

The Israel-Palestine Conflict: reality and the demise of evangelical Christianity

Abstract: Under the Bush administration Christians are having unprecedented influence on Middle Eastern politics. Where Palestinian-Israeli conflict is concerned the US Christian approach is driven by theology and a number of myths reinforced in the media. The paper addresses a number of these myths revealing a gulf between reality and theological expectation. The reality is well understood by many of the inhabitants of the Middle East who now hold the moral high ground and with some justification view Christianity as morally deficient.

Since September 11 there has been a focus on terrorism of Islamic fundamentalists as one might expect. The Nationstate, Western Society and Christianity have been threatened and violent responses by the US and its allies have followed. Christian and Jewish fundamentalists have flourished in this new environment posing as beacons for democracy and liberty and Islamic fundamentalists have also continued to engender support from their constituents. One of the main ideological battlefields for these protagonists has been the Israel-Palestine conflict.

The Islamic position advocated by people described in the West as ‘terrorist’ or ‘militant’ has been that the Palestinians are the victims of criminal activity by the West and that the behaviour of the United States and Israel in particular demonstrates an underlying hypocrisy and immorality. The West for its part maintains a position that blames the Palestinians for all the violence and sees itself as giving the Jews a home partly as compensation for the holocaust and partly because of their links to the Old Testament.

Over the last two decades historical investigation has started to confirm the uncomfortable truth that the view of the ‘Islamic extremists’ is more accurate. Many of us were led to believe that in 1948 a small gallant band of Zionist young people had defeated the might of the combined Arab armies, avenging many atrocities and the threat of annihilation, the few inhabitants fled as they were told to, the land and Jerusalem were captured and Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled. The new State, we believed, made the desert blossom and was a model of egalitarian freedom and democracy – the Switzerland of the Middle East.

We now know that none of this was true and that in fact what the Israelis carried out was an ethnic cleansing similar to that recently seen in the Balkans, that Zionist forces were far superior in number and technology to the Arab forces of 1948 and that the Jewish community in Palestine

was never threatened with annihilation. The bloodshed continues unrelentingly and rather than blessing the world, the conflict has raised the possibility of a World War on a number of occasions and leaves large numbers of people in refugee camps. Instead of a river of life flowing from Jerusalem as Ezekiel envisioned, we have a river of bloodshed engulfing the region.

A Christian response requires an informed approach and this paper aims to point to recent literature and to provide a glimpse of some of the unattractive reality so as to provoke a willingness to engage with the issue. In the eyes of much of the world, much modern Christianity is rotten when seen in the light of the Middle East today.

The Historical Research and Comment

Confirmation of the situation came with the opening of Israeli archives in 1978 and subsequent research conducted by a number of Israelis. Publications of their work during the last fifteen years include Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem 1947-48*, Avi Shlaim, *Collusion across the Jordan*, Ilan Pappé, *The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, Benny Morris, *1948 and After*, Tom Segev *1949: The First Israelis*, Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims*, Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*, and Nur Masalha, *A Land without people: Israel, transfer and the Palestinians*.¹

The earlier claims by the Palestinians of ethnic cleansing such as those detailed in Walid Khalidi, *From Haven to Conquest*, were correct.² Books such as David Hirst’s *The Gun and the Olive Branch*, which were either ridiculed or ignored at the time of their publication, were also largely correct.³ A subsequent book by Walid Khalidi *All that Remains*, focuses on the fact of the Palestinian dispossession rather than the means by documenting the fate of every Palestinian village.⁴

While some of these works perpetuate the myths that the Palestinians are in varying degrees to blame for the current problems, or that Zionist atrocities were accidental rather than deliberate, they do honestly document and describe Israel's atrocities. Benny Morris, for example, does not shirk from reporting Yitzak Levi's eyewitness account of how the Palestinian survivors of the Deir Yassin massacre were paraded through West Jerusalem, tortured and then shot.⁵ In 1949 Tom Segev describes the darker side of Israel's first year, its dreadful treatment of Jewish immigrants, especially those from non-European countries, its duplicitous negotiations with the Palestinians and the development of a society divided at every level. He gives a similar treatment of the mandate in *One Palestine, Complete* but readers will note with interest his attempt to excuse the attempts by the Zionist Stern Gang to forge an alliance with the Nazis to rid Europe of Jews and the Levant of Arabs. Joseph Heller *The Stern Gang: Ideology, Politics and Terror 1940-1949* is less apologetic about the matter.⁶

History repeats itself endlessly as the West continues to create myths about the conflict. In *The Iron Wall* Shlaim describes the 'generous offer' made to Arafat at Camp David which although he wrote only recently, we now know was untrue.⁷ Experience shows that no information originating with either Israel or the United States government can be believed at face value.

One of the few Christian books that has attempted to get to the truth of the matter, Colin Chapman's, *Whose Promised Land?* first published in 1983, was recently revised.⁸ An inspection of the extensive quotations in the second edition reveals that most come from material published in the last decade. Amongst the exceptions is David Hirst's book. The even-handed approach adopted by Chapman in the first edition is now no longer tenable. While his conclusions are understated, no-one reading the material he quotes can reasonably equate the Old Testament hope with modern Israel.

The traditional approach that Israel has always been on the defensive against threats from the Arabs, Palestinians and Islam, that it conducts itself responsibly and observes the ethical principles of warfare and that those who oppose it do so out of anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic bias are no longer plausible. Instead we find that all Israel's leaders have to some extent been committed to the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian, its National decisions have been pragmatic and have consistently ignored moral and ethical principles and that the West has chosen to believe the traditional myths as a means of justifying its own complicity in the crimes.

From Israel Itself

There have been many Zionists over the years like Moshe Sharett who have become appalled at the brutality of their colleagues. Today many Israelis share this horror and are risking ridicule and imprisonment by refusing to serve in

the Occupied Territories and by objecting to Israel's atrocities.

One such group have made the following statement, now signed by 559 soldiers, saying:-

*We, reserve combat officers and soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces, who were raised upon the principles of Zionism, sacrifice and giving to the people of Israel and to the State of Israel, who have always served in the front lines, and who were the first to carry out any mission, light or heavy, in order to protect the State of Israel and strengthen it... We hereby declare that we shall not continue to fight this War of the Settlements. We shall not continue to fight beyond the 1967 borders in order to dominate, expel, starve and humiliate an entire people.*⁹

Recently twenty-seven pilots also stated that they would not attack civilian targets in the West Bank in operations that they claim were 'illegal and immoral'.¹⁰ In December 2003 thirteen elite commandos declared "We shall no longer deface our human image as an army of occupation".¹¹ Many Israelis are deeply concerned about the effect that the occupation of the West Bank will have on the people who serve there.

