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A PARTIAL HISTORY OF PALESTINE

Karl Sabbagh, Author and Television Producer

The phrase 'New Land for Peace' is the starting point for this conference and I'd like to explain something about the land, and something about why there isn't peace there at the moment. In that way we'll be able to see a little more clearly whether there are ways in which major engineering projects had help to address the problem that has challenged the world's use of diplomacy so much over the last fifty years.

The whole of the territory we are talking about – nowadays known as Israel, the West Bank and Gaza – used to be called Palestine. It was a beautiful cultivated land, with gentle hills, ancient towns, scattered villages and rushing streams. Every time I visit the area, I marvel at the beauty of the country – and at the relatively low population density once you get away from the coastal strip. People sometimes talk as if there is only room for one of the two competing peoples in this small territory. This may be the case, but it is not literal room that is lacking. There is no room for the two peoples - Jews and Arabs - in the same way there is no room in Yankee stadium for a lion and a gazelle. Plenty of space but no room.

In my experience, many people are unaware of the history of the relationship between the land and the peoples of Palestine. I am going to call the territory Palestine because it has been Palestine for the last three hundred years, up till 1948, and I will be talking specifically about the events before 1948 that led to the dispossession of the Palestinians. I'll therefore be dealing with history and geography.

Much modern discourse concentrates on the last fifty years in Palestine, the years since it became Israel, but for the Palestinians it is the events before that which are the key to the problem. No peaceful solution can ignore the history and geography of those events.

There are five different aspects of the two claims to the territory we are discussing. The first is the **religious** basis of claims to the land.

Jews - at least religious Jews - claim that the land of Israel was promised them by their god. I won't at this stage go into the merits of each claim, I'm merely telling you what is put forward seriously by members of the two societies, and there are plenty of Jews, particularly among those

who have demanded the right to settle in the West Bank and Gaza, who think this is a perfectly serious basis for a modern state. And since these people have an influence on the Israeli government, it has to be taken seriously as a factor, even if non-Jews – and many secular Jews – may not take it seriously as a reason.

As far as the Palestinian Arabs are concerned, the only religious element in their claim is the fact that both the main religions you find among the Palestinian Arabs - Christianity and Islam – have sacred sites within the boundaries of Palestine. In particular, Jerusalem is sacred to Christians and Muslims as well as Jews, and any peace settlement has to recognize the special status of that city.

Next, **history**. The history of Palestine has been a complex one. Successive generations of conquerors have flowed through; certain parts of the area have ruled themselves from time to time; and regardless of who ruled, many communities have existed in the same places for hundreds of years.

The Jewish historical claim to Palestine, which is a claim that does not depend on a divine gift, is based on the area having been ruled by Jews for a few hundred years in the first millennium B.C. The establishment of the modern state of Israel was seen as a revival of that ancient nation, and was justified on that basis. There is a second historical element to the claim, which is that there have always been Jews living in the area, providing a continuity of claim, if you like, between the ancient state of Israel and the modern territory.

The Palestinian Arab claim on historical grounds is, first, that like the Jews, they have had a presence in the area ever since the time of the Philistines, from whom they are descended and, indeed, from whom the name of the country is derived. Second, that for the last several hundred years they have formed a majority, by a very large proportion, of the inhabitants of the area.

The third aspect of claims to Palestine is **ancestry**. If you as a people have a historical claim to an area, this is obviously made stronger if you can provide chapter and verse for the connection of individuals or families with the area.

In the case of the Jewish inhabitants of Israel, this is not usually the case. While one can point to Jews – a small minority in fact – living in Palestine over the centuries, the vast majority of Jews

who have come to Israel have no such personal or family link. Their antecedents can usually only be traced back to Jewish communities in Europe, or in other parts of the Middle East.

The Palestinians' knowledge of family history keeps their claim to the land a living reality.

Wherever they live, in refugee camps or as prosperous citizens in the West, most Palestinians can relate a family history that can be traced back, possibly for hundreds of years, and usually to a specific town or village in Palestine.

