

What is Israeli/Palestine clash about?

Part 1: Dropped from world map

At one level the Israeli/Palestine conflict appears immensely complex, whilst at another it appears as a simple, but major abuse of human rights. **Chandra Kumar** explores the history of this conflict in order to better understand the issues. The *Labour Bulletin* will run this history as a series over the next few volumes.

In July 2005, the Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU), and over 170 other Palestinian organisations, called for a worldwide campaign of boycott, disinvestment and sanctions against Israel. This marked the beginning of the Boycott Disinvestment and Sanctions movement (BDS), the Palestine solidarity movement.

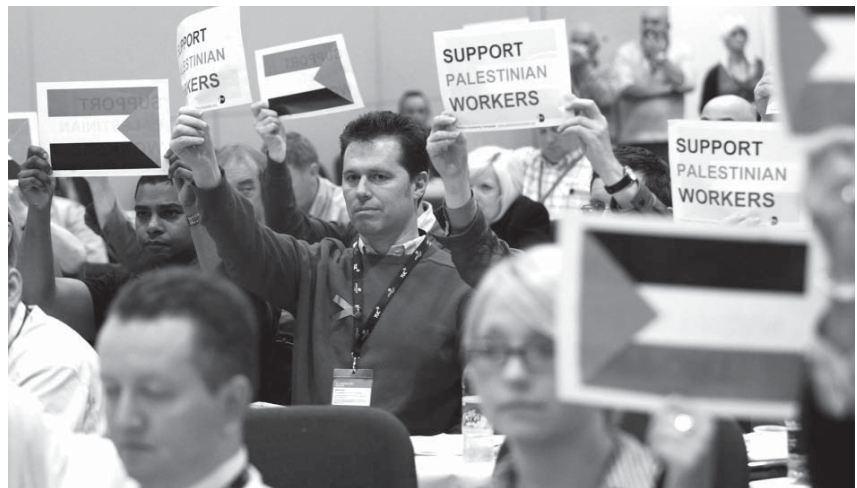
The BDS movement starts with the idea that if it was right for the world to boycott apartheid South Africa, then it is right to boycott Israel.

There are of course some differences between Israel and apartheid South Africa.

With South Africa, apartheid came from inside the country and white South Africans were a much smaller minority. Israel brought 'bantustan' apartheid-like arrangements to Palestinians inside the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), which are not part of Israel.

Although Palestinians living in Israel suffer similar forms of oppression to those of apartheid, they are Israeli citizens and can vote in elections.

But despite differences, there are strong similarities. Like old South Africa, Israel has a racist system of



Earlier this year British TUC unions voted for an effective consumer boycott against Israel.

ethnic classification, segregation and oppression, and it tries to justify this legalised racism with religious and racial myths. Also, Israel has illegally occupied Palestinian land for over 60 years.

ISRAEL AS APARTHEID STATE

Many people agree that Israel is an 'apartheid state'. Archbishop Desmond Tutu said that the situation in the OPT was worse than apartheid. Ronnie Kasrils, a former South African Intelligence Minister and leading member of the African

National Congress (ANC) who is of Jewish descent, agrees.

Western politicians and the media don't describe Israel as an 'apartheid' state, but civil society organisations the world over use this term. Palestinians are separated in the OPT. Israel gives 'independence' to the Palestinian political elites it favours, while it still controls the economy, resources, movement of Palestinians and the borders. Israel acts like the South African apartheid regime which gave non-whites 'independent

homelands', within a white-supremacist state.

In July 2004, an Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice found the 'separation wall' that Israel was building in the OPT illegal under international law. "Israel has ignored international law and continues building the wall while expanding Jewish colonies in the territories. This wall is called the 'apartheid wall' by the BDS movement."

Israel also violates human rights in the OPT. Richard Falk, barred by Israel from entering the OPT as a delegate of the United Nations Human Rights Committee, compared Israel's treatment of Palestinians to the Nazi's treatment of Jews in Europe during World War Two, in which millions of Jews were ruthlessly murdered.

Every human rights organisation that has investigated OPT has condemned Israel. They agree that every day Israel violates human rights and that Palestinian violations against Israelis are not nearly as widespread or brutal. Also they agree that Israeli military, political officials and courts hide the extent of Israel's human rights violations.

