

History of Israel

Thursday, 22 October 1998

The return of the Jews to the promised land

The state of Israel was proclaimed by the Jewish leader, David Ben Gurion, on May 14, 1948, and officially came into being on the 15th, after British Mandatory rule ended at midnight. In many minds, the birth of Israel is closely identified with the Nazi terror in Europe and the Holocaust, but in fact the conception of and planning for a Jewish state had begun some 60 years earlier.

The Messianic idea of returning the Jews to their "promised land" had been a Puritan religious belief since the 16th Century. In the mid-19th Century, British politicians saw another value: that of having in place in the Middle East a Jewish entity sympathetic to the British Empire.

Two phenomena made real these and the Jews' own previously vague aspirations of "return": the burgeoning European nationalism of the time, from which the Jews felt excluded; and the massacres, or pogroms, carried out by Tsarist Russia against its six million Jews, the largest single Jewish population in Europe, which spread into the Ukraine and Poland.

By the 1880s, groups of desperate Russian and other Eastern European Jews were settling in Palestine, which was under the somewhat tenuous authority of the Turkish Ottoman Empire.

'A national home for the Jews'

The visionary Austrian-Jewish journalist, Theodore Herzl, clarified and gave political weight to the concept of Jewish nationalism - or Zionism - and a national home for the Jews in Palestine at the first Zionist Congress at Basle, in Switzerland, in 1897. He won wide Jewish backing for it, and tried, at first unsuccessfully, to encourage the British Government to support it.

It was not until World War I, when British forces were at the gates of Jerusalem, in November, 1917, that the British Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, anxious for Jewish support in the war, issued his epic yet ambiguous Declaration.

This said the Government viewed "with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine..."

The Turks defeated, the British ruled Palestine as a military authority from 1917 until 1922. Then the League of Nations awarded Britain the Mandate to govern Palestine and prepare its citizens for self-government. From that moment, Jewish immigration from Europe increased phenomenally, with the British Cabinet pledged rigorously to honour Balfour's promise of a Jewish homeland, as it was interpreted by the Zionists.

The Arabs of Palestine, not even referred to by name in Balfour's document, were increasingly angry at what they feared would be their eventual replacement and domination by an alien, inspired and technologically superior people of different religion.

Bloody inter-communal rioting broke out during the 1920s, the most notorious example perhaps being the massacres of some 60 religious Jews in the town of Hebron, about 20 miles south west of Jerusalem.

The situation intensified in the 1930s as Nazism spread across Europe, bringing more persecution and more and even more sophisticated and determined Jews to Palestine.

Arab resistance

The Arabs were incensed. In 1936, they rose in armed revolt, mainly against the British rulers they saw as authors of their plight.

But they were disorganised, factional and poorly equipped.

By 1939, the British had crushed the uprising, ending for good effective Arab resistance to the Mandatory Power and the Zionist planners, and leaving behind a fractured Palestinian-Arab society.

The Arab resentment, however, did force the British, first, to abandon a plan to partition Palestine into Arab and Jewish sectors; and seriously to restrict Jewish immigration at that very crucial moment, in 1939-40, when Hitler was at his most dangerous, conquering Europe and launching his mission to exterminate the Jewish people.

The British idea was that the Arabs would rule Palestine, inside which would be established a finite Jewish entity. It was the Zionists' turn to be outraged and to work, successfully, to explode this stratagem.

In 1948, the Jews in Palestine managed to establish their own state, Israel. The price to pay were decades of war and violence. The birth of Israel

The contrast between the growing Jewish society in Palestine - the Yishuv - and the indigenous, mainly Muslim Arab population could not have been greater.

In 1917, two-thirds of the roughly 600,000 Arab population, were rural and village-based, with local, clannish loyalties and little connection with the towns. What passed for "national" Arab leadership was based in the towns, though there was little national identity. Two or three established, rival families dominated Palestinian politics.