Global politics is a fourth factor in the mix.

For the Jews, the overwhelming modern claim to Palestine, or at least, to a state of their own, has been the Nazi persecution of the Jews in Europe, culminating in the Holocaust. But although an extreme example, this was not an isolated event. Jews in Europe have faced centuries of persecution. It is only fair to add, however, that little of that anti-Semitism over the centuries has been at the hands of the Palestinian Arabs. As a result of hostility to Jews in the countries they lived in, some Jews during the First World War persuaded the British to support a Jewish takeover of Palestine as a country they could call their own.

For the Palestinian Arabs, the principal political claim derives from the right of self-determination that is seen nowadays as an important principle in nation-building. After the First World War, when Palestine was freed from the control of the Ottoman Empire, President Woodrow Wilson laid down the principle that self-government should apply to the nations released from Turkish control. But while other states were handed back to the inhabitants to govern along democratic lines, only the Arabs of Palestine, 90% of the population, were denied this freedom.

So for both parties in this dispute, their societies, their communal living, their ways of life, are linked to Palestine as a homeland.

Many Jews cling to the Bible as the source of their claim on Palestine, but few modern experts would see that as valid in the 21st century. The Bible is not a history book – it is a religious text and as such a mixture of myth, fiction, and oral tradition. So I am not going to go into Biblical history other than to say that there was indeed a time when there was a Jewish state called Israel covering part of this area. But it was smaller and lasted a much shorter time than many people

realize, and the Jews were only one of many ethnic and tribal groups who shared the area at the same time.

In more recent times, say the last thousand years, the Holy Land as Palestine was called, has been a focus of much interest by travelers from the West and of course was the target of the Crusades.

For the period when we have population figures that are even vaguely accurate, Arabs have been by far the predominant population in Palestine. Some figures we have for 1850 show 370,000 Arabs and only 10,000 Jews, 96% and 4% respectively. We should dwell on those figures for a moment. Many people who don't know much about the area have a vague impression that Palestine has had a largely Jewish population. Indeed, there are books and websites that state this as a fact. But it is just not true.

A key year in this story, where the modern history of the area really begins, is 1917. This was when the British Foreign Minister, Arthur Balfour, was persuaded to write a letter to the leader of a Jewish movement that wanted to turn Palestine into a Jewish state. The movement was called Zionism, and the letter said that Britain "viewed with favor" the establishment of a Jewish National Home in Palestine. By this time, European Jews had started to come to Palestine to establish Jewish communities but the relative populations of the two groups were still predominantly Arab - 90%, with 10% Jews.

This letter containing what was called the Balfour Declaration was later incorporated into a League of Nations Mandate - a charter given to Britain requiring them to control Palestine for a period until a final decision emerged about what to do with it.

Although in public Jewish leaders said that they wanted only a home in Palestine, Zionist archives show that in private they claimed the right to take over the whole area. A 1919 map showing the Zionists' intentions claims an area covering not only Palestine but and parts of modern Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.



FIGURE 1: The 20s and 30s were marked by increasing clashes between Jews and Arabs, as the Arabs of Palestine realized that increasing Jewish immigration and the support for Jewish aims embodied in the British mandate could threaten the possibility of self-rule by the majority. After a series of British White Papers - the name for the reports by official government commissions - which failed to satisfy the Jews or the Arabs of Palestine, the whole problem was handed over to the recently formed United Nations, whose own commission of inquiry produced a plan to divide the area up between the two peoples.

This Partition Plan as it was called, gave the Jews, who had 32% of the population, 55% percent of the land. The Arabs with 68% of the population were allocated the other 45%. The way the land was divided up - white for Jewish, gray for the Arabs - was based on an attempt to concentrate a high proportion of each group in its own territory.



FIGURE 2: This was pretty successful in the areas designated as the Arab state. But the area given to the Jews still contained about 500,000 Arabs, alongside 500,000 Jews. These were now expected to live the rest of their lives in a state which was defined as a Jewish state under a Jewish government.

