

The Horror of the Palestine Conflict

By

William R. Polk

Day after day, the world press has been witness to an unending tragedy played out in what was once the Mandate of Palestine. Palestinians and Israelis have each assumed roles that were cast in history. Neither believes it can do other than play preordained characters. As each acts, the other reacts. The litany of fury is well known to us all. Worse, the very playing of the drama has formed the actors and the generations that will succeed them. But as we watch the day-to-day atrocities, we are apt to forget how the drama was written. And without that knowledge, our chances of changing the script are doomed to failure.

I

Minus the particular elements of horror in the current fighting, all this was predictable -- and was predicted -- nearly a century ago. Two short statements in the British record and two in the Zionist record tell almost enough to plot the whole story right up to today. First, the British:

- 1) When in 1917 the British Cabinet was debating the text of the Balfour Declaration which proposed the creation of a "national home" for the Jews in Palestine, Lord Kitchener dryly remarked that he was sure that the existing Arab population of Palestine "will not be content as hewers of wood and drawers of water" for the incoming Jewish settlers.
- 2) Lord Balfour (in whose name the Balfour Declaration, was issued) commented that "Whatever deference should be paid to the views of those...700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land, [we] do not propose, as I understand the matter, to consult them."

Why did the British interest themselves in the Zionist cause? Using the issue of Palestine, British policy focused on four targets:

First, to try to persuade the Jewish members of the German army to desert, British aircraft dropped millions of copies of a propaganda sheet in Yiddish over Germany and Austria proclaiming that "the Allies are giving the land of Israel to the people of Israel...Remember! An Allied victory means the Jewish peoples return to Zion."

Second, believing that the new leaders of the Russian Revolution were nearly all Jewish, the British courted them with essentially the same promise. Their aim was to persuade the Russians not to make a separate peace with Germany. The British knew that

the Russians were sick of the war and desperately wanted out; if they got out, the large German forces engaged there would be free to join the attack on the Western front.

In Russia British policy was misdirected: while some of the leading Russian revolutionaries in 1917 were Jewish, at least the Communists among them regarded Zionism as a rival ideology. The Russians opted out of the war.

In Germany they were closer to the mark: Jews were not only leaders of industry, finance and intellectual life, but played a major role in the wartime armed forces. Proportional to their number, German Jewish officers won about five times as many decorations for valor in combat as their Protestant and Catholic counterparts. Without them, the British hoped that the German and Austrian armies might collapse; with them actively supporting Germany, it feared that the anticipated offensive of that year might succeed.

Third, with their economy choked by the U-boat blockade and their finances depleted, the British desperately sought American assistance. It was not forthcoming. In 1917, anti-British feeling was strong in America. The American press was full of attacks on British actions against neutral (especially American) shipping, and relations between the governments were often acrimonious. President Wilson's principal adviser, Colonel House, thought that, at best, the American government would not aid the Allies, and might take an even stronger anti-British stand. The British were told, however, that the leaders of the American Jewish community might influence the American government and privately were in a position to make large credits available. As Prime Minister Lloyd George noted, "their aid in this respect would have a special value when the Allies had almost exhausted the gold and marketable securities available for American purchases" of food and war supplies. But, the British were told, American Jews were generally pro-German. As a part of the campaign to win them over, Lord Rothschild, to whom the Balfour Declaration was addressed, was encouraged to "bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation."

Fourth, in the Middle East, publication of the Balfour Declaration was banned by military censorship. There, the British sought to undermine Germany's powerful ally, the Ottoman Empire by encouraging its Arab subjects to join the Allied side. The most famous of these overtures is an exchange of letters known as the "Hussein-McMahon Correspondence." On Palestine it was somewhat vague. Other declarations, including the "Declaration to the Seven," promised "to recognize the complete and sovereign independence of the Arabs." Further, the British commander-in-chief, Lord Allenby, was instructed to declare that "the Allies were in honour bound to endeavour to reach a settlement in accordance with the wishes of the peoples." Lastly, and more or less in accordance with President Woodrow Wilson's call for the "self-determination of peoples," a joint Anglo-French declaration of November 7, 1918 affirmed a policy for "the establishment of national governments and administrations deriving their authority from the initiative and free choice of the indigenous populations..."

Obviously, these four policy objectives were in conflict.

The British were aware of that. As Lord Balfour wrote secretly to the Cabinet, "In short, so far as Palestine is concerned, the Powers have made no statement of fact which is not admittedly wrong, and no declaration of policy which, at least in letter, they have not always intended to violate."

So much for the initial British actions. I turn now to the early Jewish assessments and actions.

On the Jewish side, actions have been determined by the Zionist assessment of the Palestinians and what should be done about them. These assessments and decisions were clear from the beginning of the Zionist movement in the Nineteenth century.

- 1) One of the early fathers of Zionism, Israel Zangwill, coined a description of the Palestine issue that has permeated Zionism and Jewish thought ever since: Palestine was "The land without people for the people without land."

In fact, of course, Palestine then contained somewhat more than 700,000 Arabic-speaking inhabitants, most of whom were small farmers living in villages. Given the technology of the time and the financial resources of the people, the country was fairly crowded. Yet, even now, otherwise reasonably informed people echo Zangwill's slogan. Just a few days ago, in the *International Herald Tribune*, a writer commented that to talk of Arab "Palestinians" was mere propaganda. That, generally, has been the line taken by Israeli governments. The non-Jews were newcomers, gypsies, nomads, Jordanians or, as Arthur Koestler called them, echoing the Bible, "thieves in the night." Prime Minister Golda Meir went even further: there weren't any Palestinians except for the Jews.

- 2) As soon as the Zionists had a good look at Palestine, they realized that the only way to make the land be "without people" was to drive out the inhabitants. Vladimir Jabotinsky, the father of "muscular Zionism" and the ideological mentor of Israeli prime ministers Begin, Shamir, Netanyahu and Sharon, told the 1936 British Royal Commission which was trying to find a way to satisfy both Jews and Arabs, that the Zionists would never be satisfied with a part of Palestine -- "We cannot. We never can. Should we swear to you we would be satisfied, it would be a lie."