Roane Carey & Jonathan Shainin (eds) *The Other Israel* presents critical comment by many Israelis on the current situation.¹² Neve Gordon for example writes an open letter to his friend Aviv Kohavi, a paratrooper in Nablus and laments 'Aviv..How did you become a war criminal?'.¹³ Ami Ayalon, head of Israel's general Security Service (Shin Bet) until 2000 says in an interview that 'Arafat neither prepared nor triggered the intifada,' and that he favours 'unconditional withdrawal from the territories'.¹⁴

Amnesty International released a statement on 18 December 2002 reporting that they had written to Shaul Mofaz, Israeli Minister of Defence saying,

*Some 180 conscientious objectors and refuseniks have been jailed in the past 26 months. [while] "Members of the IDF (Israeli Defence Forces) who commit grave human rights violations and war crimes, such as killing children and other unarmed civilians, recklessly shooting and shelling densely populated residential areas or blowing up houses on top of people and leaving them to die under the rubble are not brought to justice and held accountable for their acts."*¹⁵

The Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* is one of the few papers in the world prepared to print accurate accounts of the situation. One of its reporters Amira Haas has resided in Gaza and the West Bank while reporting and has published accounts of her experiences in *Drinking the Sea at Gaza: days and nights in a land under siege* and *Reporting from Ramallah*.¹⁶

Tanya Reinhart, a columnist for the Israeli newspaper *Yediot*

Aharonot, recently published the most chilling expose of the current situation *Israel/Palestine: How to end the War of 1948*.¹⁷ The book relies on eyewitness accounts of atrocities committed by the Israelis in the West Bank and Gaza. Experience of the last fifty-five years shows that over time our knowledge of such events will only increase. Increasingly soldiers will relate their experiences, some for example are found on Harpers.org:-

*When I first got to Hebron I wouldn't open fire on little children. And I was sure that if I ever killed or hurt anyone, I'd go so crazy that I'd leave the army. But finally I did shoot someone, and nothing happened to me. In Hebron I shot the legs off of two kids, and I was sure I wouldn't be able to sleep anymore at night, but nothing happened. Two weeks ago I hurt a Palestinian policeman, and that didn't affect me either. You become so apathetic you don't care at all. Shooting is the IDF soldier's way of meditating. It's like shooting is your way of letting go of all your anger when you're in the army. In Hebron there's this order they call "punitive shooting": just open fire on whatever you like. I opened fire not on any sources of fire but on windows where there was just wash hanging to dry. I knew that there were people who would be hit. But at that moment it was just shoot, shoot, shoot.*¹⁸

The Rabbis for Human Rights is another group seeking peace.¹⁹ It was founded in 1988, in response to serious abuses of human rights by the Israeli military authorities in the suppression of the Intifada. They draw attention to many of the moral principles of the Old Testament in the face of indifference of much of the country's religious and political leadership.

Members of the International Solidarity Movement have for some time been travelling to live in the occupied territories in an attempt to stop the Israeli atrocities by virtue of their presence. They have stood in front of bulldozers but recently Israelis have killed a number of them. Rachel Corrie was run over by a bulldozer and Israeli snipers shot Brian Avery and Tom Hurndall.²⁰ Eyewitness accounts and personal views of those who have given their lives such as Rachel Corrie were recently published in *Live from Palestine*.²¹

From outside Israel

Mountains of literature about the conflict have been published. Those that have stood the test of time and are well documented include David Hirst, *The Gun and the olive branch*, now in its third edition, Noam Chomsky, *The Fateful triangle*, also updated, Edward Said, *The End of the peace process: Oslo and after*.²²

There are a number of organizations following the conflict. One Jewish group is Rabbi Michael Lerner's *Tikkun*.²³ Lerner sees a straightforward solution to the conflict involving Israel-US honouring of the Oslo Accords and

withdrawing totally from occupied territory, the establishment of a viable Palestinian State, payment of reparations to Palestinians and the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Israel.²⁴ Michael Hoffman and Moshe Lieberman, *The Israeli Holocaust against the Palestinians* describe some not so attractive aspects of Jewish fundamentalism and its promotion of the conflict.²⁵

Another Jewish voice is the British Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks whose recent book *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* argues for religious coexistence in the face of Samuel P. Huntington's thesis that different cultures will always live in conflict.²⁶ Rabbi Sacks is especially critical of Israel as a force for discord.

All these sources of information recognise that in Western democracies, it will not be until people are willing to change governments over this issue that politicians will deviate from their unquestioning support for Israel. Other useful sources of information include Amnesty International, Middle East Report, Jews for Justice, Human Rights Watch Israel, Electronic Intifada, Institute for Palestine Studies, and the Palestine Centre for Human Rights.²⁷ Dr Hanan Ashrawi's *Miftah* manages one of the most comprehensive sites.²⁸

Norman Finkelstein, the son of genuine survivors of the holocaust has his own website where there is a good introduction to the conflict. He is the author of a number of books that have seriously questioned the legitimacy of Zionism and the State of Israel.²⁹ His books include *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the exploitation of Jewish suffering* and *Image and Reality of the Israel-Palestine Conflict*.³⁰

Books supporting Israel tend to be lauded in the press. One recent example is Alan Dershowitz, *The Case for Israel*.³¹ Finkelstein has taken issue with the book revealing plagiarism from Joan Peter's book to be discussed below and fabrication of the evidence.³² It is now very difficult to publish falsehood about the Israel-Palestine conflict without it being critically reviewed. However, such reviews are not likely to appear in many Western media outlets.

The Western Media

Every time Westerners turn on their televisions the standard myths about the conflict are reinforced. This was highlighted on a recent Middle Eastern visit by the author. The local Beirut channels were reporting daily deaths of Palestinians at the hands of the Israelis while the Western channels were silent. Then came a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv. The Middle Eastern channels reported it along with the other atrocities, the Western channels however launched into a barrage of condemnation describing how the peace process was now in jeopardy and that the cycle of violence was being "restarted". In reality violence had never diminished and there was not a peace process to begin with.

Again in December 2002 eighty-three Palestinians were killed by Israelis, most of these people were unarmed and many were women and children. Only the killing of “militants” was reported in the Western Media. When a double suicide bombing later occurred in Tel Aviv, three days of reports followed in the Australian media repeatedly claiming the Palestinians had started the violence.

With increasing regularity the media report completely false information. On 16 November 2002 many media outlets ran a story posted on the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs website claiming “Palestinian terrorists opened fire and threw grenades at a group of Jewish worshippers”. Kofi Annan and Colin Powell condemned the attack and it gave the Israelis a pretext for more brutal reprisals in the Occupied Territories. *The Australian* mentioned in the last paragraph of the story that all the Israelis killed were armed revealing that there was something more to the story. The BBC and *New York Times* cautioned that the identity of the dead was unclear. It was left to Israel’s *Ha’aretz* newspaper to reveal that in fact, two Palestinians had attacked soldiers and para-military after they had escorted Israeli settlers to their homes and the all clear had sounded. The incident was a military action between resistance fighters and an occupying army and there was no massacre of worshippers as the Israelis claimed.³³

The Israeli Government has been releasing falsehood like this since it began in 1948 and this is common knowledge, it is after all their job. What beggars belief is that the Western media gullibly continues to report the lies unchecked, unattributed and uncorrected and even worse, people who should know better believe it.

In Australia, the ABC has attempted to be more accurate by stationing its own reporters in the area, but this has come at the cost of a torrent of criticism from Israeli diplomats and Australian Zionists.³⁴ *Dateline* on SBS has also displayed astuteness when dealing with the Middle East, however as general rule the Western media is an unreliable source of information on the Middle East conflict. *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* have also had their own reporters in the area from time to time. Recently the *SMH* accurately reported the debate surrounding the visit to Australia by Dr Hanan Ashrawi to receive the Sydney Peace Prize including Alan Ramsey’s *Here’s Lucy, caving in, taking flight* severe criticism of the activities of the Jewish Lobby in Australia.³⁵

In the soon to be released *Tell me lies: Propaganda and Media Distortion in the Attack on Iraq* Tim Lleyellyn discusses the distorted way the BBC and media in the UK reports the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.³⁶ Books about the media and the Middle East include David Hirst *The Gun and the olive branch*, (already mentioned), Ziauddin Sadar and Merryl Wyn Davies, *Why do People Hate America?*, Paul Findley, *They Dare to Speak Out: People and Institutions Confront Israel’s Lobby*, Christopher Mayhew & Michael Adams, *Publish it not..The Middle East Cover*

up and Robert Fisk, *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War*.³⁷

Nothing changes. I remember remonstrating with a young Palestinian soon after the 1972 Munich killing of Israeli athletes saying that you could not justify what had happened. He responded by describing many killings of Palestinians carried out by Israeli organisations such as the Mossad. As someone who relied on the Western media I did not know what had been going on. As we worked on the dig together the young lad would daily point out the vapour trails of Israeli jets circling over Amman, deliberately taunting the Jordanians who were prevented by the West from developing an their own air force. Victor Ostrovsky and Claire Hoy, *By Way of Deception*, give a personal and stunning account of the Mossad and some of its activities during this era.³⁸

The Israeli Government knows that when they are committing atrocities that they have to exclude and control the media. The events surrounding Jenin in 2002 is one recent incident. It may be another 30 years before we can confirm what happened and what atrocities were committed by which time Israel hopes that nobody will care. In the mean time eyewitness accounts of the atrocities have started to appear.³⁹

The Media operates with a series of myths now deeply entrenched in Western tradition and belief. The myths are comfortable and cannot be departed from without questioning the values and beliefs of Western Society. Another consideration of myths may be found in Ali Abunimah and Hussain Ibish, ‘Debunking 6 Common Israeli Myths’.⁴⁰

Its their fault!

