calling the shots. With the secrecy surrounding much of the process it is hard to evaluate that criticism.

What of the future? First, nothing stays the same in politics as in life - there will be changes. Secondly, the rise of an educated strata of Palestinians will enable the case for their people to be heard more readily, whilst the tensions in Israeli society between the old Zionist order and the modern liberal world will lead to change. The rise of electronic media will enable more and more people in the wider world to see for themselves exactly what is happening in the conflict, and will make the old control of the media by state apparatus, whether Israeli or Western, obsolete. What sort of future will it be? That is not for us to say, it will have to be decided by the people living in Palestine, both Jews and Arabs.