Although not personally a follower of Jabotinsky, Prime Minister Ben Gurion adopted his position. Prophesizing today's events, he said that "after we constitute a large force...we will cancel the partition of the country and we will expand through [out] the Land of Israel." In 1937, he wrote, "We must expel the Arabs and take their places." Israel, under his leadership, partly implemented that policy in the events leading up to the creation of the state in 1948 as Israeli government records, now published, clearly show. As Ben Gurion then bluntly put it, the Palestinian Arabs "have only one function left to them, to run away."

Against these four positions, two British and two Zionist, the Arabs of Palestine began resisting in 1921 and in growing intensity are still resisting. Lord Curzon had been right: the Palestinians were not prepared be merely “hewers of wood and drawers of water” for the incoming Jewish settlers. Like other Asian and African peoples, they have fought for their land and their persons with every weapon they could find including the weapon of the weak, terrorism. In resorting to terrorism, they have adopted the course taken by the Çeçens, the Irish, the Basques, the Jews and dozens of other ethnic groups.

Fighting for nationhood is a dangerous business. Imperial powers were strong; colonial peoples were weak, fragmented, ill-prepared and often unarmed. In the process we have seen unfold in Ireland, Russia, India, the Middle East, North Africa, South Africa and the Pacific, hundreds of thousands of people were killed or maimed; property was destroyed; lives, blighted. So what, one must ask are the forces sufficient to drive these two peoples, the Jews and the Palestinians, to the current tragedy? First, the Jews.

II

The Jews have suffered generation after generation, from long before the Nazi onslaught, from western anti-semitism. Sometimes it was merely humiliating (as it often was in America in the 1930s); at other times, it penalized them (as the English did in that document most of us consider the first proclamation of civil rights, the Magna Carta); the Crusades, we should remember, began with attacks on European Jews; English, French, German and other European communities squeezed Jews and then expelled them as Spain did in that memorable year, 1492. Russia set off a mass migration with its pogroms in the Nineteenth century. So what then happened to them?

With our eyes focused today on ugly aspects of Muslim fundamentalism, we should find it ironic that, before the creation of Israel, Jews often fled from Christian countries to the relatively tolerant and safe Muslim lands, as the Spanish Jews did when they were expelled from Christian Spain.

The well-attested historical fact, whether we like it or not, is that anti-Semitism is a Western disease. Our disease. Not an Arab or a Muslim disease.

Although the Oriental Jews did not suffer anything even remotely comparable to the Russian pogroms or the Nazi Holocaust, these events have become firmly fixed in the Israeli national myth and so shape the thought of all Israelis today. Indeed, if anything, the Oriental Jews are even more strongly nationalistic than the Ashkenazi or European Jews. All, with their very different backgrounds, have developed an “embattled” cast of mind in reaction to actual or assumed anti-Semitism.

From a Jewish perspective, anti-Semitism is a pervasive disease. As one of the early Zionists wrote, Jews “carry anti-Semitism on their backs wherever they go.” Consequently, many Jews concluded that whether or not they are tolerated as they are in many lands or even assimilated as they were in pre-Nazi Germany, they would never be

safe until they had their own country. I think that is a prudent conclusion. No one, I think, should wish to deny them this right.

Why did the Zionists pick Palestine for that country? The father of Zionism, Theodore Herzl, put it clearly – the different factions within the Jewish community could agree on no other place; had they taken up the offers they had from the British (for Uganda or Cyprus), the Japanese (for part of Manchuria), or parts of Australia, Argentina or Angola, Herzl feared, the Zionist movement would have shattered. Only Palestine exercised the sort of mystical attraction that could unite them. “For Palestine,” as Chaim Weizmann soberly told a startled audience at the Council on Foreign Relations, “we have a covenant with God.”

This, to an outsider, is doubly astonishing: first of all, Palestine is hardly the Garden of Eden. Even after nearly a century of extravagant investment, it is not high on the list of attractive real estate.

And, second, even for those Jews who assert their Biblical “roots,” the connection is at best distant: it compares to the relationship of Americans to Britain in Roman times. Two thousand or so years are a very long time in human affairs. Moreover, just as most Americans are not descendants of English settlers but have been “Englished” by education, many of the Russian Jews are not Hebrew, not Semitic, but have been Judaized by religion. Many are descendants of Khazar (and perhaps other) converts to Judaism. The Khazars became Jews like my (English/Norman/Scots/French etc.) ancestors became Christians. Yet, even for them, or perhaps especially for them, Israel was so imbedded in myth and religion and so impacted by the terrible threat of anti-Semitism as to transcend all contrary notions.

The “promised land” – which the British had promised to both Jews and Arabs -- had to be their state. Israel could not be, as the British intended, just a “national home,” an enclave in someone else's state. Only if they fully and completely owned and controlled it could it assuage their desperate need for a sanctuary.

III

At the time of the American intervention in the First World War, President Woodrow Wilson raised the issue of nationhood. He recognized the power of the concept of the “nation.” In a world in which effective identity comes from membership in a nation and security comes from the embodiment of the nation in statehood, no other objective has been even remotely as desperately sought. Still today as in Wilson’s time and before, dozens of ethnic groups have fought – and many died – for it. Wilson took the argument above political strategy to political morality: “self-determination of peoples” he saw as a fundamental right as well as a strategic imperative in the quest for peace. Much attention then focused on the Balkans but Wilson saw “self-determination” in broad terms: people everywhere should have that right.

Angrily observing the “old game of grab” in the Middle East, where Britain, France, Greece and Italy were cynically engaged in carving up the map, Wilson attempted to get the major powers at the Paris Peace Conference to appoint a committee of inquiry to find out what the inhabitants wanted. When neither Britain nor France would agree, he appointed an American committee (the “King Crane Commission”) to go to the Middle East to ask essentially, “who do you say you are and what do you want to be?” By the time its report was ready, Wilson had left Paris, was stricken by the illness that later killed him and never read the Commission’s report.