Myth One: The Palestinians and President Arafat in particular have created the current situation. Israel is only defending itself.

Many believe as Senator George Brandis recently claimed in a truncated Australian Parliamentary debate on the subject, the responsibility for the conflict rests with the Palestinians and President Arafat. In fact nothing could be further from the truth.

The documents that set the scene for Palestine in the Twentieth Century are found in Doreen Ingrams *Palestine Papers 1917-1922 Seeds of Conflict*.⁴¹ On 17 November 1917 after receiving Cabinet approval Lord Balfour wrote to Lord Rothschild with a declaration to be given to the Zionist Federation saying:

His Majesty’s Government view 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 the existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and

*political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.*⁴²

This wording found itself into the 1922 League of Nations' Mandate to Britain to administer the territory of Palestine.⁴³

The declaration set the scene for the tragedy that has followed in Palestine. The inhabitants of Palestine were not consulted in relation to the declaration. The British Zionist Federation supplied the wording relating to the establishment of a 'national home' to the British Government. The Zionists saw it as a circumlocution for a 'Jewish State' whereas the Cabinet meeting to approve the declaration thought it meant a British protectorate administered by Britain in favour of Jews. The Zionist delegation never had any intention of recognising the rights of the non-Jewish inhabitants of Palestine and it seems were not expected to. In making the declaration the British reneged on previous agreements with the Arabs and the Allies. Britain was still in empire mode as illustrated in a letter by Balfour to Lord Curzon on 11 August 1919:

The contradiction between the letters of the Covenant [of the League of Nations] and the policy of the Allies is even more flagrant in the case of the 'independent nation' of Palestine than in that of the 'independent nation' of Syria. For in Palestine we do not propose to even go through the form of consulting the wishes of the present inhabitants of the country....

The Four Great Powers [Britain, France, Italy and the United States] are committed to Zionism. And Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, and future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land.

...I do not think that Zionism will hurt the Arabs, but they will never say they want it....In short, 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 the letter, they have not always intended to violate.

*If Zionism is to influence the Jewish problem throughout the world Palestine must be made available for the largest number of Jewish immigrants. It is therefore eminently desirable that it should obtain the command of the water-power which naturally belongs to it whether by extending its borders to the north, or by treaty with the mandatory of Syria, ...For the same reason Palestine should be extended into the lands lying east of the Jordan.*⁴⁴

A foreign officer noted on this statement '[that] these programmes will entail bloodshed and military repression never seems to have occurred to him'.⁴⁵

The negotiations with the Palestinians during this period

failed supposedly because of the Palestinian's inflexibility. However, given the duplicity of the Great Powers and the single mindedness of the Zionists, there was really nothing to negotiate. The public presentation of the situation of course did not acknowledge this and instead took the more popular path of blaming the victims, the Palestinians. At no time in since 1917 has the situation changed.

The path then embarked upon by the Britain and the United States had only one possible outcome, that which we now see – the degradation, expulsion and execution of the Palestinians. The idea that the inhabitants of Palestine have done something that justifies the immoral, illegal and criminal treatment to which they are now subject wherever they seek shelter is disingenuous and ignores the real origins of the conflict.

Suicide Bombing

It is necessary to digress at this point because most Westerners have been conditioned by the Western media to believe that the cause of the conflict is suicide bombing by Palestinians. Suicide bombing is a recent phenomenon; it was not used during the first Intifada (1988-1992) when very few Israelis were killed. However Western media interest in the conflict now is almost exclusively focussed on suicide bombing. This pre-occupation and the total abhorrence of the practice assumed by the media is rather curious.

One of America's greatest World War II heroes, General 'Jimmy' Doolittle, led sixteen Mitchell bombers to bomb civilians living in Tokyo four months after Pearl Harbour with the knowledge that they did not have sufficient fuel to return. It was important for US morale that the raid took place not because it served any strategic purpose but because it sent a message to the Japanese at a time when the US was not ready to fully engage them. Doolittle, Congressional Medal of Honor, was a suicide bomber.

Recently the Australian Parliament recognised the Australian servicemen who attacked shipping in Singapore harbour after a voyage in a fishing vessel, the *Kraig*. They knew that no return was possible. Why do we honour the gallantry of our own and dismiss the courage of others?

At a time when the US is raging around the world killing and incarcerating non-US civilians at will because of one, albeit horrendous, terrorist attack, the Palestinians who have lived under brutal occupation for almost ninety years and suffered daily atrocities are expected to act as if nothing has happened. Many regard this as hypocrisy.

Suicide bombing is a recent symptom of the injustice the Palestinians have received at the hands of the West and the Western media's preoccupation with it is just another phase of the 'blame the victim' syndrome. Recent practice indicates that Israel is able to kill literally hundreds of Palestinian women and children with no comment in the Western press; without suicide bombing the Palestinians

would be in danger of sinking without trace.

While the West denies the Palestinians basic humanity it can hardly criticise their behaviour. For Israel and the West it really is a case of reaping what has been sown. Ultimately the Palestinians who suicide are saying that they do not want to live in the world the West has created, and they are prepared to make the statement with their lives. Two years ago President Bush said that this fact upset him, but his minders soon took over and no such display of compassion from the White House has recurred.

Who are the terrorists?

Myth Two: Palestinians are all terrorists and Arafat is the father of terrorism. There will never be peace while they exist.

Nearly every media reference to the conflict with the Palestinians refers to them as ‘terrorists’ or ‘militants’. From the start of the 1948 hostilities this has been the standard way the West has viewed Palestinians. As a result Westerners have become conditioned to thinking that Palestinians are the belligerent element in the conflict. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Under the mandate the British treated the Palestinians with extreme cruelty, so much so that in 1935 there was a rebellion against the mandate. Westminster came to the conclusion that the mandate was not working and set about limiting Jewish immigration and declared in a White Paper that they were no longer committed to a Jewish homeland.

The Zionists in Palestine by 1935 had already received permission to raise their own armed forces supposedly for protection. These groups worked in conjunction with British forces to brutally suppress any Palestinian opposition.⁴⁶ In fact today many Israelis claim that they have not done anything to the Palestinians that the British had not previously done under the Mandate. This is only partly true.

A British army captain Orde Wingate, charitably described by Hirst as ‘eccentric’ trained Zionists such as Moshe Dayan in offensive activities against the Palestinians involving cold-blooded murder of Palestinian civilians. This developed into the tradition Hirst calls the ‘Arab Fighter’ that brought Israel into existence and has always dominated its policy and practice.⁴⁷

Even during the World War 2 Jewish gangs continued terrorist activities against the British. There were a number of attempts to assassinate the High Commissioner in Palestine and in November 1944 Lord Moyne, the British Resident Minister in Cairo was assassinated. Moyne’s two assassins were members of the Stern gang and in July 1975 their bodies were exhumed and returned to Israel for a burial in a cemetery reserved for heroes at a ceremony attended by the Israeli President and Prime Minister.⁴⁸ They also had a commemorative stamp issued in their honour.⁴⁹

On 22 July 1946 the Irgun under the command of Menachem Begin blew up the King David Hotel where the British Mandate administration was housed. Eighty-eight people died including fifteen Jews. With Zionist terrorist actions running at twenty per month and costing hundreds of British lives including the hanging of two British Army Sergeants, also by the Irgun, Britain hastened its departure from Palestine.⁵⁰ The well-equipped Zionist armies then went on a spree of ethnic cleansing to establish control of an area much larger than the UN had allocated.

