



The state of Israel was founded more than 60 years ago and involved the forced displacement and dispossession of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their land and homes. However, many people in the UK feel they don't understand enough about the situation to talk with any authority on the conflict in the Middle East. While the extensive history of the region is complex to understand, by not trying, British people are shirking their responsibility, as the current situation is one we have helped to create and have a responsibility to help resolve.

While the history of the region cannot be adequately covered within this briefing, key facts about British involvement and their consequences are discussed, as a way to understanding Britain's responsibility and role within the conflict.

THE HISTORY OF BRITISH INVOLVEMENT

Arabs and Jews have always lived on the land which constitutes Israel and the Palestinian territories, but Arabs were historically in a majority, with the Jews representing only 6% of the population in the 1880s. [1] Britain has also held a long running interest and involvement, which dates back to the early 20th century. In 1914-15, Britain made an agreement with the Arabs, in what is known as the Husayn-McMahon Correspondence, which first promised British help in establishing an independent and adjoining territory, through which Arabs could be united, and which specifically included Palestine. In return, the Arabs would revolt against the Ottoman Turks, and help the British defeat the Turks.

However, Britain was soon to betray their partners and in 1916 secretly entered the Sykes-Picot Accord with France in which Britain and France would divide up and rule over the Middle East as they wished, granting Britain control of Palestine.

In the late 19th century a movement had arisen among secular and religious Jews in Europe, which soon spread worldwide, called Zionism. This movement called for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine and was a response to the growing anti-Semitism which the Jewish community had experienced. However this idea had never been given political legitimacy until 1917 and the Balfour Declaration. This agreement declared the British Government's intention to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine and was a result of Zionist lobbying efforts on the British Government. While declaring that "nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities" [2] Balfour later admitted that "in Palestine we do not propose even to go through the form of consulting the wishes of the present inhabitants of the country". [3]

From 1920 to 1948 Palestine was under British Mandate, a fact rarely recognised or acknowledged in contemporary discussions of the conflict. Despite growing Arab opposition to

the influx of Jews to their land, creating many small uprisings, the British continued their support of Jewish migration to the region. The best known uprising is the Arab Revolt from 1936 to 1939. As historian Cheryl A. Rubenberg describes: "British suppression of the uprising [...] included the imposition of harsh emergency regulations and practices, including closures of newspapers, search-and-seizure operations without warrants, mass arrests and incarceration, deportation of political, trade union, and resistance leaders, widespread curfews, and other forms of collective punishments." [4] To those who are familiar with the current treatment of Palestinians during times of increased tension, this description appears startlingly familiar.

The Division of Palestine/ Founding of Israel

In 1947 the United Nations General Assembly passed UN Resolution 181; formally dividing the Palestinian territories into separate Arab and Jewish States. Under the plan the 600,000 Jews in Palestine were granted 56.47% of the land and the approximate 1.2 million Arabs 43.53% of the land [5], excluding Jerusalem. As the city was highly sought after by both sides, Jerusalem became an international city. Jewish leaders in the region celebrated the formal international recognition of a Jewish state in the region; however many felt it did not go far enough in recognising their ambition to inhabit the whole of Mandate Palestine. The Arab Palestinians meanwhile rejected partition as it failed to recognise or address the injustice done to them due to Jewish migration and occupation of their land.

Fighting between the two sides occurred almost as soon as the partition plan was first suggested, and soon escalated into massacres, with the British doing little to prevent/ reduce fighting or implement plans to reduce conflict. This time period is known as the War of Independence or 'Nakba' – meaning 'catastrophe' – among Palestinians and the conflict also involved other Arab nations including Syria, Jordan and Egypt. In 1948 as the state of Israel was founded, the British Mandate came to an end. That same year 750,000-900,000 Palestinians were displaced or expelled from their lands. [6] Despite UN Resolution 194

granting the right of return for Palestinians in 1949, many today are still waiting to return home. The fighting came to an end in 1949 as armistice agreements agreed the 'Green Line' separating the two states.

In 1967 fighting in the Middle East broke out again, this time between Israel and Egypt, with other Arab states wading into the conflict. The (1967) "Six Day War" allowed Israel to change the power dynamics in the region, and take control of areas of the West Bank and Golan Heights. In response UN Resolution 242 was issued, calling for Israel to withdraw from the Occupied Territories.

The Situation in Palestine and Israel Today

The situation today has many levels of complexity. Israel has enacted an ever-tightening hold on both the land and people within Palestine, and Palestinian land has shrunk to the West Bank and Gaza now making up less than 22% of historic Palestine. [7] To 'protect' themselves against Palestinian attacks Israel started building a 'separation barrier' in 2002, and today more than 50% of the wall has been constructed. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs currently predicts that when completed, only 13% of the wall will be along the Green Line, and the remaining 87% will be inside the West Bank, violating international law and creating a situation where Israel is able to take more of, and the best, land and natural resources from Palestine. [8] With 129 Israeli settlements and 438,088 Israeli settlers in the Palestinian Territories, the wall has been built to encapsulate the illegal settlements into Israel. [9] There are currently 592 Israeli road blocks in the West Bank; causing extensive economic, medical and psychological repercussions on the Palestinian population, demonstrated by 64 per cent of Palestinians living below the poverty line. [10] The situation is untenable in the long term, and the Palestinian population is suffering hugely.

British Arms Exports to Israel

The British have continued stoking the conflict in Palestine and Israel over the last 60 years by selling arms to Israel. Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) estimate that in recent years, UK exports to Israel have been worth £10 to £25 million a year. [11] While not overtly sanctioning Israeli Government's misuse of these weapons, by selling them arms, Britain is not condemning their actions either. As the CAAT website says: "The UK continues to sell arms to Israel despite the UN stating that Israel 'violates humanitarian law' and even though the UK's own 'Consolidated EU and National Arms Export Licensing Criteria' are supposed to assess the impact on regional peace, security and stability and the human rights record of the recipient." [12]

In recent months the Palestinian territories have once again been projected into the headlines with the Israeli Siege of Gaza which started in December 2008. While over one thousand three hundred Palestinian civilians and a handful of Israeli civilians lost their lives during this conflict, the British government have failed to take strong actions to address the situation. Many Israelis use the metaphor of a parent-child relationship when describing what is needed to bring peace to the region. They believe only by Israel's parent (the United States) telling Israel that their actions are unacceptable, will Israel's occupation of the Palestinian Territories stop. However, Britain is generally acknowledged as being the country with the closest relationship to America, but once again we are too busy trying to deny our responsibility for the situation to be of any real help to the people we have betrayed throughout history.

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References

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Resources on the Palestinian and Israeli Conflict

- Christian Aid Website, www.christianaid.org.uk/issues/conflict/middleeast/index.aspx.
- To read the 'Stories of Peace' blog FoR members wrote about a delegation to Palestine and Israel in November 2008, visit www.storiesofpeace.blogspot.com.
- The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs website www.ochaopt.org/.
- Gush Shalom, an Israeli peace movement's website <http://gush-shalom.org/>.

Actions to Take

- Organisations within the UK which work on Palestine and Israel include Fellowship of Reconciliation (www.for.org.uk), Pax Christi (www.paxchristi.org.uk/), Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (www.icahd.org/) and Palestine Solidarity Campaign (www.palestinecampaign.org/).
- Stop Arming Israel is a coalition of Campaign Against Arms Trade, War on Want and the Palestine Solidarity Campaign. Their website address is www.stoparmingisrael.org/.