Finding that the British and French were reneging on their promises to allow “the establishment of national governments and administrations deriving their authority from the initiative and free choice of the indigenous populations...” the Arab delegation leader, Amir Faisal appealed (after Wilson’s departure) to the head of the American delegation, Frank Polk, to act as arbitrator. Frank Polk, who had to struggle constantly with the British and French even to be admitted to the key meetings of the Conference, demurred and urged the Arab delegates to seek other allies, particularly the Zionists. They should jointly put pressure on the British and French.

Meanwhile, the United States Senate had begun to take the stance against involvement in world affairs that would keep America out of the League of Nations and sweepingly repudiated almost everything for which President Wilson had stood. Among them, of course, was “self- determination of peoples.” Again, an irony. It became the accepted wisdom of the “realist” school of international affairs experts that Wilson’s program was either merely eyewash (at best) or (at worst) dangerous naïveté. This is not the place to argue the issue, but it seems to me that what was wrong with it was only that it was never really applied: it was listened to (and acted upon) by peoples struggling for national fulfillment but was stifled, wherever possible, by those who might have granted the right to hold peaceful plebiscites. For the discrepancy between assertion and fulfillment we (and others in many parts of the world, including the Israelis) are paying -- and exacting a heavy price.

Prevented from peacefully asserting their desire for nationhood, the Palestinians began in 1921 their struggle, first against the British colonial authorities (then termed the “Mandate Government of Palestine”) and subsequently against incoming Jewish settlers.

The British reacted by reconsidering their promises and their actions. Under the chairmanship of Winston Churchill, then British Colonial Secretary, they announced that both Arab fears and Jewish hopes were exaggerated: the British intent was not “to create a wholly Jewish Palestine.” Rather they proposed to create a bi-national state with each community to be represented by an “Agency” under the Mandate government. This, of course, satisfied neither Jews nor Arabs. The Arabs, unwisely as it turned out, rejected it and so lost the experience, limited though it would have been, of creating and working within national institutions. Meanwhile, the Jews, more wisely, accepted and turned their “agency” into a proto-government.

Both Jews and Arabs focused their attention on Jewish immigration. The Jews were still a small minority of the population. (They would not reach one-third until the end of the Second World War.) For them immigration numbers were the index of hope; for the Arabs, of fear. After an initial influx, immigration slowed in the late 1920s and in 1927 more Jews left than arrived. Then, from 1929, as economic conditions deteriorated in Europe, Jewish migration increased. With it increased Arab fear and hostility. In that year, a number of Zionists organized a demonstration at the Wailing Wall where they raised the Zionist flag and sang the Zionist anthem. As in Sharon's election ploy in 2001, this touched off Muslim riots.

As they always did, the British appointed a commission to investigate. It reported that "The Arabs have come to see in the Jewish immigrant not only a menace to their livelihood but a possible overlord of the future..."

Embodying the findings of the commission in a Government "white paper," the British decided to halt immigration at least temporarily. The Arabs were elated, but the Zionists counterattacked politically in London. The British government backed down. Immigration would continue. Remarkably, the Prime Minister announced his policy of supporting the creation of the "national home" not in Parliament but in a letter to *The Times*.

Shocked by what they termed "the black letter," canceling the white paper, the Arabs attempted a nation-wide boycott. It was the first of their many failures of unified action.

What happened next was far from Palestine. In Germany. With Hitler's rise to power and the establishment of the Nazi regime, large numbers of Jews prudently decided to emigrate. With most other refuges, including the United States which was then highly restrictive, almost completely closed to them, many made their ways to Palestine. Between 1932 and 1936, the Jewish population of Palestine quadrupled.

In 1936, 137 Arab senior officials and judges foresaw the loss of their country and were angered that they were being forced to pay the price of European brutality. In a memorandum, they warned the government that "the Arab population of all classes, creeds and occupations is animated by a profound sense of injustice done to them...As a result, the Arabs have been driven into a state verging on despair..." That despair animated strikes, terrorist attacks and, soon, civil war.

The British reacted with tactics similar to those we are watching today: 20,000 British soldiers were rushed in, mass arrests were carried out, Arab leaders were interned in a concentration camp, houses of "suspects" or their relatives were blown up and whole villages were destroyed. The British refused outside mediation, but appointed another commission to investigate.

That commission concluded that "An irrepressible conflict has arisen between two national communities within the narrow bounds of one small country...In the Arab

picture the Jews could only occupy the place they occupied in Arab Egypt or Arab Spain [something like the “national home” concept, a protected minority]. The Arabs would be as much outside the Jewish picture as the Canaanites in the old land of Israel. The National Home...cannot be half-national...This conflict was inherent in the situation from the outset...The conflict will go on, the gulf between Arabs and Jews will widen.”

What to do?

The Royal Commission came up with the first of the many attempts to create peace by dividing the two communities: partition Palestine. To the British, that seemed as sensible as the saying, “half a loaf is better than no bread.” To both the Arabs and the Jews, partition seemed subversion of their nationhood: Arab attacks on the British continued and, to counterbalance them, the British both exiled the prominent Arab leaders and armed 5,000 Jews. In short order, however, the Jews also began attacking the government and Arab targets. During 1938, there were over 5,000 “incidents of violence” including over a thousand by Arabs and Jews against the government. A solution of some sort seemed imperative. A new commission was established to plan a partition. It decided that partition was virtually impossible: a Jewish state of sufficient size to be viable would also have an Arab majority.

That dilemma, already evident in 1938, has been a nightmare for Zionists ever since. The reasons are simple: first, Israel was never intended by them to be a bi-national state; it was always meant to be a wholly Jewish state; second, even a minority of Arabs would grow faster than the Jews and ultimately might become a majority. This worry became a reality with even the remnant of the Arab community left in Israel after the creation of the state in 1948. Ultimately, an Arab minority would pose the dilemma, which in fact is evident today, that Israel would have to choose between being a multi-ethnic democracy or a quasi-theological exclusive state. As we shall see, expulsion of the Arabs was always, certainly by the middle of the 1930s, regarded as the most attractive option.