Count Folke Bernadotte was a Swedish royal who had during World War 2 rescued large numbers of Jews from the Nazi’s. He was predisposed to Zionism and was selected by the UN in June 1948 to mediate a peace in the fighting in Palestine. As a man of integrity he saw the importance of the Palestinians right of return to their villages. The Zionists were implacably opposed to this and so on 17 September when he was entering Jerusalem three members of the Stern Gang assassinated him. One of the assassins was Yitzhak Shamir who later became Prime Minister of Israel.⁵¹ Israeli terrorism continued through the 1950’s with the alleged blowing up of synagogues in Iraq and Western targets in Egypt in an attempt to force Jews to immigrate to Israel.⁵²

Without terrorism Israel would not exist. It is hard to find an Israeli Prime Minister or leading politician who was not personally responsible for terrorist actions or war crimes against humanity. Moshe Sharett stands almost alone as the first and the last Israeli leader who was genuinely committed to the establishment of a just and democratic State. Many will read his diaries with interest when they are published in English.

A turning point in much Western attitude to the conflict came with the Israeli bombing of Beirut in 1982. As the bombing of the city was presented daily on television many rightly questioned what was going on. The cause of the Middle East conflict was plain for all to see. In a desolate bombed out street of Beirut, Arafat was asked by a journalist if he was now going to give up terrorism. With a wave of the hand he replied– ‘Who are the terrorists?’

Why did the Palestinians leave – the myth of radio broadcasts

Myth Three: In 1948 the Palestinians fled Palestine after radio broadcasts from the Higher Arab Committee warning that there was to be an invasion of Arab forces and that they should leave.

The idea is first found in Israeli propaganda of 1953 and has been regularly quoted by Israeli officials ever since. It also appears in Christian literature. Some find comfort in the assumption that the Palestinians left as the result of Arab instruction, irrespective of the fact that the Israelis denied them the opportunity to later return to their villages.

Christopher Hitchens in *Blaming the Victims*, summarises the investigation into this myth. No-one can testify to ever

hearing any such broadcasts and in fact the reverse was often the case, the Palestinians were ordered to stay put. Hitchens draws on Israeli historian, Benny Morris, who found no reference to the broadcasts in Israeli Defense Forces reports from the period, which instead stated that 72 per cent of the Palestinians left as a result of Israeli military force.⁵³

Israeli historian Benny Morris in *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem 1947-1949* has killed the idea of Arab broadcasts once and for all only to replace it with the idea that expulsion of the Palestinians was not by design but the result of war when people fled out of natural fear. Finkelstein *Image and Reality* takes issue with this idea.⁵⁴ Benny Morris has recently changed his mind about this.⁵⁵

The real reason for the departure of the Palestinians was the program of ethnic cleansing carried out by Zionist forces. It should be noted that “cleansing” is the correct translation of the Hebrew *tihar* used by Israelis to describe the driving out of the Palestinians.

Peretz Kidron, an Israeli English translator and ghost writer, has published excerpts from biographies by Ben Dunkelman and Yitzhak Rabin describing how both men were in the Israeli Army in 1948 and were ordered to ‘drive out’ the Palestinians; Dunkelman captured Nazareth and refused to carry out the order and Rabin who commanded the Harel brigade captured Lydda and Ramleh.⁵⁶ Rabin describes a meeting with Ben-Gurion and Yigael Alon, who was facing a similar problem in Galilee:

*We walked outside, Ben Gurion followed us. Alon repeated his question: ‘What is to be done with the population?’ BG waved his hand in a gesture which said: Drive them out! Alon and I held a consultation and I agreed that it was essential to drive the inhabitants out.*⁵⁷

Rabin then describes how they forced some fifteen thousand Palestinians out. He then comments that:

*There were some of the fellows [Israeli soldiers] who refused to take part in the expulsions. Prolonged propaganda activities were required after the action, to remove the bitterness of these youth movement groups, and explain why we were obliged to undertake such a harsh and cruel action.*⁵⁸

Kidron concluded that there was a consistency in both Rabin’s written and Dunkelman’s verbal accounts. Ben-Gurion dealt personally with both men and there were no written orders about the matter as it was appreciated by all concerned that what was being done was unlawful and discreditable. Both men clearly lost sleep over the matter, although not as much as the Palestinians involved have done since then. Benny Morris agrees that Ben-Gurion was the source of the order to undertake ethnic cleansing.⁵⁹

For many years the massacre of Deir Yassin on 9 April 1948 was seen as an isolated incident carried out by Zionist

extremists not controlled by the moderate Zionist command. The story of 1948 is still unfolding with the discovery of an increasing number of massacres of Palestinians. A case in point is that of the village of Tantura.

Tantura

The following information is derived mainly from a paper by Prof Ilan Pappé of Haifa University, entitled “The Tantura Case in Israel: The Katz Research and Trial”.⁶⁰ The situation involving the village of Tantura is interesting both as an illustration of the fate of Palestinian villages and of the problem of history Israelis now face.

The demise of the village was the subject of a Master’s thesis at Haifa University by Teddy Katz. Katz interviewed a total of 135 people; both Israeli’s involved in the action and the Palestinian survivors. Interestingly the full extent of the massacre has not been documented previously, although it may be included in Israeli records of the period that remain secret. Walid Khalidi was not aware of the extent of the massacre at Tantura.⁶¹

Tantura was 35 km south of Haifa on the coast and was located in the area allocated by the UN to Israel. It had about 1,500 inhabitants. There was a battle on the night of 22 May 1948 when the 33rd Battalion of the Alexandroni Brigade of the Haganah (later the Israel Defense Force) attacked the village on all four sides. This approach departed from their normal practice of only surrounding villages on three sides allowing an escape route for the villagers – a procedure seen recently in Kosovo.

There were casualties on both sides after which the village surrendered. The Israelis then went on a rampage killing about 100 villagers. During the following day the villagers were taken to the beach, the men were separated from women and children, and then the men between 13 and 30 years were then taken in small groups to the area of the cemetery and shot. Between 100 and 150 more people were killed in this process. On 9 June the Alexandroni Brigade reported that they had ‘tended to the mass grave and everything is in order’.⁶²

The eyewitness descriptions of the murder, rape and torture are harrowing and the reflections of the soldiers who took part in the atrocities are sad. One soldier was disturbed that he had done what he despised the Germans for doing. Many rightly believe that there cannot be peace until this past is acknowledged.

Some members of the Alexandroni Brigade sued Katz for libel and under considerable pressure he recanted bringing court proceedings to an end. Almost immediately he changed his mind, but the case was not reopened. It is unlikely that in Israel today such a case could be heard as it would involve the examination of testimonies of all Katz’s informants.

One of the soldiers testified (in 1997) that ‘someone who later was a big shot in the Israeli Department of Defense

was an officer at Tantura, and he killed with his own pistol, one Arab after another.’ A nineteen-year-old Ariel Sharon was a company commander in the Alexandroni Brigade and was in both places at the right time, but there may also have been others.

The area of Tantura is now occupied by the kibbutz of Nachsholim established by holocaust survivors and the site of the village itself is a recreational area. Most of the Palestinian survivors live in refugee camps in Syira or the al-Qabun quarter of Damascus.

