

The Palestine Tragedy

By

William R. Polk

More than any other problem in the world today, "Palestine" is a complex and lethal tangle of hatreds and yearnings, hypocrisy and altruism, fears and ambitions, nightmares and dreams, cruelty and generosity. The ways in which these impulses and actions have intermingled for nearly a century have baffled efforts to achieve a sustainable peace and have caused unimaginable suffering to millions of people. It has become obvious that they cannot be treated separately or just in terms of current events. To understand them, as the first step toward solving them, one must trace their trajectories back over the years. That is the purpose of this introductory article to *LaVanguardia's* "Dossier." Separate articles will pick up the various themes and follow them into the dilemmas faced today by Palestinians, Israelis and their foreign supporters and enemies. I begin with the Palestinians.

* * *

For thousands of years, the inhabitants of Palestine were villagers -- farmers, craftsmen and merchants. Most were speakers of Aramaic and from the second century most were Christians. In the seventh century, the followers of Muhammad invaded the country and made Palestine a part of their empire. It was several centuries, however, before their language, Arabic, replaced Aramaic and their religion, Islam, attracted a significant part of the population. Far from forcing their religion or culture on the population "with the sword," as the popular image has it, the invaders sought to prevent conversion because keeping them apart was to the invaders' interest: non-Muslims paid higher taxes. Under Islamic rule, they were allowed to govern themselves, practice their religions, run their own schools, avoid military service, and apportion their taxes among themselves.

Palestine was a small and relatively unimportant part of successive Arab kingdoms and caliphates. What gave it importance was the legendary city of Jerusalem: Jerusalem was of mythic value to Jews, Christians and Muslims. To reclaim it for Christianity Pope Urban II proclaimed the First Crusade in 1095. Ironically, however, the Crusade began in Europe with violent attacks on resident Jews and when the soldiers reached Jerusalem their first victims were the local Christians who were often slaughtered even in their churches. Thus, while "crusade" means a "noble cause" to Westerners, it has quite another meaning for Jews and Muslims.

The Crusades left no lasting impression in Palestine but were gradually replaced by an entirely different relationship between the Middle East and Europe: commerce. Jewish communities in Spain and southern France and Christian merchants in Genoa and Venice enriched themselves and their communities bringing the luxuries of the Orient across the Mediterranean. When the secret of silk production was discovered, the Levant became the source for one of the major new industries of Europe. And we learn from the names of the popular textiles during the Middle Ages and Renaissance of the skill and creativity of the Middle Easterners. Until modern times, Europeans admired and studied Muslim and Oriental Christian culture.

What changed this relationship was the surge of European industry in the early nineteenth century. Within a few years, the Palestinians and other Middle Easterners could no longer sell their manufactured goods in Europe and even began to import basic needs from Europe. As

tastes changed, they put aside the locally made turban in favor of the fez, which they imported from France, and began drinking Indian tea out of glasses made in Bohemia. Coffee drinkers began to buy their beans from France. The Baghdad-to-Damascus caravan made its last trip in 1857. If Middle Easterners traveled by sea they had to do so on English or French steamers because steam ships, in the words of a British consul, had "annihilated the local coasting trade."

So, relative to Europe, Palestine declined in wealth and technology but retained a stable and satisfying traditional way of life. By then a province of the Ottoman empire, Palestine had no sense of nationhood – a concept for which Arabic did not have a meaningful word. As throughout Asia, Africa and even much of Europe, villages remained the nexus of all social and cultural life. Outside influences were felt but did not overwhelm the nature of local life. What did change was that the Ottoman empire, in its attempt to "modernize," created in the 1880s a new concept of land ownership in which the Palestinian "real tillers of the soil," as the contemporary Zionist historian Richard Gottheil called them, who had "owned" it by immemorial tradition legally lost their rights to absentee officials and rich merchants. The farmers did not even know of this change for half a century; they kept on plowing and harvesting. But what the Ottomans decreed shaped Palestinian-Zionist relations down to our own times.