As both the Arab and Jewish communities continued their attacks on the British, the German army marched into Poland on September 1, 1939. In reaction to this wholly new and larger dimension of threat, some 21,000 Jews and 8,000 Arabs enlisted in various branches of the British army. Both communities, however, were ambivalent: both fought *for* the Allied cause but *against* the British in Palestine. Outside of Palestine, some of the Arab leaders, notably the mufti of Jerusalem flirted with the Axis which, with the help of Vichy France, briefly took an active role in Arab affairs and meanwhile, as the war receded, after the British victory at El Alamein in 1942, Stern Gang attacks on the British increased. In 1944 Jewish terrorists attempted to assassinate the British High Commissioner. Then, the Stern Gang did assassinate a British minister of state in Cairo.

As the war in Europe ended, the United States, for the first time, joined the British in seeking a solution to the dilemma of Palestine. But, this time, the focus was not on Palestine or its people but on Europe: what would happen to the survivors of the holocaust? The Jewish Agency did not wait for the answer but immediately began a

widespread campaign of terror, blowing up bridges, buildings, railway stations and kidnapping British personnel. In reprisal, the British published intercepted telegrams showing that this time it was not just the renegade terrorist groups, Irgun Zvai Leumi and Stern, that carried out the attacks but the Jewish “government.” The British then arrested and interned about 700 Jews and seized huge stockpiles of arms and explosives. In reprisal, the Irgun blew up the largest building in Jerusalem, the King David hotel.

All this was, practically speaking, a side show: the irresistible demand was to help the displaced Jews of Europe. And with no one else willing to give them sanctuary, Palestine had to be opened to them. That became the position of the American government, and the British, anxious to get out of the mess they had created, acquiesced. A new committee, this time nominally a United Nations group, UNSCOP, drew up another partition plan but one with “economic union.” The best UNSCOP could come up with showed the dilemma: the Arab state would have an Arab population of 725,000 and a Jewish population of 10,000 while the Jewish state would have 498,000 Jews and 407,000 Arabs. Jerusalem was to be internationalized and would contain 100,000 Jews and 105,000 Arabs. The Jewish state was estimated to have revenues about three times that of the Arab state.

Needless-to-say, neither community was happy with this proposal. The Zionists took some comfort from the elevation of their status from a “national home” to statehood even if their state was not to a very large one. The Arabs were adamantly opposed. Curiously, in retrospect, the Russians approved the “aspirations of the Jews to establish their own state” which, Andrei Gromyko caustically pointed out at the United Nations, was due to the “fact that no western European state has been able to ensure the defense of the elementary rights of the Jewish people.”

It should also be admitted that it never occurred to UNSCOP, the Americans or the British that those who had caused the problem should pay for it: no one suggested that an “Israel” should be created in Germany. And, as determined as the Americans were that Israel be created, no American politician suggested that Americans would be willing to donate some part of our land. It is difficult to avoid the charge that our altruism was cheap at the price: we were quite content to let someone else pick up the tab for Western anti-Semitism.

Meanwhile, in Palestine the rival communities prepared for war.

IV

Before the Zionists could deal with the Arab inhabitants, they had to force the British to leave Palestine. They could not be sure that the British would, in fact, leave or that something like the UNSCOP deal would be implemented. So they began to recruit the Jews who had served in various armed forces during the war and quickly were able to add to the existing armed forces of Haganah, Palmah, Irgun and Stern men who had been trained to break codes and intercept communications (two of the most crucial abilities in which they have excelled ever since), fly aircraft, make or adapt equipment they looted from British stores or purchased in Europe. Most important, they had to increase the

“critical mass” of Jews on the ground. The numbers were all against them as the UNSCOP plan made plain. To build up the Jewish population, they organized the so-called “secret roads” program that brought tens of thousands of immigrants into the country. And they kept up their attack on the British who, belatedly, were trying to keep the lid on the pot they had set upon the fire.

To push the British out was primarily the work of terrorist groups inspired by Vladimir Jabotinsky and led by Menachem Begin. Begin, who was born in Brest-Litovsk and educated in Poland had entered “violent politics” in the Polish Zionist youth organization, Betar, and came to Palestine with a Polish army contingent. There he helped to found the Irgun Zvai Leumi and its off-shoot the Stern Gang. Having murdered a British minister of state, his associates went on to murder the United Nations representative, Count Folke Bernadotte, and various others. Because of them, the period between 1945 and the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948 was one of the most violent times of “peace” ever recorded. I spent two months there in late 1946 and early 1947. Almost every night, machine-gun fire mingled with the explosion of bombs; streets were reduced to narrow pathways through thickets of barbed wire. Heavily armed British troops of the parachute division were everywhere. As in all such confrontations, the cost was enormous: never mind the killed and wounded, the British could not afford the upkeep of their army. They had to get out. May 1, 1948 was their deadline.

Evacuation, of course, took time. So the British began to withdraw in 1947. As area by area they pulled back, the Zionist armed-force-in-being, the Haganah, was ready to move in, flanked and helped by the terrorist organizations. Their targets shifted from the British to the Palestinians. When the Palestinians attempted to assert their control over the villages and towns, or to defend themselves, they were overwhelmed with “aggressive defense.” As the Israeli historian, Benny Morris, quotes Israeli sources, leaders of the Haganah determined “to reply [to any challenge] with a decisive blow, destruction of the place or chasing out the inhabitants and taking their place.” Words like “levelling,” “uprooting,” “evicting,” “destroying” figure in all the Israeli records. Some are even more frank: The Haganah Intelligence Service recommended, Morris quoted from the Israeli government archives, “The village [of Sukreir] should be destroyed completely and some males from the same village should be murdered.” Shortly thereafter, Haganah took the Arab village of Deir Yassin. When Haganah turned over the village to the Irgun, the Irgun massacred the entire population and widely publicized its action to promote terror among other villages and thus to encourage their inhabitants to abandon their homes and lands. Through this and other programs, such as “Operation Broom,” hundreds of thousands of Arab villagers and townsmen were literally “swept” out of the land.

