

What is Israeli/Palestine clash about?

Part 2: The Nakba and birth of Israel

The previous *Labour Bulletin* began to chart the history of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. In this second part **Chandra Kumar** tells of the birth of the Israeli state and how Israel drove Palestinians from their land and homes and has been bolstered by the West ever since.

The Zionists were not a colonial power like France or Britain. They were permanent settlers with no home country. The early Zionists did not colonise Palestine in the traditional way by exploiting cheap, indigenous labour as in South Africa. Mostly, they wished to replace the indigenous population and to establish a Jewish state with a Jewish majority, with Jewish farms and industry employing Jewish labour.

The major Jewish trade union federation, the Histadrut, was founded in 1920 and it only allowed Palestinian Israeli citizens

membership in 1960. It does not allow Arab workers from the occupied Palestinian territories to be members, although these workers are taxed if they work for Israeli companies.

The major form of Zionism until 1977 was Labour Zionism. Socialism was popular among Jewish working-class people but they distorted socialist ideals. If workers exclude fellow workers from their unions on grounds of nationality, this only bolsters capitalists and weakens workers through disunity.

Wealthy people in Europe and the United States and the British government funded the Histadrut through the international Zionist movement's Jewish Agency. These funders were interested in building a capitalist Jewish state in the heart of Palestine and the Middle East.

The Histadrut was more than a union. It was an umbrella organisation involved in banking, the army and education. Before 1948, the Histadrut boycotted Arab labour, land and produce, forcing Jewish-owned factories and orange groves to sack Arabs they employed, and destroying produce from Arab-owned farms. They then bought this land from Arab owners.

Today, the Histadrut still has the Zionist goal of keeping a majority of Jewish citizens in Israel. It has always supported the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and it further supported attacks on Gaza in 2009.

It is important for workers and their union federations to stop dealing with Histadrut in the Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions campaign against Israel.

JEWISH HOME WITH BRITISH HELP

In 1907, Chaim Weizmann (later first president of Israel) helped organise the Palestine Land Development Company to set up Jewish land development projects in Palestine. In 1917, he worked with British foreign secretary Arthur Balfour on the Balfour Declaration, which called for a national home for Jewish people in Palestine.

In 1922, the League of Nations approved a British Mandate for Palestine. This placed the region under British control whilst Britain prepared the region for independence.

The Balfour Declaration was signed just before the October Revolution in Russia. The Zionists agreed with the British about the 'danger' of socialist revolution and that Britain needed to support a capitalist, anti-communist Jewish state in Palestine.

Britain also supported the Zionists in Palestine to further the interests of the British Empire. A Jewish state could serve as a British protectorate in the Middle East to reduce French influence in the region, as well as block the rising tide of Arab anti-imperialism.

ARAB REVOLT, JEWISH IMMIGRATION

Until the 1930s, a Jewish state was just a Zionist dream, because there was little Jewish emigration to Palestine. But after Hitler came to power many European countries and the US closed their borders to Jews fleeing Nazi repression, so they went to Palestine in large numbers. The Zionists encouraged this as it boosted Jewish numbers.



The Nakba of 1948, mass deportation and massacre of Palestinians.

The Zionists continued buying Palestinian land with British support, and turned Arab peasants into landless labourers. Naturally the Palestinians resisted. In 1936, there was a general Palestinian strike, known as the Arab Revolt, to protest against Zionist and British colonisation. Zionist and British arms finally crushed the strike in 1939. This showed that 'Labour Zionism' had nothing to do with solidarity with workers.

The revolt made the British worry about losing their foothold in the Arab world, which had vast reserves of oil and gas. To avoid alienating the Arabs, the British produced a White Paper in 1939 which called for the setting up of an Arab state in Palestine within ten years, in which the Jews would have limited self-rule. It also called for a limit on Jewish immigration to 75 000 over the following five years.

Neither the Arabs nor the Zionists accepted the White Paper. The Arab League thought it gave too much power to the Jews. The Zionists wanted their own state and rejected the policy of limiting immigration. This led to violent Zionist attacks on the British. The deadliest of these

attacks occurred on 22 July 1946, when the conservative Zionist underground movement, the Irgun, led by future Israeli prime minister, Menachem Begin, bombed the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, killing 91 people.