Israeli human rights violations include torture, fatal shootings of civilians by security forces, restriction on movement, theft of land and discrimination in ownership of buildings in East Jerusalem, regular bulldozing of Palestinian homes, detention without trial and settler violence against Palestinians with the support of the Israeli Defence Force.

On 27 December 2008, Israel launched a military assault on the 1.5 million inhabitants of the Gaza Strip who do not have an army. In this bloody campaign, Israel used high-tech weaponry supplied by the United States to commit many war crimes. For example, they used banned phosphorous bombs that burn people alive.

Also the Israeli Army did not allow injured Palestinians to get medical help. During the bombing campaign,

Anti-Semitism

People who believe that Jewish people are evil, inferior, greedy or power-hungry are anti-Semitic racists. But it is not anti-Semitism to condemn the injustices of Israelis against Palestinians. Criticising Israel or Zionism is not the same as criticising Judaism, just as criticising the policies of the South African government is not a form of racism against black people and criticising the Nazis was not anti-German racism. In fact, some of Israel's harshest critics are Jews.

From the time of the birth of Israel, it was said that the world must agree to a 'Jewish state' in Palestine because of the European holocaust. Perhaps the 'Jewish state' should have been created in Germany, because the creation of Israel in Palestine involved expelling over 750 000 Palestinians from their land and homes.

The Western world turned a blind eye to the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians during 1947-1949, partly due to guilt about the Nazi holocaust which they did little to prevent. After 1948, each time Israel has gone to war against Egypt, or invaded Lebanon, or crushed a Palestinian uprising, critics of Israel were labelled 'anti-Semitic', 'holocaust-deniers' or even 'Nazis'.

more than 1 300 Palestinians were killed, including about 400 children. Thousands were injured, and tens of thousands made homeless.

Before the bombing, Israel blockaded Gaza's borders for two years. This imprisoned Palestinians and stopped supplies from entering Gaza. The blockade damaged what is left of Gaza's economy, and much of the population is now so malnourished that they are almost starving. Although the attack on Gaza ended on 18 January 2009, the blockade continues. International law says that this kind of 'siege' is an act of war, and an illegal form of collective punishment.

Cosatu supports the Palestinian call for BDS, and has expressed its disgust at the Israeli massacres in Gaza. It called these attacks mass murder, and sees them as part of "an ongoing genocidal campaign to crush and destroy the people of Palestine." Several observers, including the president of the UN General Assembly, have also used the word 'genocidal' in condemning the Israeli assault on Gaza.

Genocide is the extermination of a race or community by mass murder, or by imposing conditions that make survival impossible.

Genocide is a serious charge. No one is saying that Israel is trying to eliminate the Palestinian people by killing them all, as happened to Jews during the holocaust. Rather, it is that for a long time Israel has repressed, terrorised, and killed members of a group, Palestinians.

Israel intends to destroy Palestinians as an independent people such as happened to the indigenous people of America, Australia, parts of Asia and the south western and eastern parts of South Africa.

Israel cannot hide that it is the only country in the world, apart from the US in Iraq and Afghanistan, which is an illegal colonial occupation. Israel also refuses the right of six million Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and land or get compensation.

During the 2008 Israeli attack on Gaza, people demonstrated against Israel around the world. A former

US president publicly described Israel's policy as apartheid which shows that the US government is now more critical of Israel.

DROPPED FROM WORLD MAP

Palestine's disappearance from maps in 1948 was intentional and coincided with the birth of the Israeli state in May that year. The history leading to this event begins in the late 19th century.

The Jews of Europe were severely persecuted, particularly in Russia. A very small but determined minority reacted by forming a movement known as 'political Zionism.' Zionism aimed to set up a Jewish homeland away from Europe and Palestine was decided on.