(As an aside, I should mention that to write that Israel had deliberately sought to expel the Palestinians, when I was working on my first book on Palestine in 1955, was certain to get one charged with anti-Semitism. That was then a less public but almost as damaging a charge as to be called a Communist. Now, as I say, it is freely admitted in Israel although still somewhat taboo in America.)

The Arabs endured nothing so dramatic as the Holocaust and nothing so disruptive as anti-Semitism. While they are Semites, cousins of the Jews, unlike the Jews, they have generally lived in communities of their own people. What they began to experience, generations ago, was a very different form of suppression: imperialism. During centuries of rule by others, all Arabs including the Palestinians generally lost the capacity, even the memory, of conducting their own affairs. And this has left scars that affect even the most sophisticated today.

The predominant memory of those who lived in Palestine was the neighborhood of villages. If asked what his "nation" was, a villager customarily would give the name of his village. It was the village that gave him identity. Indeed, identification of man with land was almost mystical. The terrace walls of one's father, grandfather and great grandfather, the fields in which one played as a child and in which one's ancestors were buried, the localities where saints have been venerated and besought, all these gave rise to emotions virtually impossible for Western industrial (and virtually nomadic) man to fathom. Before their diaspora, villagers built their genealogies physically into the layout of their neighborhoods. Placement of dwellings corresponded to family trees. Consequently, they had not only the sort of feeling most of us have about our homes, temporary as they are to many of us, but a more intense, more permanent, more "living" sense of relationship to the earth. Even in the cities, people recreated their villages as autonomous neighborhoods. Over the years, I have talked with scores of individuals who have described for me rooms, houses, gardens, orchards, streets as vividly as though they were seeing them at that moment. And, in retrospect and in the mind's eye, these scenes have taken on the extra, superabundant emotional dimension, a melancholy longing, that only loss can bring. The idea that these people did not love their land or were wandering gypsies for whom any place is as good as another is not only nonsense, but is, itself an ugly variety of disparagement comparable to anti-Semitism.

This extraordinary, to the Western mind, commitment to a piece of earth, in part, explains why when they had to "camp out" in the surrounding countries (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan) or the miserable ghetto of Gaza, or even when they found jobs and houses elsewhere, the Palestinians never felt "at home" but always dreamed of Palestine. For them, "Palestine" took on a mystical meaning akin to that professed by the early Zionists: it was not just a land of milk and honey. It was a mythic land, a land of the heart.

In their diaspora, the Palestinians were encouraged in this feeling by the surrounding Arab states. This has been a source of derision as viewed by outside observers. Why did Saudi Arabia, so rich, so empty, not simply take in the Palestinians? Or Syria, Lebanon or Egypt? They are, after all, fellow Arabs.

The answers are both simple and complex. The simple answers are that when most of the Palestinians became refugees in 1948-1949, the surrounding states were particularly poor, with large numbers of unemployed people. Their weak economies were nearly drowned with landless farmers. That was what most of the Palestinians were,

landless farmers. Every economic study, every proposed aid program during most of the last half century has recognized this fundamental point.

Beyond economic considerations were political impulses. The governments of the neighboring Arab states that had grown out of a generation or more of Western domination were weak, often corrupt and rarely represented any sort of national consensus. Vaingloriously, they had declared themselves responsible for the protection of their Palestinian “brothers.” When tested in the 1948-1949 war, they failed miserably. Indeed, their performance was ludicrous. Some of the troops were not even fully armed, many had only parts of their uniforms. At least one unit marched into the fray with most of the soldiers barefoot. One by one, they were roundly defeated by the better armed, more numerous and unified Jewish forces. Like other governments, even in sophisticated Europe, they tried to deny the magnitude of their defeats: the cheap solution was to proclaim that the Palestinian diaspora was just temporary.

For their own reasons, the refugees accepted this dissimulation. They were as reluctant to give up their dream of returning as the Zionists had been to give up their far more abstract vision of “return.” More practically and immediately, they were reluctant to settle in the places to which they had fled. Many were Christian and did not wish to become permanent residents of Islamic states. They wanted, above all, to go home: emotionally, even after years, exile was a temporary condition. As memories were embellished, no current reality could compare with the vision of what had been. The “promised land” became not just an abstract ideal but a nearly concrete vision.

And, as time passed, the Arab “hosts” exploited the refugees for cheap labor while keeping them at arms length. They, in turn, criticized their hosts. A noted Palestinian wrote, “In the face of the enemy the Arabs were not a state, but petty states; groups, not a nation...[with the result that] nothing remained except the offal and bones.”

These and other words stung and were, often imprudently, repeated so that the governments and peoples of other Arab states came almost to hate the Palestinians: their very existence was a reminder of the shame of weakness and failure. As I have documented elsewhere, shame is perhaps the most powerful emotion in Arab culture and to ease, if not completely to avoid, it became the political imperative of the Arab regimes. This was to be accomplished by living with the fiction that the war was not *really* over, that the refugees, huddled in makeshift camps in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egyptian-controlled Gaza, living on \$27 a year per person worth of food, clothing and shelter, were there only temporarily. The United Nations fell in with this fiction by passing a resolution affirming the refugees’ right to return.

Few were fooled even when they wanted to be. One after another the Arab regimes were overthrown by men who promised to restore Arab dignity. Most were simply opportunists, but a few made serious attempts at reform. Foremost among them, of course, was Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt. Nasser was no intellectual giant and certainly no democrat, but he did understand that if his country was to advance, to come out of the shade of imperialism into the sunlight of dignity and independence, it had to

deal with the domestic causes of its backwardness. So, as he felt his way into power, he embarked upon a program of land reform, educational enrichment and industrialization. None of these worked satisfactorily. Certainly none brought Egypt toward Israel's standard.

Why is that? Given their apparent numerical superiority, their relatively vast size and the inflow of wealth from oil, why have the Arab states performed so poorly in comparison to the Israelis? This is not merely a rhetorical question: it is significant in explaining the kind of war the Palestinians are now fighting against the Israelis *and* the kind of war the Israelis are now fighting against the Palestinians. It therefore deserves careful examination.