The Arab Revolt occurred when the Jewish population in Palestine was growing fast and Zionist colonisation was getting more serious. Over the next five years, Jewish emigration to Palestine continued illegally and the British placed a blockade to stem further immigration. But in 1946, the US pressured Britain into allowing 1 500 Jewish refugees into Palestine every month.

PALESTINE DIVIDED

After the war, Britain decided to give up its Palestine Mandate and it was left to the United Nations to decide Palestine's fate. In November 1947, the UN passed Resolution 181, dividing Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state.

The Zionists got 56% of Mandated Palestine although Jews constituted only one-third of its population. Jerusalem was declared an 'international city' open equally to

Muslims, Christians and Jews.

While Zionist leaders publicly accepted the plan, they were not satisfied. Many of them hoped to expand Jewish territory in future.

Both the Arab states and the Arab population of Palestine rejected the partition plan. Although Palestinian Arabs outnumbered Jews by almost three to one, and owned about 94% of the land, the plan gave more of Palestine to the 'Jewish state'. A large part of Arab-owned land was inside the new Jewish state's borders. It was obvious that the Zionists would steal this land.

BIRTH OF ISRAEL AND AL NAKBA

Fighting between the Zionists and Palestinians increased, with killings on both sides. From 1947 to 1949, 750 000 Palestinians were expelled from what became Israel, and the Zionists destroyed over 500 Palestinian villages. This began the Palestinian refugee crisis.

The Zionists massacred Arabs, and these attacks spread terror. Before May 1948, at least 300 000 Palestinians fled from the new Israel. The most famous massacre was in April 1948, in the Palestinian village of Deir Yassin. Begin and Yitzhak Shamir (another future Israeli prime minister) led militias who massacred up to 120 Palestinians. Palestinians fled fearing for their lives.

Zionism aimed for a Jewish majority in Palestine and as Jews were a minority it embarked on ethnic cleansing.

After this, the Zionists used the threat of 'Deir Yassin' to frighten Palestinians into fleeing, as happened in the cities of Haifa and Jaffa.

When the Arab armies of Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Jordan attacked Israel in May 1948, they were disorganised and had less troops and worse weaponry than the Zionists. In the end, Jordan annexed

the West Bank while Gaza came under Egyptian control until 1967.

The Zionists declared Israel an independent state on 15 May 1948. They took 77% of Palestinian land, much more than allowed by the UN, including most of the good farming land. The Palestinians called these events 'al Nakba' (the catastrophe) as 750 000 Palestinians fled their homes.

Although UN Resolution 194 in 1948 recognised the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their land and homes, Israel has never allowed this.

Since 1948, Israel has uprooted about 75% of Palestinian people from their land, making it the largest refugee case in the world. Most refugees live within 160kms of their homes and land, but cannot return.

Solidarity with the Palestinian people must include serious efforts to address the refugee question. International law requires the return of refugees or a 'just settlement' with adequate compensation. Clearly, Israel opposes the return of refugees as this would upset the Zionist goal of a Jewish majority state.

ISRAEL AGENT OF IMPERIALISM

No matter how determined the Zionists were they could not have succeeded without help from Western powers like Britain and the U.S. Without their help, small Israel, with a population of only 7.1 million, would not have become the dominant military power in the region since 1948.

Without Western support, Israel could not have invaded Lebanon repeatedly. It would not have killed tens of thousands of Lebanese and Palestinian mostly refugees and displaced hundreds of thousands of people.

Without the West, Israel could not threaten Iran because of its alleged



nuclear weapons programme. While Iran is subject to international pressure because it has nuclear technology, the West has allowed Israel to stockpile about 200 nuclear weapons.

Without Western support, Israel could not ignore annual UN resolutions demanding its withdrawal from Palestinian territories. Israel would not be able to reject the UN resolution for Palestinian refugees to return to their homes or be compensated. It would also not be able to keep illegally expanding Jewish 'settlements' into Palestinian territory.

Without the West, Israel could not have built the 'separation wall' which makes valuable parts of the West Bank part of Israel. And it would not have a system of Israeli-only paved roads with separate dirt roads for Palestinians and countless military checkpoints, which make it impossible for Palestinians to move freely within their homeland.

Without Western support, Israel could not have carved up the West Bank into Bantustan-like ghettos. Nor could Israel turn Gaza into an open-air prison, by sealing its borders, controlling its airspace and

patrolling its seashores.

Without the West, Israel could not have bombed Gaza into rubble, while imposing a blockade that prevents Palestinians from getting medicine, fuel, food and other supplies.