About 240 such massacres are known from what the Israeli’s call the ‘War of Independence’. Moshe Dayan was later to comment “there is not a single place in this country that did not have a former Arab population”.⁶³ Benny Morris recently acknowledged that there were more massacres and acts of rape carried out by the Israelis in 1948 than he had previously realised however, “You can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs. You have to dirty your hands”.⁶⁴

In 1973 I remember looking for the village of Fiq, Old Testament Aphek, in the Golan area. Aphek was the site of Saul’s last stand (1Sam 29:1) and Ahab’s defeat by Benhadad (1Ki. 20:30). It was never part of ancient Israel. When we arrived at the estimated location there was nothing but ploughed fields in all directions and a new Kibbutz in the distance. It was not until we got out of the car that we saw all the bull-dozer tracks. The ancient village of Fiq was no more.

An eyewitness account of 1948 is Elias Chacour’s *Blood Brothers*.⁶⁵ He describes the ethnic cleansing in northern Galilee and the typical older Palestinian passive response of his father.

The inevitable consequences of the decisions made in London and Paris thirty years earlier had come to pass. Future generations will ponder why the international community of the Twentieth Century could not tolerate the ethnic cleansing of the Balkans but was complicit in the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. The trial of Milosovic is as much a trial of the International community that has not seen fit to bring to justice the Israelis, many of whom later became Prime Ministers, for similar crimes against humanity.

They do not exist

Myth Four. Palestine was uninhabited before the arrival of Jewish immigrants and the Palestinians came from surrounding countries when they saw how attractive Palestine was with Jewish development. Palestinians never existed as an entity.

This is an important argument for Israelis and Christians who recognise that it is immoral to colonise and enslave existing populations. The Balfour letter quoted above stated that there were ‘700,000 Arabs’ living in Palestine at the end of World War I and he was probably about right.

The idea that the Palestinians did not exist was often used in Israel in the 50’s and 60’s and Prime Minister Golda Meir

once said as much.⁶⁶ More recently Joan Peters *From Time Immemorial*, has presented such an argument.⁶⁷ This book was severely criticised in Britain and Israel as factually untrue, but with the exception of two reviews, it was lauded in the US. The arguments have been thoroughly debunked by Norman Finkelstein in *Image and Reality* and a summary of his arguments can also be found in *Blaming the Victims*, eds Edward Said and Christopher Hitchens.⁶⁸

One interesting aspect of the debate is that Peters’ fraudulent book continues to be recommended and believed in the US and is still quoted by Christians. It was extensively plagiarised by Dershowitz in his recent book. Anthony Lewis’ review of the Peters’ hoax in the *New York Times* in January 1986 entitled ‘There Were No Indians’ hints at the reason for this; US frontier tradition is based on myth, so why should Israeli tradition not be likewise based. The lack of free thought and respect for the truth in the US today is a major threat to world peace.

The link to the American genocide of the Indians continues to be referred to, the most recent by Benny Morris in his *Ha’aretz* interview, “Even the great American democracy could not have been created without the annihilation of the Indians. There are cases in which the overall, final good justifies harsh and cruel acts that are committed in the course of history.”⁶⁹ Morris clearly sees the Palestinian demise as a necessary evil.

The idea that Palestinians migrated into the area in recent times is absurd in any case. They are not Egyptians, Hashemites, Syrians or Lebanese, so where did they come from? The idea could only be accepted by those with no knowledge of the people of the Middle East and who see its inhabitants simply as ‘Arabs’.

When Democracy is not what it used to be

Myth Five: Israel is a legitimate democratic State, in contrast to other Middle Eastern countries.

Israel has elections on a regular basis and Palestinians who have remained in Israel have had the right to vote. This has given rise to the belief that Israel is a beacon for democracy in the Middle East. The reality is rather different.

As has been noted Israel was founded on terrorism and has maintained its position by a continuous campaign hostility to the indigenous Palestinians and any other party not prepared to give it unconditional support. It consistently undertakes military action not authorised by the Knesset. This is hardly the behaviour of a democracy.

Palestinians in Israel find themselves disenfranchised from many services and rights of citizenship by an embedded system of regulation based on the privileges of Jewishness. The decisions of the courts are often ignored and it seems that Israel no longer practices the rule of law. Non-Jewish people born in Palestine have no rights to Israeli nationality, but Jews born anywhere in the world do. This is not democracy.

Zionist forces captured Jerusalem in 1948 and 1967 and it continues to be occupied by Israel contrary to international law. Nearly all embassies to Israel are located in Tel Aviv in recognition of the illegality. Henry Cattán, *Palestine and International Law*, documents Israel's legal illegitimacy.⁷⁰

Israel has not complied with the large number of UN resolutions passed against it. Two such resolutions are Resolution 194 December 1948 regarding the Palestinians right of return and Resolution 242 November 1967 requiring Israel to withdraw from the Occupied Territories. If any other country had behaved remotely as Israel has it would have been subjected to sanctions and even invasion.

The occupation of the territories and their colonisation is a process of illegal conquest. It confers rights on the Israeli settlers and denies rights to the Palestinian inhabitants. Israel has governed the Occupied Territories for over thirty years, using intimidation, detention without trial, collective punishment, land expropriation, deportation, withdrawal of water and other essential services, denial of emergency medical attention, restriction of movement, destruction of personal and community property and livelihoods, illegal demolition of dwellings and public facilities, use of firearms to cripple civilians, assassination and massacre. Denial of human rights in the occupied territories whose occupants have been stateless for thirty-six years is not the behaviour of a democratic nation.

Regular elections are a good basis for developing a stable political system, but when there is an underlying military culture that has the real power as there is in Israel, there is very little to be proud of. An example of this was the Qibya massacre.

The Qibya Massacre

Israel's approach to the Palestinians and the world is illustrated by the Qibya massacre. It is described in David Hirst, *The Gun and the Olive Branch* and Uzi Benziman, *Sharon, An Israeli Caesar*.⁷¹

In 1953 a Special Forces section of the Israeli army called Unit 101 was set up. Hirst sees its formation as the legitimising of the "Arab Fighter" in the tradition of the US "Indian Fighter". It was a tradition imparted by the British army instructor, Wingate, and practised by the Israelis during the 1948 ethnic cleansing of Palestine.

Ariel Sharon led unit 101 and their first mission was against the El Bureig refugee camp in Gaza where they killed 50 Palestinians.⁷² The next raid was against the village of Qibya on the night of 14 October 1953. The border had been comparatively quiet during the preceding year with three Israeli and twelve Palestinian deaths. The Qibya raid was claimed to be in retaliation for the deaths of an Israeli woman and her two children at the settlement of Yahud the night before. One hundred and twenty three soldiers carried out the raid blowing up 45 houses and killing 69 villagers, all civilians, three quarters of whom were women and children. The international community was outraged and Israel was

ordered to provide an explanation to the UN Security Council. On the 24 November 1953 the Security Council passed a resolution expressing the "strongest censure".

The soon to be published English translation of the Moshe Sharett diaries sheds light on the Israeli response to the situation. Sharett was Israel's Foreign Minister 1948-56 and Prime Minister 1954-56. Excerpts have been given in the *Journal of Palestine Studies*.⁷³

Although Sharett was the acting Prime Minister at the time of the attack he knew nothing of it until the morning after. In fact Ben-Gurion, Dayan, the Defense Minister Lavon and the Chief of General Staff, Makleff, had sanctioned the attack. Five days after the attack Ben-Gurion formulated a statement saying that it was the result of some settlers running amok in revenge for a Palestinian attack. Nobody, it seems, believed a word of it, after all how could a few settlers carry out something that took 123 soldiers and seven tonnes of explosive. The UN condemnation was exceptionally strong. Winston Churchill although being a Zionist himself was reported not to have been so furious since the Zionist Stern Gang murdered Lord Moyne, the British Minister of State for the Middle East, in Cairo in 1944.