The majority of the Jews arriving in Palestine were well organised, motivated and skilled. In the early 1920s, they set up an underground army, the Haganah, or Defence. A Jewish shadow government was set up, with departments which looked after every aspect of society: education, trades unions, farmers, the "kibbutzim" settlements that spread across Palestine, the law, and political parties.

During World War II, Haganah fighters joined the British Army, acquiring military skills and experience. Not so the Arabs.

At the same time, extremist groups such as the Irgun Zvai Leumi and the Lehi, or Stern Group, began a brutal campaign of assassinations, bombings, kidnappings, intimidations, disruptions and sabotage. Their actions were directed against Briton, Arab and even Jews.

During the World War, the Zionist movement clearly defined its objective as a dominant Jewish state in Palestine. Deep plans were laid.

After 1945, as the facts and consequences of Hitler's death camps became evident, the Jewish underground intensified the terror campaign to oust the British, whom they accused of Arab sympathies. Jewish organisations tried to restart unlimited immigration.

Enormous emotional and political support for the Zionists came from the United States. The enfeebled postwar British Government no longer had the strength or the stomach to control Palestine or try to find a middle way that would suit both Jews and Arabs.

The first Israeli-Arab war

Britain handed the problem to the United Nations. On November 29, 1947, the UN General Assembly voted to partition Palestine into Jewish and Arab sectors.

There was violent and total Arab opposition, but wild Jewish acclaim. Fighting started almost immediately.

Even before the mandate ended, in April and May, Jewish fighters moved to protect, consolidate and widen the territory for the new Jewish state. Often they attacked areas designated for Arabs, and tried to depopulate Arab areas in the planned Jewish sector.

On April 9, Jewish fighters massacred scores of Palestinian villagers, including old people, women and children, in the West Jerusalem village of Deir Yassin, causing widespread panic and greatly augmenting the flight of Palestinians from their homes across the country.

As the Jewish authorities had predicted, Arab armies from Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon tried to invade Palestine as soon as the British forces actually left. But the Arab campaign was a generally badly organised, uncoordinated affair with untrained units who were no match for the Haganah and, later, the Israeli Defence Force.

The Palestinian militias and other Arab irregulars were also easily crushed.

There was one exception: the British-trained and British-officered Arab Legion, under the command of King Abdullah of Jordan. But it was constrained financially and politically by the British-dominated King, who had already colluded with the Jewish leaders on territorial matters and who had ambitions in Palestine.

The Arab Legion, therefore, was restricted to defending territory in and around East Jerusalem and the Old City and on the West Bank of the Jordan, which it did successfully.

The refugees

By the middle of 1949 up to 700,000 of about 900,000 Palestinian Arabs had left the affected region, forced out by a combination of Jewish/Israeli terror tactics, the frightening thrust of war, the contagious panic of local residents, fractious and incompetent Arab leadership, the flight of some richer and therefore influential families and the actual sale of Arab land to the Jews without coercion, often by absentee Arab landlords.

These Palestinians had fled from their homes for ever, though they did not know it at the time. They ended up in the refugee camps of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egyptian-run Gaza and in the Palestinian territory of the West Bank, which was ruled by the Jordanian King Abdullah, as was Arab East Jerusalem.

Those Palestinian refugees and their descendants in the region now number more than three million. Israel has since refused to allow the refugees to return as long as Arab states remain pledged to its destruction, often claiming that there was no room for them anyway.

Peace treaties and agreements with Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian movement have not altered this.

In 1917, there had been 50,000 or so Jews in Palestine. By 1948, they had become 650,000 Israelis. At the same time, the majority of Palestinian Arabs had left Israel; only 200,000 or so withstood the war and other deprivations and remained in Israel.

Israel became a state on May 15, 1948, and was recognised by the United States and the Soviet Union that same day.

Israel builds a nation

Israel and its Arab neighbours signed armistice agreements in 1949 but the Arab aim remained the defeat and destruction of Israel.

