

**Why has the creation of Israel engendered so much animosity in Arab, and to an extent, Islamic societies, that calls for a united jihad against Israel have resulted?**

David Ben-Gurion proclaimed Israel a state on 14 May 1948. The declaration fulfilled the vision of a Jewish homeland enunciated by Zionists from the time of Thomas Herzl. This vision had received Western support as early as 1917 in the form of the Balfour Declaration. An agreement which committed the British to support “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.”<sup>1</sup> This superpower support remained thirty years later when both the United States and the USSR battled to be the first to recognise the new state. The Arab response was markedly different.

The jihad or holy war declared in November 1947 by the Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al Husseini came to immediate fruition. On 15 May 1948 five Arab states combined to confront the Jewish ‘invader’. Lewis writes that to the Arabs Medinath Yisrael was both illegitimate and an injustice. The home of the Jews had been created at the expense of Palestinian Arab hopes and demands for the establishment of their own independent homeland. On a wider front Israel’s creation confirmed the failure of the Arabs to establish their own nation.

The injustice was compounded by continued Western and superpower interference in the area. Thus, Israel came to embody “an outpost of Western imperialism.”<sup>2</sup> A constant reminder of the imperialistic meddling, which had thwarted Arab desires and hopes since at least World War I.

Moreover, the displacement of both Arabs and Muslims from land they occupied for over 1300 years contributed to Arab resentment at the new state. The ‘fact’ that Israel was a state with a different religion, a separate people and distinct ethnic grouping provided Arabs with an easily identifiable enemy for propaganda purposes. The birth of Israel crystallised Arab fears of Western betrayal and galvanised them into a collective jihad against the foreign invader.

European and particularly British ambition and interest played a key role in both the formation of Israel and the Arab animosity which accompanied the creation of the Jewish state. Indeed European Great Power involvement in the region may be traced to the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798. This involvement grew steadily as the Ottoman Empire’s power gradually declined. By 1914 British concern over the strategic link to India via the Suez Canal resulted in Egypt becoming a British protectorate. The British ‘occupation’ of Egypt highlights the aim of British Middle East policy throughout World War I. That policy was the maintenance of British power within the area. In a region occupied by a diverse range of peoples it was perhaps inevitable that such a shortsighted stratagem would constitute the basis for much of the region’s future problems.

The selfishness of the policy is illustrated by the contradictory nature of the key agreements the British concluded in the region during the war. The first of these was the McMahon-Husein Correspondence (July 14, 1915 – January 30, 1916).<sup>3</sup> Essentially, Husein was assured of territorial gains in response for organising an Arab revolt against Ottoman domination. Notably, the correspondence was unclear on the

fate of Palestine. The British also concluded an agreement with the Wahhabi sheikh, Ibn Saud. Again, territory was exchanged for cooperation.

The British also concluded an agreement with the Jewish elements of the region. With the Balfour Declaration (1917) the British hoped to enlist world wide Jewish support by heightening Zionist hopes for the creation of a home in Palestine for the Jewish people. The British also saw the opportunity to gain a measure of control over the strategic area of Palestine in the post-war world by acting as a guarantor of its terms. The Arab leader Husein produced a markedly different interpretation of the document to Jewish views. He remained satisfied that Jewish settlement in Palestine would not contradict “the political and economic freedom of the Arab population.”<sup>4</sup> The major Great Power concordat of the region did not contain the same level of ambiguity as these more regional transactions.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) basically parceled out the Middle East between Britain and France.<sup>5</sup> Palestine would remain under the control of Britain, France and Russia. Ramsey McDonald stated that “we assumed three obligations, each one of which contradicts the other.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the strategic and political manoeuvres of Britain had created an atmosphere of confusion and distrust amongst its Middle East allies. The Arabs particularly felt Britain had betrayed them and their hopes for independence.

Western influence, intrigue and imperial interest continued to foster Arab frustration throughout the inter war years. A number of conferences and commissions outlined the obstacles to a peaceful settlement but failed to identify a workable policy. British actions were often designed to appease one side and then the other. This was particularly evident with Jewish immigration. The Passfield white paper ended Jewish immigration in 1929 due to the deterioration in Arab-Jewish relations. Yet it was shortly thereafter that the so-called ‘black letter’ from the British Prime Minister repudiated the policy.<sup>7</sup>

The increasing persecution of Jews in Hitler’s Germany also demanded action from Western powers. This pressure was transferred to the Arabs in Palestine as Western relations refused to bear their load of immigration by maintaining restrictions on their immigration policies.