In spite of the outrage, this has become the standard Israeli approach to conflict until the present day. They have been disciplined so that nearly all of their attacks on Palestinians and others have had sanction from an inner circle of military hardliners, often operating independently of the democratic leadership. When called to account by the international community, excuses saying that the event was a mistake or the result of unauthorised reactionary behaviour would be made. Ariel Sharon became a hero in Israel after Qibya and his Arab Fighter tradition now has almost complete sway in Jerusalem and Washington.

Its all Arafat's Fault

Myth Six: Arafat was offered everything at Camp David and subsequent negotiations and rejected it in favour of violence.

In a sense we have come full circle. The victims are now blamed because supposedly their leader Arafat turned his back on Israeli generosity in favour of further violence. In fact the Israelis never offered Arafat anything.

The charade of the 'Peace Process' has been described and discussed by a number of writers. One of the most recent and succinct is Tanya Reinhart *Israel/Palestine*. Naseer Aruri *Dishonest Broker* provides a fuller treatment.⁷⁴ Others include Edward W. Said *The end of the Peace Process: Oslo and After* and Roane Carey *The New Intifada*. See also Seth Ackerman 'The Myth of the Generous Offer'.⁷⁵

After the signing of the Oslo Accords in September 1993, Israel took control of a third of the Gaza area and ceased issuing the Palestinians residents exit permits. They took

increasing control of the West Bank doubling the number of settlements by 2000. The Palestinian economy contracted severely leading to much hardship.

In the six years following Oslo, Arafat served Israel well by conducting a brutal campaign to control Palestinian extremists. Amnesty International often cited the Palestinian Authority during this time for its human rights violations against Palestinians. However the pressure was building in the Palestinian territories as their situation deteriorated, and eventually erupted in the second intifada sparked by Sharon's provocative visit to the Haram esh-Sharif and the shooting of six unarmed demonstrators by his guards.

In 1999 President Clinton attempted to emulate Jimmy Carter and facilitated discussions between Israel and their opposition. Prime Minister Ehud Barak and President Arafat met at Camp David, but the talks broke up with disappointment. The only matters put to Arafat were by Clinton and did not necessarily have Israeli approval. Reinhart discusses the details of the negotiations.⁷⁶ The US as mediators offered Arafat a situation worse than the status quo and although Arafat had agreed to nearly everything until then, he knew that the Israeli demands conveyed by the US represented an end for him and his people. Unlike all other 'peace negotiations' there are no written records of the Camp David proceedings so those who claim Arafat was offered something are deceived.

Later in January 2001 the talks were re-established at Taba in Northern Sinai. The issues reported to have been on the table were far reaching and supposedly offered a genuine chance of peace. However these talks were conducted in the context of an Israeli election campaign and Reinhart believes were only intended by Barak to produce a press statement.⁷⁷ Barak got his press statement and claimed to be able to bring peace as a result, but it did not dissuade Israelis who duly elected Ariel Sharon.

The moment Arafat ceased doing the bidding of Israel and the US he was the subject of vilification and a successor had to be selected by the Israelis. Palestinians have never been allowed to be represented by leaders who will responsibly put their case. All potential leaders with integrity have been exiled, assassinated by Israel or sidelined by the West. The Palestinians for their part have not lived in peace for ninety years, however as Rashid Khalidi argues this oppression has fermented a Palestinian national identity that will not disappear quickly.⁷⁸

In Aruri's view the US and Israeli 'peace process' has put Arafat in a no-win situation because 'the very nature of the Israeli state precludes genuine coexistence with the Palestinian people on an equal basis.'⁷⁹ Until Israel itself is changed, no just peace is possible.

There are only two approaches that have been taken to the Palestinians by the US-Israeli coalition, the offer of a South African apartheid style Bantustans or 'transfer' that is

ethnic cleansing. The Oslo Agreement and Camp David were examples of the first approach. The construction of the wall around Palestinian areas was started by Ehud Barak and is a component of 'bantustanisation'.

Many in the US and Israeli governments now favour the latter approach and many believe that is the policy now being prepared by Israel with the support of massive amounts of US military aid. Reinhart provides evidence to show that Israel's destruction of every aspect of Palestinian society, assassination of its leaders and the murder and mutilation of its people is deliberate. She describes how the Israelis have a policy to shoot civilians posing no threat to cripple them rather than kill in order to keep the death toll down and increase the burden on their society.⁸⁰ Interestingly the only people that I have heard support this brutality are Christians of a fundamentalist persuasion.

Even handedness with only one hand?

Myth seven: There are two sides to the story.

This summary of the situation will inevitably be criticised for being one-sided, biased or what ever as is every such work. Indeed if it is not so labelled one could be forgiven for concluding that it had failed. Attempts to create two sides have invariably led to imbalance and the impression of falsehood. If the conflict is unbalanced, it is false to report it as if it is balanced. As Tim Lleyellen notes in his discussion of distortion in the British media, people are starting to realise as they watch tanks against stones and soldiers against civilians, that the words do not match the pictures.⁸¹

It is important that both sides face the truth, and at the moment it is the West that is not facing up to the truth about its crimes. Walid Khalidi concludes the preface of his book listing the details of all the Palestinian villages that existed prior to 1948 by saying,

*If All that Remains further helps to draw attention of the outside world, and of Zionists and their supporters, to the price paid by Palestinians so that Israel could be established and the conscience of Western Christendom salved for its own anti-Semitic crimes, then it might also be of some relevance today in the search for an honorable and peaceful resolution of this century-old conflict.*⁸²

Attempting to bring peace to the Middle East is a thankless task. The comments of General Carl von Horn of the United Nations Truce Supervisor Organisation that oversaw the establishment of Israel in 1948 are as true today as ever,

Our raison d'etre as peacekeepers was objectivity and impartiality. Yet these very qualities were exactly those which led to hostility. It was understandable; time and time again in the course of frank discussions with Israeli officers and officials, I had heard them openly repudiate the idea of objectivity. Their flat statement 'You are

either for or against us', explained why – having dared to be entirely objective – I had now been branded as irrevocably 'against'. .. Even nastier was an Israeli tendency immediately to brand objectivity as anti-Semitic; a convenient label which could be smeared on any UN soldier whose impartial report did not weigh down in favour of the Israelis.⁸³

It is hard to describe the conflict because any words that are used are attacked as extreme and those who apply the terms are fearful of being outed as irrational extremists. Those who have attempted to be objective are still branded Anti-Semitic. In *The Politics of Anti-Semitism* Scott Handleman sees this as trivialising the concept at one level, and at another he sees those who make such allegations as being similar to holocaust deniers because they are refusing to face the truth.⁸⁴

Language is also being distorted. At Jenin the Israelis killed many Palestinian civilians in April 2002, but it was not a 'massacre'. The Palestinians have been subjected to ethnic cleansing and a full range of brutal and murderous discriminatory practices for fifty-five years but it is not 'genocide'.

It is significant that no one at this stage is regularly using the 'G' word in relation to this conflict, although some have noted that it certainly looks like genocide. However, the United Nations Human Rights Commission strongly condemned what it called 'Israel's responsibility for the large-scale massacre in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, which constituted an act of genocide.'⁸⁵ The current Prime Minister of Israel was deemed to bear personal responsibility for the massacres by an official Israeli inquiry and under the IV Geneva Convention as the highest-ranking military officer in command, General Ariel Sharon, may be deemed guilty of war crimes.

One of the parties now in Government in Israel is openly committed to the 'transfer' of Palestinians and the idea has received support in the US. 'Transfer' is otherwise known as ethnic cleansing and ethnic cleansing is a war crime and included in the UN Commission for Human Rights and the Geneva Convention definition of genocide. People like President Milosovic are being tried in The Hague for such crimes.