The members of the UN were called on to vote on the plan, and as a result of a lot of pressure on uncommitted members by countries that supported the Jews, enough votes were gathered to pass the Partition resolution, without the consent of the Palestinian Arabs, still a majority of the population in spite of the immigration, some of it illegal, of thousands of European Jews.

The other Arab countries invaded Palestine, initially to prevent the Jewish forces taking over more territory than they had been allocated in the UN Partition Plan but they were not strong enough to do so and by 1949 the new state of Israel had consolidated its hold on the area that is now Israel.

In the course of this, they expelled 700,000 Palestinian Arabs from their homes and barred them from returning after the war was over. The non-Israeli parts of former Palestine, where Palestinians could still live, formed 22% of the original Palestinian territory.

At the same time as about 700,000 Arabs left their homes in Palestine, Jews from other countries came to live in Palestine. The new government passed a 'Law of Return' which allowed any Jew anywhere in the world to come and live in Israel. But no Palestinians who had lived in Palestine were to be allowed to return to their homes.

More than 400 villages in Palestine were depopulated or destroyed by the Israelis. Most families that inhabited those villages now have members or descendants who live outside Palestine and still, fifty years later, feel an attachment to the place.

But for the new Israeli citizens, it was as if the Palestinians had never existed. In Prime Minister Golda Meir's words: "There was no such thing as Palestinians, they never existed. Before 1948, we were the Palestinians."

In fact, today there are millions of Palestinians scattered around the world, and every Palestinian family wherever its members are now, from Houston to Hampstead, Sydney to Sabra and Shatila, can construct its family tree and name the towns and villages where its members once lived.

My own father, a Palestinian from the town of Safad in the north, can trace his family as far back as 1700. In the last three hundred years, six generations of my family lived in the land that is now Israel. Most of the current generation can name the villages and sometimes the houses where their parents lived, now either occupied by Israelis or destroyed.

I have concentrated on the story of Palestine up till 1948, because I believe that without an understanding of that history, no peace is possible. But peace plans today are overlaid with a history of growing bitterness between the two sides, as a result of actions both sides have taken since 1948.

In 1967, after another Arab Israeli War in which the Arabs were soundly defeated, Israel took over the remaining areas of Palestinian Arab land, in the West Bank and Gaza. Having taken 78% of pre-1948 Palestine in the first war, the Israelis now occupied the remaining 22%.

To the bitterness of losing their ancestral homes, the events of 1967 added the injustice of military occupation, and the beginning of a program of settlement building designed to strengthen Israeli control of the rest of Palestine.

If we look more closely at the West Bank we can see what has happened.

FIGURE 3: Just looking at the road patterns alone, seen here in blue, gives an idea of the territory the Israelis wish to retain. These are specially built roads linking Jewish settlements, and no Arabs are allowed to use them or cross them freely, effectively turning journeys that used to take a few minutes between neighboring villages, into many hours as people try to find circuitous detours round roads and settlements.



Another element that has been imposed on this already fragmented territory is the famous Wall. It is planned as a security fence to protect Israel from the activities of suicide bombers who have infiltrated Israel and killed hundred of civilians over the last few years. But it runs inside the West Bank, not along Israel's own border, absorbing yet more Palestinian land into Israel and tightening the screws on the freedom of ordinary Palestinians by creating yet more border crossings, control points and barriers. The wall has also cut off prime land from the villagers who own and farm it.

Palestinian Arabs, denied any acknowledgment of their claims on their former homeland and impoverished by the Israeli occupation, have vented their fury on Israel with two uprisings, known as Intifadas, and in the case of a few, with terrorist attacks on the military and on civilians. In turn, the Israelis have attacked Palestinian centers in an attempt to eliminate terrorism and suppress the uprisings, killing many civilians as well as the militants they were targeting.