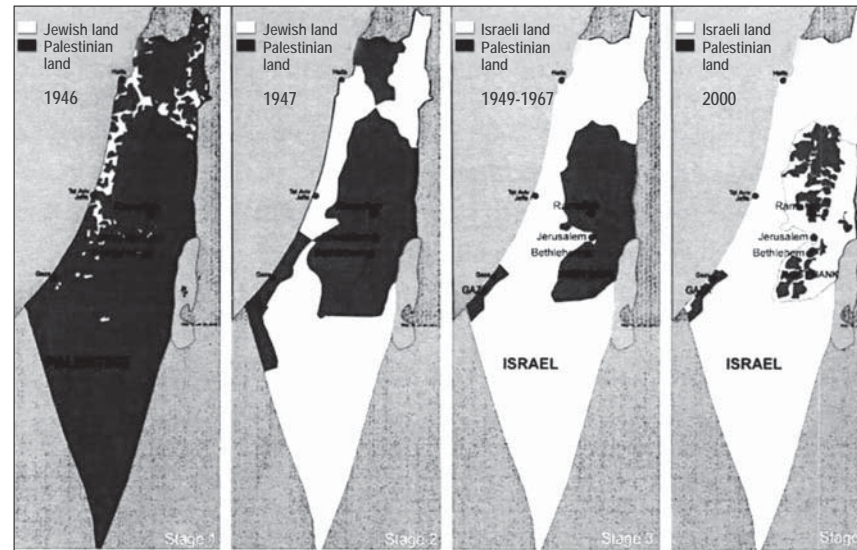
Some claim that Palestine belongs to the Jews because the Old Testament God said so, and because over 2 000 years ago two small Jewish kingdoms existed in Palestine. Both Jews and Palestinians have ties to Palestine and Jews, Christians and Muslims regard it as a holy land.

The non-Jewish people of Palestine have always rejected these arguments. Why should a Jewish state be granted in modern times on the basis of religious texts written thousands of years ago? What if every religious group began claiming land on that basis?

Modern secular ideas of religious tolerance clash with ideas of a state established on the basis of religion. The main historical claim Palestinian Arabs have to Palestine is that they have lived there for at least 1 300 years. By the end of the 7th century, mostly Arabs inhabited Palestine, and Islam became the main religion. Soon afterwards, the Islamic world knew the boundaries of Palestine and its name 'Filastin' in Arabic. Palestine was known as a fertile, beautiful land.

The first Zionist settlers from Europe arrived at the end of the 19th century and Palestine was not a 'land without a people'. At the beginning of the 20th century,

Palestine loss of land 1946 to 2000



there were about 500 000 Arabs in Palestine and about 60 000 Jews.

ZIONISM AND IMPERIALISM

The rise of industrial capitalism in the 19th century was marked by sharp economic booms and busts in Europe. With mass poverty, Jews became scapegoats just as African migrants are scapegoated in South Africa today.

Most Jews lived in Russia and Eastern Europe and suffered greatly in undeveloped areas of the Russian empire, like Poland and the Ukraine. They belonged to the working class and many worked in small shops or were unemployed. Life became even harder when they became the targets of violent anti-Jewish pogroms or race riots encouraged by government officials and police.

In this context political Zionism emerged. The Jewish Anti-Defamation League defines Zionism as an anti-imperialist ideology of national liberation. But this is a distorted view.

Zionism was a nationalist response to anti-Semitism in Europe, but it only had the support of a small minority of the world's Jews until after World War Two. Most European Jews fought anti-Semitism by other means particularly as socialists in labour

struggles alongside non-Jewish workers. They saw Zionism as backward, and divisive.

And it was certainly an imperialist movement. Theodor Herzl, the founder of political Zionism, wrote in 1896 that the Jews should establish in Palestine "an outpost of civilisation against barbarism" and that they should "form a sector of the wall of Europe against Asia". Herzl wanted to align with the imperial powers against the colonised non-white peoples of this world.

Leading Zionists believed that there could only be a 'Jewish state' with the help of the same imperial powers that were persecuting Jews in Europe. They tried to convince European colonial powers that Jews had their interests in Palestine at heart - to rule the Arab population, exploit cheap labour and profit from Palestine's resources. LB

Chandra Kumar is a former lecturer at Rhodes University and was a volunteer researcher at Workers, World Media Production (WWMP) during 2008. This series of articles on the Israeli/Palestine conflict is a shortened version of a booklet titled 'Israel and the Palestinian Struggle for National Self-Rule' published by Workers' World Media Production, 2009.