Given the available resources and technology, Palestine in 1900 was heavily populated. In fact, as the early Zionist leader Israel Zangwill pointed out, it was then twice as densely populated as the United States. Yet it was Zangwill who coined the expression which would permeate Zionist thought for the next century: Palestine, he wrote, was "The land without a people for a people without a land."

* * *

To understand the Jewish experience, we must leave Palestine. Most Jews from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century lived in what became Russia and Poland. Many, no one knows what proportion of these people, were not of Semitic background but were actually converts who had become Jewish when the Turkic Khazar empire adopted Judaism as its state religion in the ninth century. In North Africa, similarly, groups of Berbers converted to Judaism. Conversion to the three great monotheistic religions was common: the barbarian invaders of the Roman empire had mostly converted to Christianity while Palestinians and others were converting to Islam.

Smaller Jewish communities were scattered across Western Europe and particularly in Spain; some even reached India and China. The Jews traditionally have divided themselves into *Ashkenazi* (East European), *Sephardic* (Spanish) and Oriental (*Bene Ha-Hizrah*) communities. In Palestine, Jews were in a small minority – perhaps 10,000 in the middle of the nineteenth century, rising to roughly 50,000 by the First World War -- and were mainly religious transients. Nine out of ten of the settlers who arrived left.

In Europe, Jews were usually segregated and discriminated against and occasionally driven out or massacred but were often tolerated because they were useful. Many manufactures were virtually Jewish monopolies and, since the Church forbade Christians from usury, the Jews, who were generally forbidden to own land, became money lenders to kings and nobles. The 1215 Magna Carta, which most of us think of as the foundation of English liberty, was in part designed to cancel debts owed by the nobility to Jews. Many cities locked their Jewish inhabitants away in *ghettos* (a word given us by the Venetians). They were occasionally expelled as they were, *en masse*, in 1492 from Spain from whence they went to the more tolerant Islamic lands. But in most of Europe they survived and grew in number. Paradoxically, in the nineteenth century as

they achieved more civil liberties in Western Europe, they were more persecuted in Eastern Europe. In Russia, they had long been restricted in residence and from about 1820 were subjected to vicious, government-inspired *pogroms*. These attacks reached a crescendo following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 and set off the first large-scale migration to Western Europe.

Life for Jews in Austria, Germany, England, France, and America -- to which 160,000 Jews migrated in the 1880s -- was far richer and more secure than in Poland or Russia, but as one of the early Zionists lamented, since Jews “carry anti-Semitism on their backs wherever they go,” they could never feel secure. Another early Zionist wrote that Jews “have walked the earth as a ghost, and, as all ghosts do, have inspired fear and dislike...Jews have suffered from being strangers in a double sense: strangers in the lands to which they have been driven, and more than strangers because they had no land of their own in which they and others could feel that they were completely at home.” Increasingly, they wanted a place of their own.

Many Europeans were pleased with the idea of the Jews leaving. Several eccentric Englishmen advocated a sort of Zionism early in the nineteenth century – much as some Christian fundamentalists do today – with the proviso that when they got to the Holy Land they would become Christians. As the century wore on, anti-Semitism increased in power and virulence: in 1881, 255,000 Germans petitioned Chancellor Bismarck to disenfranchise the resident Jews and prevent further immigration. In France an organization was created to boycott Jewish banks; then in 1895 a French Jewish officer, Alfred Dreyfus, was accused to treason, convicted, and condemned to Devils Island. His case and the French attitude toward it – with French soldiers shouting “Death to the Jews” when Dreyfus was stripped of his uniform – convinced Theodor Herzl that Jews could never hope to be assimilated into Western society and must have their own nation-state. But, for years, Herzl was strongly opposed by the recognized leaders of the Jewish communities of Western Europe who wanted assimilation rather than separation. “The Zionist movement,” as the contemporary leader of the Anglo Jewish Association, Claude Montefiore remarked, “was caused by anti-Semitism.”