It was a forlorn hope. Jewish immigration increased yet again, both from Europe and from Arab countries like Iraq, whose Jewish populations suffered persecution on the grounds that they were seen as a potential fifth column for an enemy state.

Zionist agents encouraged this exodus to Israel by mounting sabotage operations in Arab countries which they knew would be blamed on the Jews.

Money poured into Israel: from the United States, from Jews overseas and from German war reparations. The Israelis built on and developed nearly a million acres of abandoned or seized Arab land.

Territorial ambitions

Within a few years, the young country developed an efficient agrarian and more and more developed technological society with a rich mixture of peoples to drive it. By 1961, Israel's population was more than two and a quarter million, 10% of it Arab.

The Israelis retained their military superiority over the Arabs. In 1956 they joined the British-French Suez Campaign to topple President Nasser, Egypt's new and inspirational Arab Nationalist leader.

The Anglo-French conspiracy failed, but the Israelis achieved their objective and occupied the Sinai peninsula. Although American pressure forced their withdrawal in 1957, it was a telling indication of Israel's territorial ambitions.

Throughout the 1950s and until the mid-1960s, the Israeli forces and Arab-backed Palestinian guerrillas fought increasing skirmishes along the Syrian, Jordanian and Egyptian borders. Both sides tried to make inroads into their neighbours' territory.

Six days of war

Nasser's dramatic and belligerent gestures brought him great popularity with the Arabs but, ultimately, disaster on the ground.

The Egyptian leader had been increasingly well-armed and supported by the Soviet Union since the mid-1950s. But he calamitously overplayed his hand in May 1967, after a series of border incidents and false reports of Israeli troop movements.

He ordered the removal of United Nations forces from the Sinai, which had been stationed there after Suez. At the same time his forces blockaded the Gulf of Tiran, Israel's only outlet to the Red Sea and its Eastern markets - a *casus belli*, as

he must have known and the Israelis had made clear.

On June 5, 1967, the Israelis made a pre-emptive strike, destroying Egypt's air force and reaching the Suez Canal within three days.

Jordanian forces, who temporarily were under Nasser's over-all command, shelled Israeli-controlled West Jerusalem. The Israelis wasted no time in taking this long-awaited opportunity to seize Arab East Jerusalem. They were at the Jordan River by June 7. Syrian shelling was answered by a push into the Golan Heights, which fell to Israel on June 10.

The tally was unimaginable ... to Israeli, Arab and stunned international observer alike. In six days of war, the Israelis had taken the West Bank, the Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Desert, with the central Jewish religious shrine of the Western or Wailing Wall at the site of the Jews' ancient temple in East Jerusalem a magnificent and emotional bonus.

For the Arabs, it was their lowest ebb since 1948, a depth from which they have yet totally to emerge. For the Israelis, it was a triumph, a succes d'estime they were never to emulate.

But the conflict was set to continue.

Israel in War and Peace

After Israel's conquests of 1967 there was a short period of triumphalism.

The Israelis annexed East Jerusalem, announcing it as their unified and eternal capital, and imposed military rule on Syria's Golan Heights, the formerly Jordanian West Bank and Egyptian-administered Gaza.

Israel, under its new Prime Minister, the intrepid Mrs. Golda Meir, also began to build Jewish settlements on those territories, a policy that remains at the heart of the Middle East problem.

Israel, in confident mood, considered American and other peace moves in the region. But, such land as the Israelis considered minimally vital to their security was the same land the Arabs reckoned minimally to be rightfully theirs. The Arab-Israeli stand-off persisted.

But out of their second humiliating defeat in less than 20 years, the Arabs - including the emergent Palestinian national movement - were beginning to rebuild their self-esteem and increase and enhance their armaments.

No Arab state recognised Israel. Israel felt free to act accordingly and ignore United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, urging the return of occupied Arab territories, which had been passed in November 1967, after the Six-Day War.

