

Historical Context: Palestine Becomes The Modern State Of Israel

Morgan Duchesney

Most current coverage of the Palestinian/Israeli issue is bereft of comprehensive historical coverage. This creates the false but often convenient impression that the situation is a recent phenomenon. An accurate understanding of the region's history is necessary to a full understanding of this complex and endless conflict. However, the lack of context is not unusual. As Bruce Henderson writes: "It's not an exaggeration to say that my generation, from the 60's, was the first to become disenfranchised from historical context. " (*Adbusters Canada*, 2011) Expediency and historical revisionism have replaced the Latin and Greek myths that previously, "...provided a foundation for the artistic or philosophical articulation of modern life." (*Ibid.*) We are left with blunted irony and cynicism, sorry substitutes for honest inquiry and humility.

The Romans mainly accomplished the most significant expulsion of Jews from what was called the Land of Israel around 132 AD although a small Jewish population remained. What followed was a Jewish Diaspora throughout the Middle East and later Europe. The territory changed hands frequently until the Ottoman Empire established dominance in 1516.

From that point until the turn of the 20th century, the Land of Israel, or Palestine as it came to be called; was peopled mainly by Arabs with a small Jewish element. The situation changed abruptly in 1917 when the British government, under intense pressure from international Zionist

organizations, passed the Balfour Declaration. This declaration promised a homeland to the world's Jews, who were represented by a number of Zionist organizations active mainly in Britain and the U.S. During this pivotal period, the United Nations (UN) was under pressure from international Zionist organizations, and Arab nations, as well as the governments of Britain and the United States government; each pursuing their own agenda.

From about 1918 onward, the rapid influx of European Jews rapidly altered the population mix in Palestine and soon territorial disputes between Arab and Jew naturally followed. Arab nations like Egypt, Jordan and Syria objected to the terms of the 1947 United Nations partition of Palestine. They felt that the tiny Jewish population should not be given such a disproportionately large share of the territory, including access to precious fresh water and arable land. Eventually, this struggle culminated in the 1948 war that both created a new Land of Israel and the subsequently marginalized the pre-1948 inhabitants in a new state where Jewish Israelis dominated Arabs. The Palestinians refer to this event as the *Nakba* or holocaust, an accurate but extremely controversial choice of words.

In their self-interest, the British did two things that have bequeathed a legacy of strife to generations of Israelis, Palestinians, Iraqis and others. They created artificial borders to serve their imperial requirements which in turn fomented fresh strife and new factionalism among

those affected by this colonial cartography. Needless to say, the territory's Palestinians and Christians were not consulted and their interests were never considered. The interests of British Petroleum and U.S. oil companies were paramount; as they continue to be. Only the names have changed.

This careless colonialism resulted in the forced displacement of nearly three quarters of a million Palestinian people from their ancestral homelands. They were herded into overcrowded desert refugee camps or encouraged to emigrate. When one includes Israeli efforts to diminish Palestinian culture, a case may be made for accusations of ethnic cleansing. Perhaps a fair British-brokered arrangement between these two peoples could have prevented the subsequent bloodshed that has plagued this region since the official creation of Israel in 1948. All suggestions in that direction were ignored.

While promising a homeland to the world's displaced Jews was a noble and necessary policy, little concern was reserved for the region's indigenous Arabs and Christians, whose presence in the region was considered an inconvenience by the British. This so-called right of return must infuriate Palestinians displaced by the arrival of Jews from Europe, Africa and North America. There is no right of return for Palestinians driven off their land by the Israeli government and this disputed right is a key stalling point in the so-called peace process. The Israelis literally refuse to discuss it.

Currently, Palestinian territory includes Gaza, East Jerusalem and the West Bank. While these separate landmasses are not technically occupied by Israel, the integrity of their borders is tenuous. This is especially true of the West Bank, which is an odd arrangement of secure

Jewish settlements and private highways surrounded by belts of ever-shrinking Palestinian communities. The Israeli military controls all borders and air space and reserves the right to enter these territories without permission. Dispute over rights to the holy city of Jerusalem is another key point in the endless struggle. Both religious Palestinians and Jews claim this ancient city as the sacred capital of their state.

Perhaps the greatest threat to the possibility of a secure Palestinian state is the relentless Israeli policy of illegal settlements. The West Bank and East Jerusalem endure illegal Israeli settlements while Gaza is subject to disproportionately-harsh Israeli invasions, targeted assassinations and air strikes in retaliation for Palestinian rocket attacks and bombings in Israel. United Church of Canada official, the Rev. Hanns G. Skoutajan described the Palestinian situation

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in the August 2009 *Ottawa Citizen*, "They have been deprived of their land, locked into territory by walls that dwarf the infamous Berlin Wall. Settlement incursions into the West Bank continue in spite of Palestinian and international objections. Arabs in East Jerusalem are summarily evicted from homes they have occupied for generations, to say nothing of the destruction of Gaza earlier this year." How could any people, subjected to decades of such abuse by a powerful oppressor, not resist with any means at their disposal?