Anti-Semitism was not the only motivation for non-Jewish support of Zionism. The British thought that European Jews could enrich their empire so in 1903 they offered the Zionist movement 6,000 square miles of what became Kenya – paying as little attention to the native Kikuyu inhabitants as they later would to the Palestinians. Other schemes were mooted for “national homes” in what became Iraq, Sinai, Argentina, and Manchuria. One “autonomous Jewish republic” was actually created in 1928 by the Soviet Union in Birobijan. But it was the First World War that gave the Zionist movement its chance in Palestine.

* * *

In 1917, Britain was near collapse. The government was effectively bankrupt and its army on the Western front was suffering horrific and unsustainable casualties. All that saved it from defeat was that the Russians tied down about half the German army on the Eastern Front. But in March 1917, the Russian army mutinied and the government of the tsars abdicated. Although the provisional “republican” government promised to continue the war, its inability to do so quickly became clear. Soldiers in the tens of thousands simply walked home. To speed up the Russian collapse, the German government expedited the return to Russia of the Bolshevik leaders from their exile in Switzerland. Since they were known to favor withdrawal from the war, the British feared that the Germans would soon be able to throw the whole weight of their army against the Western front.

Desperate, the British government hit on an audacious plan. Believing that the Russian revolutionaries were Jewish, that a large part of the German and Austrian officer corps was Jewish, and that the then pro-German American Jews controlled American finance, it sought to win their support. To try to persuade the Jewish officers of the German and Austrian armies to desert and Russian Jews to encourage their government to stay in the war, the British dropped millions of copies of a propaganda sheet in Yiddish by airplane over Germany and Austria proclaiming, “the Allies are giving the land of Israel to the people of Israel...An Allied victory means the Jewish peoples return to Zion.” Simultaneously, the British government issued the Balfour Declaration with essentially the same message which it asked Lord Rothschild to transmit to the Western Jewish communities. At the time, Palestine, which of course Britain did not then “own,” seemed a small price to pay to rescue the empire, but those declarations were to shape the conflict between Arabs and Jews, Palestinians and Zionists, down to the present day.

The British never lost sight of the strategic value of Palestine. It was placed to be a guardian of the Suez canal which was the central linchpin of the shortest route from Europe to the main British possession, India, where the bulk of the empire’s army was located. It was also as a potential base for troop movement into Iraq which the British thought would have oil – which the Royal Navy needed as fuel and the British government needed for revenue. With Egypt already on the edge of a nationalist rebellion and Aden too remote, Palestine could become, or so military planners hoped, the ideal garrison for the Middle East.

* * *

While the major and most urgent danger Britain faced in 1917 was in Europe, Britain was also an Afro-Asian empire with scores of millions of Muslim subjects who, it knew, would oppose the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. So the British hid the Balfour Declaration under military censorship and simultaneously made similar promises to the Arabs, proclaiming that “the Allies were in honor bound to endeavor to reach a [peace] settlement in accordance with the wishes of the peoples” and promising that it would establish “national governments and administrations deriving their authority from the initiative and free choice of the indigenous populations.”

While the British publicly denied inconsistency, its deception was deliberate. Lord Balfour, in a then-secret demarche to the British Cabinet, admitted, “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.”

This attitude outraged President Woodrow Wilson. He regarded the British and French approaches to the peace settlement as immoral – a violation of his cardinal principle calling for the “self determination of peoples” -- and sent an American fact-finding mission to the Middle East to find out what the natives wanted. But, by the time the King-Crane Commission was ready to report, he had left Paris and was desperately ill. He never saw the report. Without Wilson, the American delegation at the Peace Conference was weakened and since America had not declared war on the Ottoman Empire it exercised no influence on former Ottoman territories; so when the Arabs appealed for American support, they were advised to make the best deal they could with the Zionists. America had washed its hands, at least temporarily, of Palestine.

The British, of course, could not afford to do so. They had conquered the Middle East and intended to stay there. How to do so was the baffling problem they would face for the next 30 years. Their answer was to place themselves in the unstable middle of conflicting aspirations

of the Zionists and the Palestinians, first favoring one and then the other, next pulling back from one and then from the other, and eventually fighting both.