As long as Western governments support Israel, it will have little trouble distributing the water supply unfairly. Israelis consume five times per head more water a day than Palestinians in the occupied territories. The situation is worse in Gaza where Palestinians face the health risk of polluted water partly because Israeli bombs destroyed sewage facilities. The blockade of Gaza has made it difficult to get chlorine and equipment for water treatment.

Without Western support, Israel could not refuse to negotiate with Hamas, the democratically elected representatives of the Palestinian people in the occupied territories since January 2006.

Without the West, Israel could not commit war crimes and violate international laws against torture, kidnapping, arbitrary arrest and detention, assassinations, demolition of houses, restrictions on freedom of movement, bombing of civilian areas, collective punishment of civilians, use of banned weapons, and the use of Palestinians as human shields.

Without Western support, Israel could not act like an innocent victim of 'terrorist fundamentalist' Arabs and Muslims.

If the Western powers wished it, they could make it difficult for Israel to be a key player in the arms and diamond trade in African countries like the DRC today, which has fuelled conflicts leading to millions of deaths in recent years.

Israel plays an important role for the West, particularly for the U.S. Zionism was born in the West and its founder, Theodore Herzl, openly supported European imperialists

against 'backward' non-European peoples. Their thinking hasn't changed.

The Western powers supported Israel because it was a safeguard against 'communism' in the Middle East. With the fall of Communist regimes in 1990, this support has continued because the West sees Israel as important in their fight against Arab-Muslim international terrorism.

Imperialism has a clever way of blaming the problems it causes on its victims - in this case, the Palestinians.

US NEO-IMPERIALISM

The Second World War weakened the European powers and the US emerged as the strongest economic and military power in the world after 1945. Europe kept its dominance in Africa, but in the Middle East, the US aimed to play the dominant role.

The Middle East was important to the US because of oil. Control of oil is key as it is central to every aspect of production and life in the modern world. For the US to stay the main capitalist power, it has to keep its power in the Middle East where the world's greatest oil reserves lie.

During the Cold War, two global 'superpowers', the US and the Soviet

Union existed. The US was determined that the Arab regimes did not fall under the Soviet sphere of influence. The US also did not want Arab countries to be truly independent as this may lead them to nationalise their oil industries.

So, after European colonialism ended, the US maintained its economic and military power over previously colonised peoples. Instead of direct colonial rule, indigenous elites came to power in what is known as 'neo-colonialism' and the US rewarded these mostly undemocratic Arab regimes.

The US labels pro-Western, Arab regimes 'moderate' and Arab states that pose a challenge to US power 'extremist'. It does not matter to US policy-makers whether the Arab regimes are democratic or not, as long as they are subordinate to the US.

Between 1956 and 1970 the Egyptian president Abdel Nasser, an anti-imperialist, inspired pan-Arab nationalist revolts in Libya, Iraq, Yemen, and Algeria with Saudi Arabia likely to follow. Nasser was a clear threat to US and Western dominance in the region because he was trying to bring a form of nationalist capitalism that would weaken the power of US and Western oil

companies. He was also to most people of the Middle East a symbol of Third World independence and progress.

Nasser angered Western capitalists by building friendly relations with communist regimes, including China. On 26 July 1956, he made them even angrier by nationalising the Suez Canal. Britain, France and Israel attacked Egypt on 29 October the same year. From a military standpoint, the West's operation was a success, as Israel occupied the Egyptian Sinai, followed by British and French forces. But politically, it was a temporary victory for Arab nationalism.

The US did not wish Britain and France to become dominant in the region again and after it applied pressure through the UN, France and Britain withdrew from Egypt. This 'Suez Crisis' demonstrated to Israel that the US was dominant in the region.

While Nasser's influence grew and pan-Arab nationalism took hold in the Middle East, the US was fighting a costly war in Vietnam and anti-war resistance grew at home. In these circumstances, it was difficult for it to directly attack Nasser. Israel thus played a crucial role in the Middle East by crushing the pan-Arab movement.

This marked the beginning of an alliance between the US and Israel. After 1967, this relationship became even stronger. Israel is now very dependent on the US and also acts as an off-shore military base for the US in the Middle East. LB



Egyptian prime minister Nasser cheered in Cairo after nationalising the Suez Canal and announcing the formation of the Suez Canal Company in August 1956.

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