The current struggle is actually between two national groups, the indigenous Palestinians and immigrant Israelis and their descendents who currently receive massive military support from the U.S. government. Without this support, Israel would cease to enjoy its overwhelming regional military dominance. This struggle is mainly a matter of overwhelming military tech-

nology pitted against the crude guerrilla tactics of small arms, suicide bombers and unguided rockets. There is something particularly tragic and desperate about suicide bombing. While ugly and destructive, it cannot be considered an act of cowardice. While continuing Palestinian rocket attacks against Israeli are certainly a form of terrorism, these attacks are actually the latest violent manifestation of a long process of generally futile resistance to Israeli expansion. The Palestinians simply can't compete militarily with the Israeli military and, like many other oppressed groups, have traditionally been obliged to resort to guerilla tactics.

Organizations like the Palestinian Liberation Organization, Fatah and Hamas owe their existence to this simmering resentment and arise from a David and Goliath desperation. It is interesting to note how U.S. Revolutionary War and Israel's 1948 anti-British terrorism are both conveniently excused as justifiable violence in the name of freedom and democracy. Terrorism is currently defined as what others do to "us". As *Harper's* editor

John R. MacArthur wrote about the subjectivity of state violence: It involves, "...more killing in the name of saving lives, more repression in the name of liberty, more camouflaged... piety in the name of freedom of religion and more hypocrisy in the name of...truth and justice..." (*Ibid*: Sept. 10, 2011, pg. A13.) Such tactics are the ultimate in self-deluded vanity and their defense by Western intellectuals like Michael Ignatieff is particularly disturbing. It requires great discipline to ignore the obvious in defense of the indefensible.

The Palestinian/Israeli struggle is hardly a battle of equals in spite of corporate media portrayals. Further complicating matters is the tacit un-

derstanding that Israel is the region's only nuclear power. The various Arab states are well aware of Israel's military prowess and don't currently seem to consider the Palestinian cause worthy of any direct military risk. Ultimately, open war with Israel means war with the United States and no one is willing to risk that lethal possibility.

The U.S. recently exercised its default UN Security Council veto to undermine Palestinian efforts to stop illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. They have chosen to ignore the inconvenient fact that Israel's

West Bank/East Jerusalem expansions are a clear violation of international law under UN Resolution 242. Palestinian officials, frustrated by Israel's continued illegal settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, recently abandoned peace talks they rightly consider disingenuous.

These West Bank and also East Jerusalem settlements are the crux of the conflict because they display a casual indifference to what fragile sovereignty the Palestinians enjoy in the territories supposedly

ceded to them by their powerful neighbors. While I am aware that Mr. Netanyahu requires political support from expansionist elements in Israel, he must also be aware of the antagonizing effect these settlements have on a Palestinian people already marginalized by arbitrary borders, security measures, limited mobility and restricted access to fresh water.

Interestingly, the Palestinians have also appealed to the UN General Assembly for recognition of Palestinian statehood although there is scant coverage of this strategy. The U.S. has no veto at the General Assembly and many nations, including influential Brazil, "...have officially recognized a Palestinian state inside the borders that were in place before the 1967 Six

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Day War...” The Palestinians believe that this course may finally shame the U.S. and Israel into good faith negotiations. The Israeli state is concerned that they are losing control of the so-called peace process, which is really just a permanent delaying tactic on the road to annexing all valuable Palestinian territory and transforming it into Israeli settlements.

Rather than attempting to diminish and dismiss power’s dangerous prerogatives, we might take a deeper look at the dark history of America’s dysfunctional relationship with Israel. I am well

aware the Israeli government is beholden to religious extremists bent on expansion and supported by fundamentalist U.S. Christian sects who see Israeli expansion as key to the fulfillment of some sort of Biblical prophecy involving Armageddon and “The Rapture.” Public analysis of these relationships is long overdue. The recent “Rapture” excitement in America reminds me that the Israeli government is dangerously beholden to Jewish religious extremists bent on territorial expansion and supported by fundamentalist U.S. Christian sects who see Israel’s growth as key to the fulfillment of a Biblical prophecy involving Armageddon and The Rapture. These militant Christians don’t care who dies and see the Palestinians as road kill on their highway to heaven. Their generous donations are vital to Israel’s insatiable war machine.