While Palestine was still under their military government, the British admitted some 5,000 Jewish settlers and proclaimed that Hebrew, which virtually no one then used for non-religious purposes, was an official language. When in 1920 Palestine became a British colony, euphemistically called a “Mandate” of the newly formed League of Nations, the British put it under an English Zionist High Commissioner. He immediately issued regulations that promoted the sale of lands farmed by the Palestinians but registered in the name of absentee, often foreign, landlords to the Jewish National Fund and let in a second group of 16,500 Jewish immigrants. These were Britain’s initial pro-Zionist steps.

The Palestinians were furious. Although lacking in national institutions and relatively naïve politically, they realized the implications of the imposition of an alien community into their midst. In May 1921 occurred the first of what would be an unending series of acts of Arab resistance.

Alarmed, Britain sought to mollify the Arabs with non- or even anti-Zionist moves. The then Colonial Secretary, Winston Churchill, rebuked the Zionists for their stated ambition to make “Palestine as Jewish as England was English” and proclaimed that Britain had never intended “to create a wholly Jewish Palestine” but only to allow the formation of a “Jewish National Home...*in Palestine.*” But colonial administration allowed further Jewish immigration, land purchases, and the creation of a virtual government known as the Jewish Agency. Increasingly alarmed, the Palestinians engaged in boycotts, riots and sporadic attacks on the Mandate government and on the Jewish immigrants. As it did when faced with native revolt in its other colonies, Britain temporized and appointed a series of study groups which culminated in a Royal Commission in 1936.

* * *

Meanwhile the two communities had become more determined. On the Jewish side, as soon as the Zionists had a good look at Palestine, they realized that the only way to make it “the land without a people” was to drive out the inhabitants. David Ben Gurion later said publicly what many Zionists were already saying privately, “we must expel the Arabs and take their places.”

On the Palestinian side, there was a growing sense of desperation. Already in 1929, an official inquiry concluded 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.” But, the Palestinians never had much more of a chance than other colonial peoples in Africa and Asia to whom the English, French, Dutch, Portuguese, and Belgians were doing similar things. They were technologically relatively backward and were divided religiously between Muslims and Christians and geographically among scores of villages and towns. Socially also, they had little in common: a few were nomads, most were farmers and some were sophisticated urbanites. They had no national institutions or recognized national leaders. In all these ways, they contrasted with the growing European Jewish community. But in small groups they began to resist.

The British reacted furiously. They quickly moved into Palestine a large part of their then small army, some 20,000 men and, as they had done to the Indians and the Irish and were to do to the Kenyans, they commenced a brutal “search and destroy” campaign; they incarcerated protestors, dynamited hundreds of houses, bombed or machine-gunned groups of people and even

shot handcuffed prisoners. Their policy rested on the belief that “Asians and Africans only understand force.” Militarily, they easily cowed the Palestinians who, at the behest of the (British-appointed) leaders of the surrounding Arab states, gave up. But the costly counterinsurgency program convinced the British government that it had to find a cheaper solution than military repression. That was to be the role of the 1936 Royal Commission. Shocked by what they found, the commissioners set out the grim reality in these words:

“...an irrepressible conflict has arisen between two national communities within the narrow bounds of one small country. About 1,000,000 Arabs are in strife, open or latent, with some 400,000 Jews. There is no common ground between them...Their cultural and social life, their ways of thought and conduct, are as incompatible as their national aspirations...This conflict was inherent in the situation from the outset. The terms of the Mandate tended to confirm it [and] the conflict has grown steadily more bitter...it seems probable that the situation, bad as it now is, will grow worse. The conflict will go on, the gulf between Arabs and Jews will widen.”

So the commissioners suggested that Palestine be partitioned: the Jews were to get the smaller portion (which, as their land expert advised them, contained almost all of the fertile lands) while the Arabs were to get the larger portion (which had little fertile land). Jerusalem and a corridor to the sea were to be internationalized. For the next half century, frontiers would be repeatedly studied, redrawn, discussed and fought over. They still are.