Consequently, Arab disillusion was increased by both the fact that events in Europe, outside of their control, were determining the composition of their country and that Western nations hypocritically and piously dictated policy to the Arabs whilst avoiding providing any large degree of assistance themselves. The Arab distrust of Western powers was compounded by Jewish success at achieving nation-state status and Arab failure.

One of the legacies of expanding Western influence in the Middle East was the influx of Western ideas and institutions. Independence and nationalism were used as tools to seduce ethnic minorities and achieve imperial strategic objectives. Yet nationalism and independence could only be attained through or by the control of both a land and a people. It is not surprising then why Jewish immigration and land purchase became the key to the door of independence.

A Zionist slogan portrayed Palestine as a land without a people.<sup>8</sup> Yet in strictly population terms this was a false claim. The population at the time of the Balfour Declaration was approximately 600, 000 with 90% of these Arab.<sup>9</sup> Yet the Declaration referred to them as non-Jewish and avoided mention of their political and national rights. Despite constant vacillation in British policy, Jewish immigration in the 1920s remained relatively insignificant. By 1931 the Jewish population in Palestine although doubling was only 16.9% of the total population.

Zionist propaganda was unable to compete with the attractions of America. Consequently, three times as many Jews went to America as to Palestine in the 1920s. However, the fifth aliyah (1932-39) brought 227 000 Jews and brought them up to 30 % of the total population.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps more importantly by 1939, 70 % of all new arrivals were from Central Europe.<sup>11</sup> These 1930s arrivals were steeped in Western culture, better educated and richer than previous immigrants. In concert with the Jewish land purchasing companies and contributions from American Jews this wealth provided Jews with the ability to purchase property and land.

Despite this huge wealth at their disposal, the Jews even by 1945 only owned some 7% or 180 500 hectares of the total area of Palestine.<sup>12</sup> However, it was not amount of 'facts' created – Jewish settlements on disputed land but the perception of wealth and growth which was created which evoked Arab enmity. Thus, although it was wealthy Arab landlords who turned the profit it was their landless peasant tenants who suffered through displacement as the Jewish settlements often preferred Jewish labour.

The gradual decline in Arab control over the land and population was matched or mirrored by the international and political decline in their chances of establishing political and national rights in Palestine. Certainly, the Arabs had reason, despite Balfour and Sykes-Picot, to believe that self-rule was merely a matter of time. Even the mandate system although delaying independence, still maintained the British duty, as the mandatory power, to bring Palestine to self-government as quickly as possible.

However, the Peel Commission (1937) and Partition Plan (1939) combined to almost eradicate any lingering advantage the Arabs held.<sup>13</sup> The significance of the Peel Commission was that for the first time the creation of an Arab and a Jewish state in Palestine with a third small state under British administration for Jerusalem was recommended. Whist rejected by both Arabs and Jews the planned idea for 'partition' would be echoed from the British White Paper (1939) to the UNSCOP recommendations to the UN after the Second World War. Legitimacy now supported Zionist hopes to the detriment and dismay of the Arabs.

Bitterness and a sense of betrayal doubtless reinforced by a comparison with the defeated Turks, whom had risen from defeat to create a strong, modern and independent republic. Nor would a comparison with some of their Arab brothers have helped. For, ironically, most of the so-called backward Arab states had achieved independence while the Arabs who supported the British remained under the latter's direct or indirect control.

The Israeli or rather Jewish attitude towards the Arabs was also a contributing factor to an increase in Arab hostility. As early as 1919 Arab leaders fearful of Jewish

intentions to create an independent autonomous Jewish state feared “that there will be clashes between them and the other races.”<sup>14</sup> Whilst an Arab manifesto of the same year warns that Jew will “swallow up Palestine.”<sup>15</sup>

Some of these concerns appeared justified by the treatment of Arab fellaheen by Jewish employers. For those Arab rural workers able to break the monopoly of Jewish work on Jewish settlements the pay were less than his Jewish counterpart and the treatment poor. No efforts were made to organise and protect these workers like the Jewish Labor Federation did for the Jewish workers.

Moreover, the Jews disregarded the Arabs as real players in the game to establish a Jewish state. Consequently, Zionists ignored the increasing Palestinian Arab fear of growing impact in the country and therefore felt little need to build an understanding between the two peoples. Part of this attitude may be attributed to Zionist propaganda. Some Zionist leaders believed that any Palestinians were of such low culture that they could only benefit from contact with sophisticated Europeans (Jews).

Indeed the Jewish slogan ‘A land for a people and a people for a land’ can now be viewed as not simply about population but cultural superiority on behalf of the Zionists. Such attitudes were even reflected by Israeli leaders. David Ben-Gurion proclaimed “we must expel Arabs and take their places.”<sup>16</sup> Such aggression and arrogance was bound to provoke both Arab response and Arab anger.