The settlement programme was a key part of Israel's strategy: by 1973 there were 42 settlements built in the occupied territories in and around Arab East Jerusalem, and 35 more set for the West Bank and Gaza.

Israel's relationship with the United States was now an unbreakably deep alliance sealed in arms and money. Since 1949, Israel has received more than \$62,000m in aid from the United States government alone - the equivalent at present rates of nearly \$11,000 a year for each Israeli.

Yom Kippur: the first military set-back

The arms procurement and co-operation programme with the United States guaranteed and still guarantees Israeli military superiority in the region.

But the Soviet bloc was also arming Israel's main Arab neighbours, Egypt and Syria.

President Nasser of Egypt had died in September 1970, broken by the defeat of 1967. His successor, President Anwar Sadat, was determined to win back Egyptian territory.

Against all expectations and taking advantage of Israeli overconfidence and the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, Egyptian forces managed to cross the Suez Canal on October 6, 1973, while the Syrian army burst through on the Golan Heights.

The Israeli Defence Forces eventually recovered, encircling parts of the Egyptian army near the Suez Canal and forcing back the Syrian thrust. After about seven miles, Egypt halted its initial advance, which left Syria in the lurch.

But Israeli morale was badly damaged. Nearly 3,000 Israelis were dead or missing, a horrific figure for such a small nation. The eventual disengagement agreements brokered by the United States reduced Israel's positions in both the Sinai and the Golan Heights.

Land for peace

In the late 70s came a breakthrough. Egypt's President Sadat took the initiative and in November 1977 made a ground-breaking visit to Israel. After long negotiations under the watchful and persuasive aegis of the United States, Israel and Egypt signed a peace agreement, the culmination of face-to-face talks in 1979 in the American presidential retreat of Camp David.

The deal was land for peace. Egypt gradually received back the Sinai, taking full control in 1982. In return, Israel had a lasting peace with what until then had been its most significant Arab enemy. Without Egypt's forces, a successful Arab military offensive against Israel was, and remains, unthinkable.

Oddly, it was the right-wing Likud government which entertained President Sadat on his surprise visit in 1977 and negotiated and signed the Camp David peace agreement. It's prime minister, Menachem Begin, had been a leader of the extremist underground group Irgun Zvai Leumi during the 1940s.

The Labour party, which had ruled Israel since the state was formed, had fallen from office under pressure of economic troubles, the fallout from the 1973 War, and internal divisions over policies towards the Arabs.

Labour was out of government for nearly 10 years. During that time, the Likud Coalition led Israel into dangerous military escapades.

It also shaped a new, more conservative Israel, in which, to survive in office, Likud gave hardline religious minority parties a disproportionate amount of power in return for their votes.

Israel and the PLO

In the face of Israel's domination of the region after 1967 - the war and occupation of the West Bank pushed nearly 400,000 more Palestinians into Jordan - many Palestinians lost faith in the machinations of Arab regimes and began to build their own nationalist and resistance movement.

By the middle of the 1960s, organised Palestinian groups under the umbrella of Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) were carrying out border raids into Israel from Jordan and Syria, and after 1967 these intensified.

They were able to exploit a low-level war of attrition between Israel and Egypt and, until 1970, enjoyed the tacit support of the Jordanian and Syrian governments.

Entanglement in Lebanon

Israel retaliated against the guerrillas, striking at them in Jordan at first, then more decisively and extensively into Lebanon, where the Palestinian organisations fled after King Hussein of Jordan crushed and expelled them in 1970.

Israel had the better of the military exchanges, and in 1978 invaded Southern Lebanon, occupying an area across the Israeli border. It created and ran there a mainly Christian Lebanese militia led by a rebel Lebanese Army major.

But the PLO and its Lebanese allies continued to raid and shell northern Israel. The PLO also gained more and more international recognition, in the Arab world and beyond, even in the West, as the official representative of the Palestinian people.