Possible Map insertion: the 1936 Royal Commission plan

Neither side was willing to consider what to the British seemed practical – in the English folk saying, “Half a loaf is better than no bread.” Both absolutely believed then, and still today do, the rightness of their cause. As the future president of Israel, Chaim Weizmann, told a startled audience at the (American) Council on Foreign Relations, “we have a covenant with God.” Vladimir Jabotinsky (who was the ideological mentor of the later Israeli prime ministers Begin, Shamir, Netanyahu and Sharon) told the Commissioners that the Zionists would never be satisfied with just a part of Palestine, and another later prime minister, David Ben Gurion, summed up the Zionist position thus, “after we constitute a large force...we will cancel the partition of the country and we will expand through [out] the Land of Israel...[then the Palestinians will] have only one function left to them, to run away.”

On their side, a group of 137 Palestinian intellectuals who had joined the administration tried petitioning the British to recognize that Palestine was their home and to stress its importance to their two religions, Islam and Christianity, writing 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...” But increasingly, their people were disillusioned with petitions and took to the streets and hills. Their defeated resistance movement revived and organized first a general strike and then a true insurgency, making 438 attacks on British officials, troops and installations in 1937 and 5,708 in 1938.

The British reacted as before: incipient Palestinian national organizations were broken up and prominent Palestinians were deported or jailed. Eventually, some 2,500 Arabs were imprisoned and at least a thousand were killed. To help repress the Arabs, the British armed some 5,000 Jews as paramilitary police. But British-Jewish collaboration lasted only a few months before Jews too began attacking both the Arabs and the British. To understand the next events we must again leave Palestine and return to Europe.

* * *

Following the rise to power of the Nazis in 1932, the position of Jews in Germany rapidly worsened. After the passage of the 1935 Nürnberg Laws (which deprived Jews of citizenship and forbade intermarriage) and particularly after the November 1938 police-inspired *Kristallnacht* attacks on Jews and the nationwide fine of 20% levied on Jewish owned property, it became clear that Jews had no future in Germany. The German Jews were desperate. But many doors, including American, British and French doors, were closed against them: European countries did not want them; they shamefully closed their eyes to the coming catastrophe.

Even before these tragic events, some Jews began to organize paramilitary forces. The first of these was in Palestine itself where, early in the First World War under British patronage, they created a 900-man unit known as the Zion Mule Corps. Then, as mentioned above, the British created a Jewish paramilitary police on the eve of the Second World War and also allowed the Jewish Agency to maintain an unofficial “army” known as the *Haganah*. What the British aimed to achieve was both Arab acquiescence (without the need for further British troops) and Jewish cooperation in British policy.

What the British thought of as cooperation, the Zionists regarded as *Havlagah* (restraint). But, as Nazi violence in Europe increased, some Jews in Palestine came to see restraint as absolutely intolerable and formed a terrorist organization known as Irgun *Zvai Leumi*. Irgun, which ironically had its roots in the Zion Mule Corps, began to attack the British. Meanwhile, in Poland, inspired ideologically by Vladimir Jabotinsky and organizationally by the various European Fascist youth organizations -- even copying their use of colored shirts; theirs being green -- a radical movement known as *Betar* announced a program that came to be known as “muscular Zionism.” Its leader, Menachem Begin, was arrested by the Soviets but released after the German attack on Russia and allowed to emigrate to Palestine where he was to become a leader of Irgun and later Israel’s prime minister.