Martin Shaw notes the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians and describes the conflict as having 'genocidal dimensions'.⁸⁶ Another recent writer on genocide however made the absurd claim that it is the Palestinians who should be investigated for genocidal attitudes.⁸⁷ While the US rages around the world like a bear with a sore head, it is understandable that many see the West to be hypocritical to expect no frustration from those who have been subjected to ninety years of Western violence.

The only fair way for such issues to be dealt with is for the evidence to be assessed, but when it is not possible for

independent parties to investigate situations as occurred recently when the Israeli's prevented the media and then the UN from visiting the Jenin area, it is hard to be conclusive. The full array of evidence is not before us. The mass graves of Palestine have not yet been excavated, unlike those in Kosovo, Eastern Europe and Iraq. When they are and when Israeli government papers become available a final assessment will be made. Muslims rightly see this willingness by the West to exclude Israel's occupation from external scrutiny as more hypocrisy.

People have lived in hope and no doubt have not wanted to jeopardize any possibility of peace by seeming to overstate the situation. However, this comes to the crux of the problem, which is a general refusal at all levels to face reality. Some Israelis have done so and have been imprisoned as a result.

Norman Finkelstein (14 April 2002) provides the following stunning assessment:-

Having failed in its carrot policy [the Oslo Accords], Israel now reached for the big stick.

Two preconditions had to be met, however, before Israel could bring to bear its overwhelming military superiority: a "green light" from the U.S. and a sufficient pretext. Already in summer 2000, the authoritative Jane's Information Group reported that Israel had completed planning for a massive and bloody invasion of the Occupied Territories. But the US vetoed the plan and Europe made equally plain its opposition. After 11 September, however, the US came on board. Indeed, Sharon's goal of crushing the Palestinians basically fit in with the US administration's goal of exploiting the World Trade Center atrocity to eliminate the last remnants of Arab resistance to total US domination. Through sheer exertion of will and despite a monumentally corrupt leadership, Palestinians have proven to be the most resilient and recalcitrant popular force in the Arab world. Bringing them to their knees would deal a devastating psychological blow throughout the region.

With a green light from the US, all Israel now needed was the pretext. Predictably it escalated the assassinations of Palestinian leaders following each lull in Palestinian terrorist attacks.

"After the destruction of the houses in Rafah and Jerusalem, the Palestinians continued to act with restraint," Shulamith Aloni of Israel's Meretz party observed. "Sharon and his army minister, apparently fearing that they would have to return to the negotiating table, decided to do something and they liquidated Raad Karmi. They knew that there would be a response, and that we would pay the price in the blood of our citizens." (Yediot Aharonot, 18 January 2002) Indeed, Israel desperately sought this sanguinary response.

Once the Palestinian terrorist attacks crossed the desired threshold, Sharon was able to declare war and proceed to annihilate the basically defenseless civilian Palestinian population.

Only the willfully blind can miss noticing that Israel's current invasion of the West Bank is an exact replay of the June 1982 invasion of Lebanon.

To crush the Palestinians' goal of an independent state alongside Israel - the PLO's "peace offensive" - Israel laid plans in August 1981 to invade Lebanon. In order to launch the invasion, however, it needed the green light from the Reagan administration and a pretext. Much to its chagrin and despite multiple provocations, Israel was unable to elicit a Palestinian attack on its northern border. It accordingly escalated the air assaults on southern Lebanon and after a particularly murderous attack that left two hundred civilians dead (including 60 occupants of a Palestinian children's hospital), the PLO finally retaliated killing one Israeli. With the pretext in hand and a green light now forthcoming from the Reagan administration, Israel invaded. Using the same slogan of "rooting out Palestinian terror," Israel proceeded to massacre a defenseless population, killing some 20,000 Palestinians and Lebanese, almost all civilians.

The problem with the Bush administration, we are repeatedly told, is that it has been insufficiently engaged with the Middle East, a diplomatic void Colin Powell's mission is supposed to fill. But who gave the green light for Israel to commit the massacres? Who supplied the F-16s and Apache helicopters to Israel? Who vetoed the Security Council resolutions calling for international monitors to supervise the reduction of violence? And who just blocked the proposal of the United Nation's top human rights official, Mary Robinson, to merely send a fact-finding team to the Palestinian territories? (Institute of Palestine Studies, 3 April 2002)

To repress Palestinian resistance, a senior Israeli officer earlier this year urged the army to "analyze and internalize the lessons of...how the German army fought in the Warsaw ghetto." (Haaretz, 25 January 2002, 1 February 2002) Judging by the recent Israeli carnage in the West Bank - the targeting of Palestinian ambulances and medical personnel, the targeting of journalists, the killing of Palestinian children "for sport" (Chris Hedges, New York Times former Cairo bureau chief), the rounding up, handcuffing and blindfolding of all Palestinian males between the ages 15 and 50, and affixing of numbers on their wrists, the indiscriminate torture of Palestinian detainees, the denial of food, water, electricity, and medical

assistance to the Palestinian civilian population, the indiscriminate air assaults on Palestinian neighborhoods, the use of Palestinian civilians as human shields, the bulldozing of Palestinian homes with the occupants huddled inside - it appears that the Israeli army is following the officer's advice.

Dismissing all criticism as motivated by anti-Semitism, Elie Wiesel - chief spokesman for the Holocaust Industry - lent unconditional support to Israel, stressing the "great pain and anguish" endured by its rampaging army. (Reuters, 11 April; CNN, 14 April)

Meanwhile, the Portuguese Nobel laureate in literature, Jose Saramago, invoked the "spirit of Auschwitz" in depicting the horrors inflicted by Israel, while a Belgian parliamentarian avowed that Israel was "making a concentration camp out of the West Bank." (The Observer, 7 April 2002)

Israelis across the political spectrum recoil in outrage at such comparisons. Yet, if Israelis don't want to stand accused of being Nazis they should simply stop acting like Nazis.⁸⁸

Two months later Finkelstein gave a lecture at Toronto University entitled *Back to Basics: Expulsion — The Next Stage of the 'Peace Process'*. It is hard to escape his conclusion as inevitable.

It was Noam Chomsky who first discussed the possibility of the West being held to ransom by an Israeli threat to use its Nuclear weapons against its neighbours in the event of a possible shift in policy by the West.⁸⁹ The present focus on any nation except Israel and the US that may have contemplated nuclear weapons is rightly viewed by many as hypocrisy.

Christians and the Middle East

Graham Hoskin's papers in *Interchange* 1976 and *Perspectives* 1983 explaining Christian attitudes to the Middle East remain relevant today especially his recommendation that Christians should heed Jesus' instruction to his disciples to 'be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves'.⁹⁰ Graham's first paper had a profound influence in England and through a series of events, partly involving the author, led to Colin Chapman's first edition of *Whose Promised Land?*⁹¹

Christian approaches to the Middle East have invariably put a theological overlay on the situation and by ignoring reality have often been contrived and nonsensical in the eyes of informed observers. Christians have traditionally spoken of the Jews returning to 'their land' with out even hinting that there was an existing population or that to achieve the return the population had been subjected to atrocities and illegal measures. These ideologies have most recently motivated the US Christian Coalition to drive American policies in a way that has seen a dramatic deterioration in Palestinian conditions.⁹² Christian attitudes

are not on the sidelines.