Thus it is not surprising when Arab propaganda proclaims the dangers of Zionism as the acquisition of land and the concentration and availability of money. These calls provided or indicated the growth of a national Arab consciousness with Zionism, and its descendent Israel, as the enemy. The economic strength of the Jewish Agency also represented a considerable threat to Palestinian Arabs. Consequently delegates from twenty-two Muslim states attended a Muslim congress. This concerted approach was followed by a boycott of Zionist goods (1933). As Mansfield points out “Palestine had become a powerful catalyst for the growth of Arab nationalist feeling.”<sup>17</sup>

The effects of the creation of Israel also contributed to the growth of Palestinian Arab nationalism. The war of independence or first Arab-Israeli War (1948) produced an estimated 700, 000 Palestinian Arab refugees – both homeless and stateless.<sup>18</sup> This episode often referred to by Arabs, as the al-Nakba – the catastrophe – has long remained a source of unresolved tension between Israelis and Arabs. The reasons for the Arab exodus remains disputed however what is clear is that “the future of the Palestinians has remained a major issue between Israel and the Arabs.”<sup>19</sup>

Springborg writes, “the unresolved Palestinian issue ensued the perpetuation of hostility and violence that has yet to abate.”<sup>20</sup> But what was that issue? Certainly one of the components of that issue was the Arab sense of injustice at the hands of their Western allies. British promises and support for Arab independence proved to be a false dawn throughout the period 1915-48. Too often imperial concerns and Realpolitik dashed Arab hopes for self-determination. A self-determination, which the victorious Western powers, not only fostered but also granted or developed in other Arab and Middle East countries. Indeed, particularly insulting to Arabs was the British patronage and support to the Jews - the same assistance which Arabs believed was denied to them.

Arab distrust and animosity at Western interference was easily transferred to Israel. A state which through its very existence, as well as its ideology and institution symbolised the injustices the Arabs felt at the hands of the West. Such an attitude was only exacerbated by the loss of land and displacement of the Arab population caused by the birth of Israel. The gradual creation of facts – Jewish settlements – had simultaneously eroded Arab rural life and provided the grounds for continuing Zionist expansion. Even though the Israeli victory claimed 80% of the land rather than the 53% intended under the Palestinian Mandate Ben-Gurion still intimated that this was “merely the acceptance of a principle not a specific blueprint.”<sup>21</sup> In other words more territorial gain by Israel should not be ruled out.

Such an aggressive and demanding attitude infuriated the Arabs who saw the Israeli as both foreigners and invaders of a land they had occupied for almost thirteen hundred years. It was these components of the Palestinian ‘issue’ created by the birth of Israel, which aroused such antagonism amongst her Arab neighbours and produced the basis for lasting and unresolved conflict, which remains today.

**ENDNOTES**

1. The Balfour Declaration in **Laqueur, W (ed). *The Israel/Arab Reader A Documentary History of the Middle East conflict*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1968, p.18.**
2. **Andersen, R.R, Seibert, R.F and Wagner, J.G. *Politics and Change in the Middle East Sources of Conflict and Accommodation*, Third Edition, New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 1990, p.87.**
3. **Laqueur, op.cit., pp.15-16.**
4. **Cohen, A. *Israel and the Arabs*, W.H. Allen, London, 1970, p.135.**
5. **Laqueur, op.cit., pp.12-15.**
6. Speech by Ramsey McDonald, British Labor Party Leader in **Cohen, op.cit., p.169.**
7. **Laqueur, op.cit., pp.50-56.** See also **Bickerton, I.J and Pearson, M.N. *The Arab-Israeli Conflict A History*, Third Edition, Longman, Melbourne, 1996, p.46.**
8. **Bill, J.A and Springborg, R. *Politics in the Middle East*, Fourth edition, Harper Collins, New York, 1994, p.316.**
9. **Bickerton, op.cit., p.39.**
10. **ibid., pp.50-52.**
11. **ibid., p.51.**
12. **ibid., p.52.**
13. **Laqueur, op.cit., pp.56-58, pp.64-75.**
14. **Cohen, op.cit., p.144.**
15. **ibid., p.147**
16. **Mansfield, P. *The Arabs*, Third edition, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1992, p.307.** The Arab Higher Commission was formed in 1936 and the Arab League in 1945.
17. **ibid., p.213.**
18. **Bickerton, op.cit., p.98.**
19. **loc.cit.**
20. **Springborg, op.cit., p.307.**
21. **Bickerton, op.cit., p.91.**

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