Much to Israel's distress, the Palestinian movement was being seen worldwide as a legitimate nationalist resistance movement with a high political profile - rather than the bloodied terrorists of traditional Israeli propaganda.

The Palestinians in the occupied territories were also becoming increasingly active. There were riots and violence that Palestinian activists inside and outside the region were able to exploit at Israel's expense.

The international community continued to blame Israel's continued occupation of Arab lands and its settlements policy for these upheavals.

In June 1982, with a view to putting an end to the PLO as a force to be reckoned with, and quashing its support in the West Bank and Gaza, the Israel Defence Force acted. Israeli aircraft and troops began a supposedly retaliatory move into Lebanon (although the border was in fact quiet at the time).

This quickly became a full-scale invasion lasting more than two months and eventually rolling into the Lebanese capital Beirut itself. Tens of thousands of civilians, Lebanese and Palestinians, were killed and injured.

World and much of Israeli opinion was appalled. The outrage reached epic proportions when in September 1982, fighters of a Christian militia allied to Israel carried out a massacre of several hundred Palestinian civilians in a Beirut camp, Sabra-Shatila, that the Israeli Army was supposed to be controlling and guarding.

Again, many Arab and independent observers held Israel responsible for the massacre, or at least accused it of almost wilful criminal negligence in not controlling its Christian allies. And there were other, darker conspiracy theories.

An Israeli judicial commission found that the Israeli Army had failed in its duties and was indirectly responsible for the massacre. Even wider worries were voiced in Israel itself as to whether during the invasion the government of Prime Minister Begin had ever really had control of events or the army itself.

Begin resigned, reduced and wearied by events, to be replaced by Itzhak Shamir, yet another former leader of an extremist underground organisation, the Stern Group, or Lehi, in the 1940s.

In May 1983, Israel signed a defence agreement with Lebanon, which was soon abrogated under Syrian pressure. By 1985 Israeli forces, harassed by Lebanese guerrillas, had pulled back from much of Lebanon. But they widened their "security zone" in South Lebanon.

New enemies

The PLO, it was true, was no longer a military force in Lebanon - the Syrians finished off what pockets the Israelis had not reached. But new and more lethal enemies took up arms against Israel and its allies, the South Lebanon Army led by yet another rebel Lebanese officer. These guerrillas were mainly Lebanese Shi'ites of South Lebanon, particularly the Iranian-backed Hizbollah, or Party of God.

During the next 13 years, the so-called "security zone" in South Lebanon became more and more problematic for Israel. By 1998, the Israelis were trying to find an acceptable way out of the Lebanese thicket.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian problem continued to grow.

Israel and the Intifada

Israel's survival and progress has been almost as much a result of Arab disunity and political bungling as of the Israelis' own skills, ingenuity, commitment - and the massive, almost uncritical support they receive from the United States.

The mid-1980s saw the Palestinians down but not out. Israel had tried everything to crush their spirit. Civic elections in the occupied territories in the mid-1970s brought Israel an embarrassing roster of insubordinate pro-PLO mayors and councils.

Attempts to undermine the Palestinian national movement by organising and financing pro-Israeli groups (the "Village Leagues") made little ground.

Israeli support for Islamic extremists, as an opposition force to the secular pro-PLO movement, eventually blew up in Israel's face. Hamas, for example, which was born out of the Moslem Brotherhood with Israeli encouragement, is to this day a central factor in the Palestinian resistance and political system.

Intifada

In late 1987, a spontaneous yet well-organised uprising - the "Intifada" - began in Gaza and spread like a fire across the West Bank and into Jerusalem itself.

Daily strikes and demonstrations, with Palestinian youths hurling stones and petrol bombs, kept the Israeli occupation army at full stretch for nearly three years. The Intifada drew world attention not only to Israel's 20 or so years of illegal military occupation of the territories and East Jerusalem, but also to the brutal measures Israel was using to put down the uprising.