When the highly respected Christian author Elizabeth Elliot questioned this approach in her well-researched book on the subject *Furnace of the Lord* she faced implacable opposition and effectively had her book banned by most Christian bookshops.⁹³

Likewise, when Colin Chapman's analysis, *Whose Promised Land?*, was published the Christian bookshops I monitored ran promotions of a David Prince book extolling Zionism and stocked almost no copies of Chapman's book. Chapman's revised book although still published by the Christian Publisher, Lion Publishing, is not often to be found in Christian bookshops. Christine Mallouhi *Waging peace on Islam* has also experienced hostility from many Christian quarters and 'Christian responses' advocating a war on Islam have appeared.⁹⁴

Sojourners Magazine is one and possibly the only Christian outlet that consistently presents well-substantiated information and a full range of views on the Middle East. It also has a responsive readership that provides accurate feedback when factual errors occur and an audio visual introduction to the current situation.⁹⁵

A consistent theme amongst Christians is that they know better because they have inside knowledge. Jesus saw the same attitude in the religious people of his day and in most of his clashes with them he presented a position of common sense and compassion in the face of real human tragedy. While the Pharisees were preoccupied with questions such as Sabbath observance, Jesus focused on human need, such as a workingman with a withered hand (Matt. 12:9-14). In the same way Christians today discuss the prophetic meaning of modern Israel and ignore the plight of the people involved.

In August 2003 while President Bush was meeting Mahmoud Abbas and Ariel Sharon in Washington, one of Bush's allies, Tom DeLay, the Republican majority leader in the US House of Representatives addressed the Knesset. He urged Israel to ignore the truce and to go on killing Palestinian activists; he could not imagine 'that a Palestinian State could ever happen'. DeLay is a Christian Zionist and fundamentalist and his views were deemed by many Israelis to be more extreme than the ruling Israeli parties.⁹⁶

The behaviour of Israel in the Occupied Territories is that of a morally defeated and psychologically disturbed nation. But do Christians have anything to say to Israelis other than to appear as more ghastly images of themselves? Many have watched South Africa over the last decade with some awe and a realisation that the Israel-Palestine conflict does not have comparable change agents – with the possible exception of Dr Hanan Ashrawi.

Tony Compolo recently said that he could quote Jesus anywhere except in American churches.⁹⁷ While this is tragic, it is also what Jesus expected; he did not come for the religious who consider themselves whole (Matt 9: 12f). It is

healthy for Jesus to be decoupled from Western Christianity because it provides a genuine opportunity to understand him and his teaching in the light of our current circumstances.

There are two aspects of evangelical Christianity that have traditionally linked it to the Israeli side of the conflict, the ethnic link and the prophetic expectation relating to the land. Christians seem to have forgotten that Jesus was the product of a virgin birth and while he was prepared to take the title, Son of David, and Son of Abraham, he did not have a physical link to them. In Matthew chapter one the genealogy of Joseph is set out in the context of his decision to marry Mary who was carrying a child who could not physically be the next generation in that genealogy.

Joseph turned his back on physical ethnic connections in order to fulfil the Old Testament hope of salvation (Matt 1:21). Many people today have reversed Joseph's decision and are trying to conjure up what is now a myth of ethnic connection to the Old Testament for the people who are supposed to inhabit the land. They have forgotten the journey made by Saul the Pharisee who became Paul and could say 'there is neither Jew nor Greek...' (Gal 3: 28).

Colin Chapman quotes the theology of N.T. Wright who sees Jesus as the new Israel and the world as the new land, 'At no point in this early period [the first Century] do we find Christians eager to define or defend a 'holy land''.⁹⁸ W.D. Davies provides a thorough study of the idea of the land in the New Testament in *The Gospel and the Land* and finds no evidence that the writers saw significance in any specific tract of land. He concludes by saying:

*..the person of a Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, who proclaimed the acceptable year of the Lord only to die accursed on a cross and so to pollute the land, and by that act to shatter the geographical dimension of the religion of his fathers. Like everything else, the land in the New Testament drives us to ponder the mystery of Jesus, the Christ, who by his cross and resurrection broke not only the bounds of death but also the bonds to the land.*⁹⁹

Just as Jesus' birth ended the significance of ethnicity so his death, according to Davies, ended any meaning in Jerusalem and the land – for Christians at least.

The 'crusade' by President Bush into the Muslim world stands in stark contrast to Jesus Christ, Son of God, who chose the way of the cross rather than the application of political and religious power. Jesus did not share the view of the future held by most fundamentalist Christians today and to make the point he was prepared to die.

Conclusion

The Middle East conflict as ever has the feel that it is coming to a head. Maybe it is as the economic imperatives start to bite and there is an increasing world appreciation

of the situation. Unfortunately there are very few people who can make a contribution to a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Many Israelis have come to realise like Benny Morris that the 1948 Israeli ‘War of Independence’ was a genocidal ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians. They believe that the driving out of the Palestinian was a necessary evil - something one has to do to have a State of your own - and it would appear that the West generally agrees. If only the Palestinians would cooperate and die silently then we could all supposedly be happy. As one Israeli occupation soldier said in the *Harpers Magazine* interview, ‘I don’t hate the Arabs. I just think there’s really no choice’.¹⁰⁰

Christians cannot contribute to peace because they do not understand the situation or the stark reality of Finkelstein’s concluding comments on Zionism:

Israel has not become the spiritual beacon for world Jewry; indeed, it is arguably less fecund culturally than the Jewish communities in the so-called Galut [exile]. Israel has not remade the Jewish people into a ‘working nation’; if anything it has transformed Israeli Jews into a parasitic class – pious noirs battenning off cheap Arab labor and massive foreign subventions. The means have become the ends. What is the raison d’être of Zionism in the contemporary world save as an outpost of ‘reactionary and imperialist forces against the resurgent East’?¹⁰¹

Intervention in the Middle East by a powerful and just entity is essential, but unfortunately such a body does not presently exist. When receiving the 2003 Sydney Peace Prize Dr Hanan Ashrawi said

third party interventions can also be destructive if motivated by special agendas, if they exercise bias, and if they are incapable of effecting reality on the ground. Without substance, legitimacy, and applicability such interventions create a semblance of engagement without coming to grips with the reality of the conflict itself. When the issue is relocated domestically to become part of internal political realities, particularly in election votes and funds or the influence of special interest groups, then the question becomes one of exploitation and self-interest rather than serving the cause of peace.

The most detrimental external interference is that of the zealots and enthusiasts who embrace the most extreme long-distance stances with the “passionate intensity” of the “worst.” Blind loyalty for, and identification with, one side leads to the adoption of the most strident belligerency towards the other, hence intensifying the conflict and subverting dialogue and rational communication. Islamic fundamentalists and regressive brands of Arab nationalists have ironically joined forces with

Christian evangelicals, Jewish fundamentalists, and ideological neoconservatives to fight their own proxy wars at the expense of moderate Palestinians and Israelis alike. Such radical apologists have inflicted serious damage and pain from their safe distance in Riyadh, Damascus, Washington, Knoxville, or Sydney demonstrating the type of intervention that no peace can survive.

¹⁰²

Ashrawi believes that a two-state solution is possible ‘though becoming increasingly more difficult with the expansion of settlements, by-pass roads, and the apartheid wall throughout Palestinian territory’. Ashrawi said that ‘as we hurtle toward the abyss’ there is now a moment to still work for peace.¹⁰³ But it is hard to detect any real desire to do so in Western politics and religion.

The implications for evangelical Christianity are already significant. As the atrocities in the conflict multiply, its role in legitimising modern Israel and its expansionist policies calls into question its own theological basis. The Pharisees and their theology are linked to the crucifixion of Jesus, the Jesuits are linked to the Inquisition, and now evangelical Christianity will for the rest of time be linked to the demise of the Palestinian.

Christopher J Davey

9 February 2004

The Author

Christopher Davey grew up in rural Australia with Christian traditions of a fundamentalist and dispensational perspective. After completing degrees in theology and archaeology at Cambridge and London respectively he worked and travelled in the Middle East and discovered that the teachings of his youth were at odds with the reality and exhibited a callous disregard for the people of the region. This paper represents a return to a subject that Chris has not written on for about twenty years.

Endnotes

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