

Moving Stories: 200

Responding to the crisis in the occupied Palestinian territory: January 2017

2017 – Year of Anniversaries for Palestine.

The Long Shadow of the Balfour Declaration

In May 1916, the Ottoman Empire was collapsing. Diplomats from the imperial powers, Sir Mark Sykes of Britain and Georges Picot of France, secretly carved out the Middle East region with an arbitrary 'line in the sand'. It became the basis of the League of Nations plan of July 1922 – with consequences still felt today.

It was the **Balfour Declaration** of 2nd November 1917, whose centenary will be marked this year that determined the fate of the people of Palestine, the land between the river Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea. Sir Arthur Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary, wrote to Lord Rothschild and stated that the British government views "with favour the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine ... it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine..."

It was a major triumph for Zionist diplomacy, since Jews in Palestine were less than 10% of the population, the majority being Arab. For Palestinians today, the Balfour Declaration marks the beginning of their 'century of suffering', but for Jewish people it is a landmark on the way to the creation of the State of Israel. At the time, the Balfour Declaration provoked considerable opposition among other prominent Jews in the UK and also among Jewish leaders in Jerusalem.

In the first week of November 1917, British forces finally defeated Ottoman forces in Gaza, entering Jerusalem in December 1917. They controlled Palestine through the British Mandate for 25 years. During those years, Jewish immigration

began to increase dramatically and Britain, which had made conflicting promises to Jewish and Arab leaders, struggled to maintain control. The Peel Commission report of 1937 was the first of several plans since then to divide the land between Jews and Palestinians.

In 1947, Britain was war-weary and the question of Palestine was taken to the United Nations, which devised a partition plan that assigned the greater part of the land to the Jewish minority. Resolution 181, the UN Partition Plan of November 29th 1947, remains a significant date for Palestinians but it was rapidly overtaken by events. Jewish fighters gained the upper hand and declared their 'Independence' with a new state on 15th May 1948 which they named Israel, on 78% of the whole land. The 'State of Israel' was granted UN membership a year later; Palestine's application has continued to be vetoed by the US ever since.

Mass immigration of Jewish refugees to Palestine, escaping the horrific events of the war years, was seen by many as a 'rightful' claim to their own land at a time of great persecution. "A land without a people for a people without a land" was a widely adopted Zionist slogan, even though the reality of centuries-long settled and indigenous people in Palestine was widely known. Almost three-quarters of a million Palestinians were forced out of their homeland in 1947 and 1948; many remain stateless, in refugee camps in neighbouring countries to this day. (See *'The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine'*, by the Israeli historian Ilan Pappé)

UNRWA, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees was created in 1949 to deal with what was hoped would be a temporary problem. At the end of the Six Day War in June

1967, there were further expulsions of Palestinians as Israel wrested control from Jordan of the whole of the West Bank, including Jerusalem. June 11th 2017 will mark **50 years of military occupation** for the Palestinian people.

For a few years the Oslo Peace Accords of 1993 onwards appeared to bring hope of a peaceful settlement, but the main issues of borders, Jerusalem, refugees and security were never finalized – and Israel expanded its West Bank settlements. Western powers repeatedly denounce Israel's settlements on Palestinian land as illegal, but are unwilling to go further and make Israel accountable. Serious peace proposals and offers from Palestinians and the Arab world have been ignored.

Ten years of Israel's blockade of Gaza will also be marked in June 2017. Hamas had won the national Palestinian election in 2006 but was largely confined to the Gaza Strip. Israel which had evacuated the small number of Jewish Israeli settlers from Gaza in August 2005, cooperated with Egypt in imposing a siege on Gaza which it denounced as being run by a 'terrorist group'. Since then, this once fertile and beautiful area of the land has been devastated by 3 major Israeli attacks, the last one in the summer of 2014. Gaza has a young population of almost 2 million people living in some of the worst conditions on earth. The UN has declared that without relief Gaza will become uninhabitable by 2020.

As we enter 2017 with a new US Presidency, the issue of Israel and Palestine and their future as two peoples living in the same land remains bitterly divisive – not least among Jews in the United States, Britain and elsewhere. Their own long and fractured history has left its mark on the Palestinian people too. Palestinian Christians have appealed for support to fellow Christians through the Kairos Document of 2009. *'The General's Son'* by the Israeli writer Miko Peled is helpful in outlining the narratives of suffering of

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both peoples, which must be acknowledged if they are ever to live in harmony together.

The UK government will "neither celebrate nor apologise" for the Balfour Declaration said Foreign Office minister Tobias Ellwood in a parliamentary debate on 16th November 2016.

I believe that we should use this anniversary year to say that it is 'Time for Palestine' – for the second half of this Declaration to be implemented through recognition of the Palestinian people's right to independence and a secure homeland.

Margaret Derbyshire

It is hoped we will have articles on the different anniversaries in 2017, from other perspectives, during the year.

Prayer

Living God, today we pray for all the people in Israel/Palestine, that they may discover the courage and humility to build peace together. We pray for those with power and influence, that they will seek a just path of reconciliation. We pray for those who are in dire need today, that their human rights to food and shelter and medical care will be urgently met. We pray for international aid agencies as they work to bring hope to devastated communities. We pray for all those in the land who have suffered over the years of struggle: for those who are grieving for their lost loved ones; for those whose lives have been changed forever because of injuries, mental and physical; and for those who bear the lasting scars of being displaced and dispossessed. Living God, their pain is so great today. Bring your healing, bring your peace, to Israel/Palestine.

For our Muslim brothers and sisters in Israel/Palestine this day, we pray *Assalamu Alaikum*. For our Jewish brothers and sisters in Israel/Palestine this day, we pray *Shalom Aleichem*. For our Christian brothers and sisters in Israel/Palestine, this day, we pray *The Peace of Christ*. Amen

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