

Background to the Arab-Israel Conflict and Challenges towards Creation of an Independent Palestinian State

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I. INTRODUCTION

An independent Palestinian state connotes among other issues the withdrawal of Israel from the Palestinian territories it occupied after the 1967 Arab-Israel war; the delineation of boundaries between Israel and Palestine to the pre-1967 borders; the removal from Palestinian territories of all Israel forces of occupation; respect for the independence and sovereignty of Palestine; the right of return and the right of national identity and non-interference by Israel, in the internal affairs of Palestine.

Historical Background to the Crisis

The territory known as Palestine has a long and turbulent history which cannot be recounted here. Suffice to say that the claim by the Zionists that Palestine was a virgin land is a clear falsehood. Edward Said wrote on how a Zionist emissary to Ghandi asserted that Palestine was "a waste space when we went there... No one else wanted it". This is contrary to the issues on ground as Palestine was not only an ancient land, but the populous homeland of a contemporary society as well. In 1922 at the height of serious Zionist colonization, the population density in Palestine was 72 persons per square mile---a high figure if compared with countries of the region and those outside it.

However, it is important to stress that the genesis of the contemporary Palestinian problem and indeed most of the induced crisis in the Middle East began with the First World War. Palestine was one of the Arab territories in the Middle East conquered and controlled by the ottoman Turks since 1516. Like most of its territories, Ottoman's control of Palestine was nominal having been left in the hands of tribal leaders, whose loyalty to the Sultan of Turkey was affirmed by collection and remittance of taxes.

When the First World War broke out in 1914, Sharif Husayn of Mecca and Henry-McMahon, the British Ambassador in Egypt began negotiations concerning the political status of territories under Ottoman To the British, Sharif Husayn descendant of the prophet who claimed to be negotiating on behalf of all Arab people was an invaluable ally. To Sharif Husayn, new ties and cooperation with Britain would help the Arabs acquire independence from Turkey and lead to the founding of an Arab Caliphate This alliance between the Arabs and the British represented by the two personalities marked the beginning of a delicate Anglo-Arab relation. From July 1915 to January 1916 about ten letters were exchanged between Sharif Husayn and McMahon on how to cooperate and actualize the breakup of the Ottoman Empire. Both sides tried to protect their interests by pledging support for the other, though it was doubtful if Sharif Husayn had overwhelming blessings and mandate of Arabs for the negotiations. Britain tactically avoided committing itself to discussions on timing and territorial limits of the expected Arab Caliphate negotiated with Sharif Husayn.

Arab support championed by Sharif Husayn helped immeasurably in the allies' victory in the First World War, but the British betrayed the Arabs. Instead of creating an Arab caliphate from the disintegrated Ottoman Empire as promised, the British began another diplomatic romance with France, fully known to the Russians, on how to share the territories of the "sick man of Europe", if the allies emerged victorious in the First World War. While the war was on, the Arabs were actively fighting on the side of Britain in keeping with the promise.

Deceitfully, this was also the time when Britain was negotiating with Sharif Husayn, unknown to him that another negotiation spearheaded by Britain was underway with a view to realizing its economic and imperial ambitious. The Skye's-Picot agreement otherwise known as "Franco-British-Russian Agreement" or "Asia Minor Agreement" was a treaty negotiated between November 1915 and March 1916 and concluded on 16th May 1916 on the sharing of Ottoman Empire between Britain and France. The treaty derived its name from the two diplomats who perfected and signed it- France's Francois Georges-Picot and Britain's Sir Mark Sykes. The Russian Tsarist government was a minor party to this agreement and when the Bolsheviks exposed the

agreement, following the Russian revolution of 1917, the exposure was received differently: “the British viewed it as an embarrassment; the Arabs were dismayed while the Turks became delighted”

When Sharif Husayn discovered the Skyes-picot agreement and confronted the British, the latter replied, thus;

“His Majesty’s government and their allies

**stand steadfastly by every cause
aiming at the liberation of the oppressed
nations and they are determined to stand
by the Arab people in their struggle
for the establishment of an Arab world
in which law shall replace Ottoman
injustice and in which unity shall prevail
over the rivalries artificially provoked
by the policy of Turkish officials. His
Majesty government reaffirms their former
pledge in regard to the liberation
of the Arab people.....”**

The significance of the Sykes-Picot Secret Agreement lies in the fact that it laid the basis for the division of Arab lands under Ottoman Empire into areas of future British and French influence and control.

Britain, France and to a lesser extent Russia, shared Arab lands in a manner akin to the unilateral partitioning of Africa by the European powers at the Berlin Conference of 1885. This agreement gave Lebanon and Syria to France while Britain got Iraq and Transjordan. Palestine was to be under international administration thus setting the stage for its confused political status. It can also be said that Britain and France took this position as a fall back to their pact with Zionist leaders. The Zionist position is that Palestine belonged to them and should therefore reclaim their ancestral home. ChaimWeizeman was a leading Zionist who worked with Arthur Balfour for establishment of a “national home” for Jewish people in Palestine. As early as 1915 it became evident that Zionists and supporters of Zionism had gained grounds in the British government and Parliament. Britains handling of its relations with the Zionists during the First World War has been described as “one of the most shattering and shaming indictments of British foreign policy ever framed” or “one of the greatest mistakes in British imperial history”. Balfour declaration sow the seed of Palestinian misfortune in total disregard for their rights even though they formed over 92% of the population of Palestine at the time. In fact, it is often said the Palestinian conflict began not in 1948 but in 1917 with the declaration of support for a Jewish state by Balfour.