Begin with land: a look at the map shows how huge the Arab world is in comparison to Israel. Then deduct from the map the essentially unusable portions where there is no water. Egypt, for example, then ceases to be the size of Texas and New Mexico and becomes much smaller than tiny West Virginia; Jordan declines from Indiana to even smaller Rhode Island; Iraq ceases to be the size of California and becomes also the size of West Virginia; and Saudi Arabia, the territorial giant, as big as Alaska and California combined, dwindles to Maryland.

Land is, of course, only the foundation: except for oil-related activity, which has pumped into the area enormous amounts of money, there are few natural resources with which to build much on the land. Such industry as has been created is small-scale, mostly uneconomic, heavily dependent upon subsidies.

Like industry, technical skills are still few, new and mostly not of "world class." My favorite statistic comes from Iraq: when I first went there in 1952, Iraq had 5 mechanical engineers. That figure can be paralleled at various levels of the society of the several Arab countries. While student enrollments have risen, on average, about ten or twelve times since the end of the Second World War, quality has generally declined or at least not kept pace. What is most interesting, I find, is among the general work force. There we find something analogous to land utilization: without going into great detail, my studies indicate an "effective" component, that is a group oriented toward modern technology, of less than 5% of the total. Thus, Egypt, for example, with a population of 60 or so million, would have something on the order of a million and a quarter of what I have called "new men." Similar discounts can be made for the population of other countries. Relatively speaking enormous strides have been made there and elsewhere, as they have been in India, Pakistan, Iran and other "emerging" countries, but the results are still meager.

Naturally, or at least politically, the governments of the other Arabic-speaking countries in the Middle East have focused their energies on their own citizens. "The Arabs," despite attempts to create a sense of pan-Arab nationalism, are really quite distinct and separate peoples. There is less that unites the Palestinians to the Saudi Arabians, for example, than gives me a sense of fellow feeling with Australians or South Africans. We both speak more or less mutually intelligible dialects of a mother language,

and watch the same movies, but our way of life is quite distinct, and our sense of loyalty is engaged in different directions for different purposes. Probably few Americans feel closer to Australia than to Mexico or Poland. So the Saudis, Iraqis, Egyptians, Kuwaitis and Lebanese, were engaged with their own, separate, affairs.

For years, most Palestinians sat in enforced idleness under ragged tents or in huts made out of battered tin drums in camps and waited. Divided religiously, socially and geographically, they had no national institutions or recognized national leaders. This was their time in the wilderness. The refugee mentality, as Moses found, dies slowly. It was not until the late 1960s, after a generation had grown up in their diaspora, that they, like the Israelis in the parable of Abraham, coalesced into something like a nation.

The contrast with Israel could hardly be more dramatic: even for those Jews who did not initially benefit from exposure to the advanced, technological society of Europe (as many of the so-called "Oriental Jews" did not), Israel has created a very sophisticated milieu. This is evident at every turn: Israel is a modern industrial state with an income far higher than any other Middle Eastern state. It not only has more engineers, physicists, chemists, doctors and technicians but can even field a larger army than any of its neighbors. It is culturally a European country physically present in the Middle East. Its universities are world class, its industry is highly developed (was even able, with help from South Africa and France, to manufacture nuclear bombs as early as 1960), and its land was manured with that best of all fertilizers, money. Israel has received from the United States grants totaling approximately \$100 billion (\$100,000,000,000) or an endowment roughly \$33,000 for every Israeli man, woman and child. America not only opened its purse but its universities, its industries, its government contracts and its heart to Israel.

Nothing, of course, like any of these things happened to the Palestinians -- or indeed to any other underdeveloped nation. This is not to argue that these things should have happened to the Palestinians (or should not have happened to the Israelis), but the fact that they happened the way that they did goes some way to explain the disparity of the capacities of the two communities.

VI

This disparity was made evident in the wars fought between the Arabs and Israel in 1956, 1967 and 1973. It is not necessary or useful to go into detail on these: in each case, the Arabs were outclassed and defeated decisively. Israel had capacities simply of a different order – always a generation ahead of even the most “advanced” of the Arabs. Not only did it have sophisticated command and control techniques, including ground control for aircraft, but it could increase its army from a standing force of no more than 50,000 to 300,000 in about 48 hours. I once was taken by the Israeli government to visit a tank brigade south of Tel Aviv that was maintained by only 200-300 men but could be put into action with 3,000 men in a few hours.

The Israeli army was, of course, supplied and also backed up – with arms occasionally as in 1973 being delivered to the battlefield – by the United States.

Even when Israel and the United States disagreed, the American government backed Israel to the hilt. The acid test came (and was quickly passed) in the Israeli attempt to sink the United States Naval ship, *Liberty*, in 1967. The story illustrates several aspects of Israeli policy and Israeli-American relations but is still little known. It was so tightly restricted at the time that although I was working in President Johnson's office in the White House, I did not learn of it until much later. Apparently, the key intercept tapes were kept secret for the next 35 years.

The American government had been concerned with the build-up of Soviet armaments in Egypt and sent the electronics surveillance ship, *Liberty*, and several Air Force C-130 and Navy EC-121M aircraft to monitor radio traffic in the Eastern Mediterranean. Based primarily on U.S. National Security Agency records, supplemented by CIA, DOD and other American papers and Israeli government papers, James Bamford recounts (in *Body of Secrets*, New York: Doubleday, 2001, 185 ff) what happened.

Shortly after Israel attacked Egyptian forces in the Sinai, it cut off and took prisoner a large number of Egyptian troops. At El Arish, just 13 miles from the *Liberty*, the Israeli army began killing their prisoners, whose hands were bound behind their backs, and discussed doing so on the radio. As Bamford wrote, “the *Liberty* had suddenly trespassed into a private horror.” Egyptian soldiers were not the only casualties: a convoy of UN Indian peacekeeping soldiers was attacked and a number of the soldiers were killed and UN headquarters in Gaza, flying the UN flag, was “blasted” by Israeli tanks. Bamford quotes confirming evidence from the Israeli military historian Aryeh Yitzhaki. A number of other instances of such killings were later confirmed. Bamford believes that the Israelis were afraid that the *Liberty* had intercepted evidence of these acts and determined to destroy the evidence, i.e. the *Liberty*.