What do the two sides say that want as part of a peace agreement? Among the Jews there are those maximalists who still believe that ultimately Israel should be given all the territories that

formed Biblical Israel at its greatest extent. There are others, more moderate in Israeli terms, who would settle for a secure land within the borders of pre-1967 Israel, before they occupied the West Bank and Gaza.

Among the Arabs there is a similar spectrum of demands, from a return to pre-1948 Palestine to an acceptance of the West Bank and Gaza. Although the Israelis don't often remark on this, the official Palestinian position is that Palestinian negotiators would accept finally and absolutely the loss of 78% of pre-1948 Palestine if the illegal Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza was removed and they were given complete independence in those territories.

In addition to territorial needs, there are what I call psychological needs that each side claims in any peace settlement, not necessarily just or possible.

For the Palestinian Arabs, regardless of what territorial agreements are made, what would help to make a peace agreement work for them is a recognition by Israel that the events of 1917 to 1948 which led to a planned handover of Palestine to the Jews were an injustice. The Palestinians would also want some recognition of the rights of the millions of refugees and their descendants who currently live outside their ancestral home as a result of the establishment of Israel. The Palestinians talk of a 'Right to Return', a phrase the Israelis use to characterize their policy by which any Jew in the world, regardless of whether he or his family has any personal connection with Israel, can come and live in the state. The Palestinian Arabs feel that, with a demonstrable and long-lasting connection with specific towns and villages in Palestine, they too should be allowed to return, or at least be compensated for the loss of their homes, if they chose not to.

Palestine was once a beautiful, peaceful and fertile land, with intelligent and cultured citizens, and it could become so again.

There is an Arabic proverb which, perhaps, has particular relevance for a group of engineers with ideas for transforming the Middle East.

حَظُّ بَيْفُلُوقِ الصَّخْرِ

In Arabic it is: hazzu byifluq as-sakhr and it means: "His luck pulverizes granite" So to the engineers and architects who may embark on this fascinating and difficult journey I say - "May you have luck that will pulverize granite."

DIPLOMACY AND PEACE-BUILDING ¹

Dame Margaret Anstee, Undersecretary General, United Nations (retired).

Thank you very much. I want to echo the gratitude that has been expressed by earlier speakers for being invited to this important meeting, this important conference. I have to say that, in my case, I feel myself to be doubly overwhelmed. I think Frank Davidson likes to spring surprises on people and it was only last night that he informed me that this was going to be the Nakagawa Memorial Lecture and I was immediately very concerned as to whether the modest contribution I am about to make would really be a suitable tribute to his memory. But the second reason I am overwhelmed is because although during my very long career with the United Nations, I think I lived in about 15 countries and I once calculated that I had visited 130 on official missions, I was never really involved in the Palestine-Israel issue, so I am very far from being an expert on that. So, as a result of that, I hope that you will bear with me if I adopt a rather more general approach to this subject that I've been given of "Diplomacy and Peace-building". I will try, however, to draw some conclusions which might be applicable to the situation which we are discussing, though I must say with all modesty, because I really don't know enough about the details of the subject.

First of all, I wanted to talk about the evolution of peacekeeping and the concept of peace-building in the UN. Of course as we heard from earlier this morning, the Middle East problem goes back to the very early days of the United Nations. In fact, Frank, you mentioned the late Sir Robert Jackson, who was at that point the Senior Assistant Secretary General to Secretary General Trygve Lie, which was the most senior position below the Secretary General in those days, and his untimely departure from the UN was caused by a disagreement with Secretary General Trygve Lie over what was supposed to be the solution at that point over Israel and Palestine because he predicted that it was going to lead to conflict over many, many years- and unfortunately, he was right. But then, he was always right, wasn't he?

And of course some of the earliest peacekeeping missions were in the Middle East. Last year, of course, everyone was enormously shocked when there was this terrible attack on the UN in Iraq in August and the death of Sergio Vieira de Mello. But in actual fact, when one looks back, Count Bernadotte, who one might have thought was perhaps he wasn't called a special representative of the Secretary General, he was a Special Envoy, but he was assassinated in 1948. So, there is a long tradition in that regard.