The outbreak of the Second World War caused radical but temporary shifts in the positions of both Arabs and Jews. Most Arabs retained a grudging respect for Britain and affection for England, and about 8,000 Palestinians enlisted in the British forces. But the senior Islamic official, the Grand Mufti, saw Germany as the “enemy of the enemy” and, like the Indian nationalist leader Subhas Chandra Bose, threw in his lot with the Germans. Jews, of course, could not deal with the Germans and about 21,000 enlisted with the British. Irgun temporarily ceased attacking the British. Its decision, however, caused about 200 members split off to form a new, more violent organization, known for its leader Abraham Stern as the “Stern Group” or *Lohamei Heru Israel* (LEHI), which continued to attack the British throughout the war. By the middle of the war, 1943, Irgun reversed itself and also began to attack the British, attempting to murder the High Commissioner, Sir Harold MacMichael, and actually killing the senior British representative in the Middle East, Minister of State Lord Moyne, in November 1944. An infuriated Winston Churchill denounced the Zionists in Parliament and, following his lead, the Palestine administration swung (slightly) against Zionism. This in turn provoked a major terrorist attack in July 1946, the blowing up of Jerusalem’s King David Hotel where senior British officials were housed and killing nearly a hundred Arabs, Englishmen, and Jews.

The end of the war in Europe released the several hundred thousand survivors of the western European Jewish community, many of whom made their ways with Zionist help by “secret roads” to Palestine. The British tried to stop them, but the United States favored the Jewish migration and openly espoused the Zionist cause. President Harry Truman demanded that the British immediately permit the entry of 100,000 Jewish immigrants. Not to be outdone, his Republican rival called for hundreds of thousands. It never occurred to them or, apparently, to

any American or European statesmen that those who had harmed them, the Germans, should be made to create a sanctuary in, say, Bavaria; nor did any of them offer any of their own lands to the displaced Jews. Hypocritically, all decided to make the Palestinians pay for what the Europeans had done. Just as the British in 1917, so in 1946 they thought Palestine a small price to pay for what Europeans had done or wanted to achieve. And the Zionists, naturally, took advantage of this attitude even though, as they realized, it was often motivated by anti-Semitism.

Meanwhile, in Palestine, the conflict between the British and the Jews reached the level of outright war. By the time of my first visit to Palestine in 1946, the streets of all the cities were rivers of barbed wire, the nights were punctuated by bomb blasts and machinegun fire, and about a hundred thousand heavily armed British troops were massed in the tiny country. Pitched battles were fought daily while security forces rounded up and locked away large numbers of Jewish suspects in prison camps, hanged a few convicted terrorists, and tried to slow down or prevent further Jewish immigration.

As in all insurgencies, the occupying army, particularly the paratroop division, came to hate the insurgents, but the British, who had found it so easy to engage in brutal suppression of Arabs, felt inhibited in dealing with the Jews who, after all, were not a dark-skinned colonial people but white Europeans. The Jews helped them by publicly maintaining that the Jewish Agency and its official army, the Haganah, were not involved with Irgun and LEHI terrorists. This fiction fell away when in June 1946, British soldiers raided the Jewish Agency where they found documents showing that the Haganah, Irgun, and LEHI operated jointly under its command and “will act only according to our plan.” In dozens of other sites the British found stores of arms and explosives. The British won that battle but had already lost the war: a year later, they decided that they could no longer control Palestine and would turn it over to the United Nations.

The attempt to use the United Nations to mediate the conflict was denounced by Irgun as a veil covering British policy. There could be no mediation, Irgun proclaimed. Mediation would just be a new form of force, which in its manifesto # 7 threatened “will be answered with force. That is the law of war. That is the imperative of Hebrew statesmanship. We shall fulfill them both.” In any event, Irgun proclaimed, the Englishman is just another species of Nazi and “Our suffering...brings joy to his Nazi heart.” In a June 1947 memorandum to the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), Irgun charged that “Britain has encouraged and participated in the greatest of all crimes in human history: the extermination of the Jewish people in Europe.” Worse, they charged that the British did so “in order that we should go down to perdition and our name be blotted out from under God’s heaven... war is the hope, the only hope.”