The Israelis first observed the *Liberty* during the morning of June 8 from an air force Noratlas NORD 2501. The ship was identified at Israeli naval headquarters not only from naval reference books but by seeing its name painted in large letters on both sides of the hull with the American flag flying on the mast. All morning, the *Liberty* was under constant observation, being circled according to the deck officer, thirteen times. It was the only ship in the area. At 12:05 three motor torpedo boats and a number of Mirage IIIC jet fighters set out to attack it: in the first run, they killed a number of the crew and shot out most of the radio gear. However, the ship got in a “mayday” distress call to the Sixth Fleet. The EC-121 high overhead recorded one of the Israeli pilots saying, “Great, wonderful, she's burning.” Israeli ground control headquarters asked, “Menachem, is he screwing her?” He was, indeed: “A later analysis would show 821 separate hits on the hull and superstructure...[and proclaim that] it would take a squadron of fifteen or more planes to do such damage...” Then the serious slaughter began with napalm and thousand-pound bombs. The captain managed to hoist the largest American flag, a so-called “holiday ensign,” just before the three torpedo boats attacked with

cannon and five torpedoes. (Fortunately, only one hit.) The boats then systematically destroyed the life rafts and life boats still aboard and those that had been launched in the sea. As one sailor later said, "It was obvious that no one was meant to survive this assault." Another said, "If you jumped overboard, the way these people were attacking us, we knew they would shoot us in the water."

At 3:28 PM (local time), the aircraft carriers USS *Saratoga* and *America* scrambled aircraft and National Security Council director Walt Rostow advised President Johnson of the attack. As Bamford recounts, "According to NSA documents classified top secret/umbra [a code classification beyond Top Secret]...[NSA Deputy Director Louis] Tordella was told that some senior officials in Washington wanted above all to protect Israel from embarrassment...that consideration was then being given to sink[ing] the *Liberty* in order that newspaper men would be unable to photograph her and thus inflame public opinion against the Israelis."

Meanwhile the US naval attaché in Tel Aviv was summoned to Israeli Defense Force Headquarter and there was told that Israel had attacked the *Liberty* "in error." "Shortly thereafter," wrote Bamford, "a total news ban was ordered by the Pentagon." At 5:29 PM (at the site of the *Liberty*) Johnson instructed the Joint Chiefs of Staff to recall the fighter protection "while the *Liberty* still lay smoldering, sinking, fearful of another attack, without aid, and with its decks covered with the dead, the dying and the wounded."

The aftermath was that 32 crewmen were already dead and two more would shortly die; 171 others were wounded; with his navigational equipment shot out and having little power, Commander William McGonagle worked his ship out to sea. Over sixteen hours later, near Crete, two American destroyers finally arrived. When the ship reached Malta on June 14, "A total news blackout was imposed. Crewmembers were threatened with courts-martial and jail time if they ever breathed a word of the episode to anyone – including family members and even fellow crewmembers." Two years later, after crew members obtained legal counsel, Israel paid \$20,000 each to the wounded and \$100,000 each to the families of the dead. The ship commander was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor but Johnson would not personally present it or allow it to be given at the customary White House ceremony; it was given McGonagle more or less secretly at the Washington Navy Yard.

Other than the drama and the pain, what is the long-term import of this incident? If I were an Israeli policy planner, as I have been an American policy planner, I would discount all future American protests and warnings. Apparently, that message has not been lost on Prime Minister Sharon today. I am not privy to what is going on between the American and Israeli governments, but judging from what I have seen of diplomatic negotiations, I would guess that the Bush administration has told Sharon he had better finish the job in Palestine quickly so as not to embarrass the Americans. That guess appears confirmed by the rather leisurely timetable of the trip to Israel of the Secretary of State. The headline in the *International Herald Tribune* reads "Defying U.S., Sharon vows to press ahead; Bush repeats demand."

It is, of course, true that Israelis by and large believe themselves justified in their acts although there is a significant and growing number who question at least the form of their actions. At some point, however, even the most hawkish will have to ask themselves what the reaction abroad would be if they were not Jewish. Certainly what they are now doing in the occupied territories would have brought crowds of protesters into the streets of every major city in the world if the actions had been taken by South Africans, the British, the French or the Americans. Sooner or later the reservoir of good will – or guilt over western treatment of the Jews which is, after all, a sort of reverse anti-Semitism – will dissipate and Israel will be treated as a “normal” state among states. The Palestinians have long proclaimed their dispute as one “of oppressed people against a strong, colonialistic, oppressive state.” In other words, a Jewish David has become the Israeli Goliath. If others begin to see a transformation of this kind, sympathy for “David” will not be so easily accorded “Goliath.”

I turn now to the Palestinians.

VII

As I mentioned above, during the generation that the Palestinian refugees passed in their diaspora, the years from 1949 to roughly 1968, their lives and their attitudes were profoundly changed. That was the period in which the younger, more aggressive men and women decided to take up arms to assert their rights to Palestine and to nationhood. As General Yahosafat Harkabi, former chief of Israeli military intelligence, wrote (in “The Position of the Palestinians in the Israel-Arab Conflict and their National Covenant, 1968), life in the camps helped bring about a new group identity; curiously but understandably, in that environment the refugees were influenced by the Zionist example. Those who became the new leaders made “efforts to mould a Palestinian people although it had no territory. In this also the Jews, as a people without territory and government, served as an example.” Life in the camps had radicalized the refugees and convinced them, as Harkabi wrote, to adopt a “war of national liberation...[which] will take on the form of guerrilla warfare.”

As Harkabi and others (including I) have pointed out, the failure of the Arab states in the 1967 war threw the issue of Palestine back into the hands of the Palestinians.