Allow me to address the hypocrisy of Israel’s magnanimous offers to “give” land to the Palestinians rather than correctly referring to the possibility of Israel returning Palestinian territory illegally seized at the conclusion of the 1967 War. In addition to UN Resolution 242, the Camp David Accord (signed by Israel and Egypt) states that the West Bank and East Jerusalem are to be the foundation of a future Palestinian state. Under the circumstances, why should Palestinians meekly accept Israeli settle-

ments in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and believe that these settlements are not part of an established Israeli policy of dividing and absorbing Palestinian territory?

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The legitimacy of the Israel state’s unique claims concerning its inherent “right to exist” is also worth a brief discussion. I am unaware of any other national entity that claims an inherent right to exist. This unprecedented and uniquely Israeli claim is unknown and unrecognized by international law. Countries do have a right to live in peace and defend their borders but this so-

called right to exist is a fantasy created to justify any and all oppressions perpetrated in the interests of racial purity, religious extremism and state security ideology. I apply the same condemnation to militant nationalism of any sort, but especially the sort that combines secretive oligarchy with state capitalism. Actually, that sounds like the current situation in Canada.

The seizure of Palestinian territory by the Israeli state has been accomplished by a well-established pattern of stealthy increments. It started long before the creation of modern Israel following the annexation of Palestine in 1948. “Those familiar with the history of Zionism will recognize the method, dating back to the 1920s: dunam after dunam, arousing as little attention as possible.” (Morris, B., 1996) The modern equivalent was expressed in the 1996 Israeli cabinet minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer’s description of Israeli expansion into the West Bank, “I build quietly. My goal is to build and not encourage opposition to my efforts. What is important to me is to build, build, build and build some more.” (*Ibid*) The Israeli government, with full U.S. support, has traditionally chosen this subtle and gradual path of seizing Palestinian lands and perhaps more importantly, water resources. It continues to this day, again with full U.S. backing. This is the reality of what is euphemistically referred to

as the peace process.

Concerning existential threats to the Israeli state, author Johnathan Cook writes, “Like the Iranian nuke, the Arab Spring explodes the myth of Israel as a safe haven.” (*Adbusters Canada*, 2011.) The Israeli leadership is well aware that the Arab Spring is, “...certain to fuel the ambitions of Palestinians not only to end the occupation but to restore their rights and dignity as a people after decades of dispossession and humiliation.” (*Ibid.*) Senior Israeli officials both recognize and recoil from the genuine participatory democracy of the Arab Spring. They yearn for the return of, “...dictators whose pragmatism forced them to keep the peace.” (*Ottawa Citizen*, Sept. 11, 2011. pg. B12.) They are disappointed that depots like Mubarak have been, “...supplanted by a new generation of leaders who have no choice but to reflect the popular mood, which is often hostile to Israel.” (*Ibid.*)

The Israeli state’s refusal to integrate itself into the new Middle East reality is exposing the fact that, “Netanyahu and other politicians understand that what is really at stake is not Israel’s physical survival but it’s ability to entrench its “Jewishness” against the regional forces of a democratic awakening.” (Cook) They fear, “...that the real existential threat to the Jewish state’s survival lay[s] less in military defeat than in a gradual demographic erosion,” that will reduce the security of “...a solid Jewish majority [within Israel].” Therefore Netanyahu has insisted that the Palestinians recognize Israel as a ‘Jewish State’, “...fully aware that no Palestinian could ever accept such a condition – unless they were prepared to submit to permanent subjugation.” (*Ibid.*) Under such circumstances, is it any wonder that the Palestinians have side-stepped Netanyahu and appealed directly to the United Nations?

Ordinary Israelis have good reason to worry about their future security, if the behaviour of their wealthy neighbors is any indication. Unbeknownst to most of the world, and with terrible historical irony; at least 6 million prosperous Israelis have acquired a second U.S. or European passport. Israeli dissident commentator Gideon Levy writes that, “The foreign pass-

port has become an insurance policy against a rainy day.” (*Ibid.*) These faithless elites are ready to abandon the mythical promised land; leaving their poor cousins to deal with the new demographic reality of a shared state.

The Israeli advantage of overwhelming military superiority and U.S. financial and logistical support continues to be the dominant factor in the conflict. Unfortunately, this advantage is often misinterpreted as some sort of moral high ground and is employed to negate the truism that one can’t peacefully enjoy what has been seized and held by force. Beyond that, “Israel has been living on borrowed time and money, its army and long occupation heavily subsidized by the West. The Arab Spring is proving to Israel’s moment of reckoning.” (*Ibid.*) If the UN General Assembly could create the State of Israel in 1947, it can create a Palestinian state in 2011. That’s only fair.

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