Behind their words and acts, Irgun was addressing a bitter memory: European Jews, they charged, “had gone into the Nazi gas ovens like sheep.” No more! The Israeli Jews had become a new breed: “Yes, our blood has been shed again in the hills of Galilee. But it is not the blood of slaughtered ones, but the blood of fighters and heroes, which raises new heroism, bringing freedom to the Homeland and a life of honour to our people.” Fighting was seen as virtually rebirth, a truly mystical event. With this widely-shared mindset, there could be no mediation, no compromise, no restraint; any action that would help the Zionist cause was moral, indeed imperative. This was the attitude that the Zionists would take into the next phase of the conflict. Two years later, on September 17, 1948, when the United Nations representative, Count Folke Bernadotte of Sweden, attempted to broker a ceasefire, he was murdered by members of LEHI.

* * *

Meanwhile, the British began to get out of Palestine. In their final actions, they turned over to the Haganah most of their arms dumps while vaguely urging the Jewish soldiers not to use them. Much has been written about what happened next during the 1948-1949 war, and much of that was just propaganda. Those who doubted it were denounced as anti-Semites. Now, younger Israeli historians with access to official records have given a truer account. In essence, they emphasize two major points: first, the Jewish Agency knew exactly what it was doing and had the means to effect its policy; its forces actually outnumbered their Arab opponents as well as being better trained, better organized and better equipped, and, second, the war was less about battles than about population removal – the aim was to clear the Palestinians out of Palestine. Persuasion, propaganda and terror were the means of action. While other attacks had occurred, the sleepy little village of Deir Yasin was the most famous massacre in the days before the end of the British Mandate. It was overwhelmed on April 9, 1948.

Deir Yasin was trying to stay out of the conflict and had even driven out a band of Arab militants who wanted to use it as a base. But Irgun was entrusted with the task of seizing the village. It was helped by the Jewish Agency's official army, the Haganah. When the village was taken, Irgun robbed, stripped, and murdered the entire population, men, women, and children, and called a press conference to announce its action and to proclaim that this was just the beginning of a campaign throughout Palestine and neighboring Trans-Jordan. The lurid story, of course, circulated all over Palestine. If such terrible events could happen to Deir Yasin, what village was safe?

The answer the Israeli historian Benny Morris found was “none.” He reported from official Israeli records many cases of rape, at least 24 massacres as well as cases of arbitrary shootings of civilians and other war crimes. He says that “Apparently, various officers who took part in the operation [code named “Operation Broom” to sweep away the Palestinians] understood that the expulsion order they received permitted them to do these deeds in order to encourage the population to take to the roads.” Morris found that words like “leveling,” “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.” He commented that “no one was punished for these acts of murder. Ben-Gurion silenced the matter. He covered up for the officers who did the massacres...Ben-Gurion was right. If he had not done what he did, a state would not have come into being. That has to be clear. It is impossible to evade it. Without the uprooting of the Palestinians, a Jewish state would not have arisen here...There are circumstances in history that justify ethnic cleansing...That was the situation. That is what Zionism faced. A Jewish state would not have come into being without the uprooting of 700,000 Palestinians.”

Possible Map insertion: 1947 UN Resolution on Partition

So it was that the Palestine refugee problem was created. Not all Palestinians fled. About 130-180 thousand stayed in what became Israel to become Israeli citizens, a quarter of a million were living in Gaza, half a million in the Jordanian-occupied West Bank, and roughly one hundred thousand each in Lebanon and Syria, mostly in camps hastily established by the United Nations and fed, housed, given medical care and some schooling on less than \$27 per person per annum, living in, as the UN documents described their fate, a “deplorable material and moral situation.”

* * *

It is this condition and the long series of events that preceded it, that form the seedbed for the attitudes on both sides of this tragic conflict. This history has shaped the Middle East in the last half century. These events and attitudes shape Israeli policy on the “ingathering of Jews” and on the threat of the creation of a bi-national state and they have shaped the attitudes and actions of group after group of insurgents and today’s HAMAS. They form the legacy which we must view with a clear eye if we wish to understand the obstacles -- and then somehow clear them away -- to find the road to peace.

© William R. Polk, June 5, 2007.