Just as the Zionists have never renounced their claim (symbolized on their flag) to all of Zion – from the sea to the Euphrates – so the Palestinians in their 1968 National Covenant (Article 2) claimed all of what was included in the original mandate of Palestine and specified that all Jews who were living permanently there before 1917 will be considered Palestinians. Others would have to leave. Most important, the Covenant argued that (Article 9) “Armed struggle is the only way to liberate Palestine [and]...to exercise its right of self-determination in it and sovereignty over it.”

To attempt to accomplish these objectives, groups of Palestinians formed a bewildering array of semi-secret groups of widely differing political and paramilitary attributes. I cannot here analyze them; some were led by “crazies” or psychopaths like

Abu Nidal. Others were tiny off-shoots or splinters. Some lasted only a short time. The main group that emerged was FATAH which was led by the Gaza engineer Yassar Arafat.

Arafat today is clearly a spent force, corrupt, tyrannical and deeply unpopular among the Palestinians, but in his earlier days he was a dynamic and persuasive leader. He almost single-handedly created FATAH despite opposition from most of the Arab governments. In fact, Arafat had to flee Egypt in 1954, but Syria gave it some initial support. Its model was the Algerian FLN. The Algerians with never more than 13,000 *militants* had won a war, not battles, but a war against 485,000 French troops, a million European settlers and about 2 million of their own pro-French fellow countrymen. Also influential was the Irish Republican Army which, with even fewer resources, was battling the British. Like them, FATAH focused its activities on publications or propaganda and on actions by “freedom fighters” or *Fedayeen*. Its central thesis was that the armed struggle itself would serve to create a Palestinian revolution out of which would emerge the Palestinian nation.

While the Palestinians sought to pattern themselves on other national groups, they had to adapt to two different problems: on the one hand, Jews were accorded a special status throughout the Western world. Those who had marched and demonstrated against South African and Rhodesian whites and French *colons* in Algeria did not protest Israeli actions, even when, like the French in Algeria, they were torturing or murdering prisoners and harrasing civilians with racial taunts, cutting off water and sewage facilities and confiscating land. On the other hand, whereas the British were clearly alien in Ireland as the French were in Algeria, the Israelis were operating in Israel. So the Palestinians, particularly the more violent of the groups, had to act against the Israelis outside Israel. That meant hijackings, murders and bombings in places where non-Israelis lived and worked and so made the world community regard them as pariahs. That is a view they have never overcome. It accounts, I think, for much of the indifference toward the fate of the Palestinians in the current tragic war.

However, in the aftermath of the Camp David accords of 1978, only FATAH remained a candidate to embody the Palestine Authority.

VIII

From 1921, commission after commission, arbitrator after arbitrator, agent after agent has been searching for some means of ending the tragic and seemingly unending conflict. As some of you know, I have been involved in some of them and did, successfully, negotiate a ceasefire.

Almost everything has been tried – dividing the waters of the River Jordan (so the states would not clash over that vital resource, the American “Johnston plan”), aid programs to create a labor shortage (so the refugees could be absorbed, the American “Lilenthal Plan”), state-to-state negotiations (so as to by-pass the Palestinians, the Carter-Begin-Sadat “Camp David Negotiation”), redrawing frontiers (various British, United

Nations and American plans), honoring the form of the right of return while making it unattractive (the American “Johnson plan”).

Almost, that is, except for the one thing that the Israelis realized from the beginning was central to Zionism and the Palestinians now realize is central to their future: the embodiment of the nation in a state. Unless or until this issue is faced and resolved, I do not think there is any significant hope for peace.

IX

Instead, Israel has moved determinedly toward what it believes will bring it security. It has done so with two policies: the first is the settler policy or as the Israelis have described it, “creating facts.” This policy has resulted in the planting of scores of Jewish settlements interlaced with roadways and checkpoints on the occupied West Bank. In his first year in office, Sharon oversaw the building of 34 new settlements in the West Bank.

While this policy is a direct violation of international law and in defiance of a number of United Nations resolutions, it has created not only a physical presence that would be difficult to dismantle but also a political position that would be virtually suicidal for any Israeli leader to oppose. Recall that when the French found it impossible to end the Algerian war unless they withdrew, it was only the enormous prestige of De Gaulle that made withdrawal possible. I see no comparable statesmen on the Israeli scene today and no motivation so strong as that which impelled the French action.

The second policy is the application of force. Israel is not alone in trying this policy. The Russians have fought the Çeçens for over two centuries; the British have been fighting the Irish since the time of Henry VIII; India has been holding down Kashmir since 1947; we fought and killed large numbers of Muslim Filipinos before the First World War. Israel has fought the Palestinians for over seventy years.

None of these was successful. None brought security, much less peace.

What did work, where it was applied, was recognition of what Woodrow Wilson urged, “self-determination of peoples.” Examples are, sadly, not many but are significant. When Britain allowed the Republic of Ireland to come into existence, it became an ally; when Britain allowed India to become free, it became a leader of the Commonwealth; when France recognized Algeria, it became a major trading partner. Americans might remember that after the scars of our Revolution and other attempts at bullying America had healed, America ultimately became, as Tony Blair loves to repeat, Britain’s closest friend.

Scars of the current Israeli attack on the Palestinians are certainly going to take a long time to heal; they will not heal as long as they are picked off with senseless, racially ugly, violent actions. Healing will require both time and separation. But, steps can be taken soon that will, at least, move in the right direction. Progress will certainly be slow;

there will be set-backs; but, surprisingly, I think that the Israelis and Palestinians will ultimately come to recognize elements of kinship, shared definitions of a better life and, perhaps, some sense of mutual interest. And, of course, much that has now been destroyed must be rebuilt and much more added to that to make Palestine a viable state. That is the easy part; it is the rebuilding of hope, trust and respect that are hard.

This is vague, very long-term and far from the horror of the events of today. The only virtue it has is that any other course of action will lead to war-without-end that will brutalize, still further, both the Palestinians and the Israelis and cause misery beyond reckoning.

Those who care about humanity cannot espouse such a course.

© William R. Polk, April 7, 2003