Although the PLO was not the author of the uprising, it quickly added its organisational weight and approval, and took or tried to take much of the credit for it.

First moves towards peace

In 1988, the PLO officially accepted the existence of Israel, the "two-state solution". As a consequence, the United States joined most of the rest of the world in recognising the PLO and beginning a limited dialogue with its leaders. However, a Palestinian fringe group's attack on holidaymakers on an Israeli beach temporarily stopped the exchange.

But in 1990, as Israel was managing to contain the uprising, the Arab world indulged in one of its characteristic episodes of self-destruction - the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

Yasser Arafat, the PLO Chairman, who now lived in exile with his movement in Tunis, was caught between his powers of leadership and long-term political acuity. He decided to go along with public Palestinian opinion. Many on the Arab "street" supported Saddam Hussein as a supposedly committed and coherent enemy of Israel, and because of a general dislike of the rich Kuwaitis.

The rich Gulf states, who were a vital part of the international alliance that was formed to remove Iraq from Kuwait, shunned Yasser Arafat and cut off his money supply.

Scores of thousands of Palestinians whose earnings had been returned to families in the occupied territories and who had consistently paid their PLO dues were kicked out of their lucrative positions in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

The PLO was broke, seemingly helpless and isolated.

The road to Oslo

After the Gulf war, the United States tried to reshape Middle Eastern politics. With great effort the American government organised the first-ever effective Israel-Arab-Palestinian dialogue. The negotiations, based on the concept of "land for peace", were launched at Madrid in October 1991, and involved Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinians.

Within two years the initiative foundered. But behind the scenes negotiations continued, with face-to-face talks in Norway between the PLO and the Israeli government. This resulted in the Oslo Accords of September 1993, approved by Israel's then prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, PLO chairman Yasser Arafat, and endorsed by US President Bill Clinton.

Concentrating on the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, Israel at last recognised the PLO and gradually allowed the organisation's members and leadership to return to - some of - the occupied territories.

The agreements envisaged an interim period of Israeli withdrawals and redeployments from and in the territories and limited autonomy for the Palestinians, in return for peace and an end to Palestinian claims on Israel proper.

Open questions

However, the decisive questions of the status of Jerusalem and its Arab population, the settlements, the refugees and Israel's borders were put off until the interim period was over, towards the end of the decade.

Since then, the accords have foundered though have not yet been abandoned. Israel continued to expand its settlements mightily during the 1990s, both during and after - and in spite of - the Madrid peace conference and the Oslo accords. The Judaisation of Arab East Jerusalem proceeds apace.

Israel's negotiations with the Syrians and Lebanese collapsed nearly two years ago. Only Jordan and Israel have made peace, albeit, like the Israeli treaty with Egypt, most of the Arab population is cool towards the treaty.

The future of Israel

Israel is an advanced, prosperous, industrialised Western-style implant in the Middle East, decades ahead of its neighbours in technological and military prowess.

It has its own military-industrial complex, has highly developed computer, construction and textile industries, and is the world's second-largest exporter of cut and polished diamonds.

American irritation with its current leadership is unlikely to turn into significant withdrawal of military, financial, political or moral support. The Jewish lobby in the United States is as forceful as ever in seeing Israel's interests pursued without serious hindrance in the corridors of American power, especially Congress.

Israel's biggest dangers are internal. There is growing Palestinian resentment and frustration inside Israel and the occupied territories, which could soon lead to unprecedented bloodshed.

There are the tensions between Israelis themselves, between fractious and extremist religious groups and the secular majority, who see the nature of their pragmatic Zionist ideals being compromised by overly powerful and coddled religious fanatics; between right and left, that is anti- and pro-compromise with the Arabs; and between European and Oriental Jews - a clash of class status and ethnic origins.

For Israelis, May 15, 1998, is not a straightforward 'Happy 50th Birthday'.

By Tim Llewellyn, first published by the BBC