British Foreign Secretary, Author James Balfour on November 2, 1917, with the full knowledge of ChaimWeizemanand British Prime Minister David Lloyd George issued his famous Declaration in the form of a letter to Lord Rothchild, a leading BritishJewexpressing British governments’ support for Zionism. The letter states: I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty’s Government, the following declaration of sympathy which has been submitted to and approved by the cabinet:

**“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 existing
non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or
the rights and political status enjoyed
by Jews in any other country”**

The Balfour Declaration was undoubtedly an act of double-dealing and betrayal by the British which deceitfully promised the Promised Land twice; first to Sharif Husayn and then to the Zionist. The consequences of the British arbitrary action was devastating to the Arabs while for the Jews it opened the gate towards their ultimate goal of establishing an independent Jewish state in Palestine or, as ChaimWeizeman wished “to gradually make Palestine as Jewish as England was English”.

Archival materials from the Public Records Office have shown the deliberate desire by the British officials in collaboration with the Zionist for the creation in Palestine, of a permanent home for the Jewseven

though as Lord Curzon argued in a 1914 Memorandum to the cabinet that “the Jewish connection with Palestine had terminated 1200 years ago”

The circumstances of the First World War, the desperate desire for victory by enlisting the support of Jews in Russia and America, and inter-European rivalry motivated by economic interests would have influenced British attitudes, actions and decisions in the Middle East from 1915 to 1920s. But it is untenable to suggest that it was British desire to exclude France from Palestine, rather than sympathy for the Zionists that prompted the support for a national home for the Jews in Palestine.

Allied victory in the First World War was undoubtedly facilitated by the Arabs, under whose initiative Iraq, Syria, Lebanon were conquered. By 1918 Homs, Hama, Aleppo and other leading Arab territories had been taken over by the Anglo-Arab forces and this glaring defeat led to the signing of the Armistice on 30th Oct., 1918 marking the end of the over six hundred year old Ottoman Empire.

It should be noted, however, that since 1870, with the growth of Zionism, Jewish population in Palestine began to grow. Jews from Europe were encouraged to migrate to Palestine and tracts of land were bought up by the Jewish Agency which was shared among the new Jewish settlers. The Arabs were evicted without compensation.

At the Versailles Peace Conference of 1919 which was a precursor to the League of Nations, a strategy was devised of dealing with territories taken over from Germany and Turkey after the First World War. The mandate system handed over the administration of the occupied territory to the conquerors on behalf of the League. Accordingly and in line with this policy, Syria and Lebanon were placed under French mandate while Iraq, Transjordan and Palestine under the British.

While the British used the mandate period to consolidate their hold on the region, protecting their strategic interest (Suez Canal) and furthering their economic interest (oil, especially in Iraq) the Jews continued their aggressive migration into Palestine, with active British support. The British mandate period [1922-1948] not only enabled Britain to facilitate Jewish immigration and the transfer of land, but also to place Palestine under political, administrative and economic conditions as will secure the establishment of the Jewish national home. Article 4 of the mandate appointed a Jewish Agency in the administration of Palestine.

A Jew, Herbert Samuel was appointed the first High commissioner in Palestine by the British to actualize the game plan. The Arabs expressed their opposition to both British overrule and Jewish growing dominance in an uncoordinated manner through divisive meetings, congresses and demonstrations. Throughout the mandate period the British administration witnessed series of anti-Zionist, anti-Jewish demonstration and other forms of hostilities between the Jews and Arabs. Those hostilities as U Thant noted, exploded into widespread violence. Disturbed and unable to control the situation, the British Government decided to relinquish the mandate and submit the question of Palestine before the United Nations in April 1947

The UN Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) recommended termination of the British mandate in Palestine and partition of Palestine into an Arab state and Jewish state. While the UN Committee recommended British withdrawal from Palestine by August 1948, the British unilaterally and in a questionable manner relinquished its mandate over Palestine on May 15, 1948. Whether arranged or planned with the British, the following day, May 16, the Zionists declared a Jewish state known as Israel, whereas the Arabs rejected the UN partition plan of their land.

The creation of the state of Israel marked the beginning of dismemberment of Palestine. Palestinians were expelled from areas under Israel control leading to displacement of a huge population which came to be known as Palestinian refugees. Secondly, Palestinian territories were juridically and administratively incorporated by Jordan and Egypt:

“That part of Palestine that came under Jordan’s control was eventually legitimized by an act of the Jordanian parliament in 1950, and became known thereafter as West bank; the southern part of Palestine came under Egyptian control and administration and is referred to as the Gaza strip. Both parts came under Israel occupation in 1967”

Between 1948 and 1973 Israel and the Arabs fought several wars the four major ones in 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973. In the 1948 war which immediately followed the partition, the Zionist displaced the Arabs in the areas designated for them under the UN partition plan thereby creating a Jewish majority in Palestine. Arab Palestine was virtually demographically turned into Jewish Israel.

The 1967 war (six-day war) was not only devastating to the Arabs but had altered the political landscape of the Middle East. The Egyptian president, Gamal Abdel Nasser’s blockade of the strait of Tiran (the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba) preventing Israel shipping interest was one of the factors leading to the war. Egypt, Jordan and Syria fought Israel. During the war which lasted six days Israel “conquered” Gaza strip from Egypt, West Bank from Jordan, Golan Heights from Syria, East Jerusalem from the Arab sector and Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, until Israel withdrawal following the Camp David Accord of 1982.

The areas captured by Israel during the six day war came to be known as “occupied territories” in the context of International Law where some legal obligations fall on the occupying power, including the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907. Israel has blatantly refused to implement those obligations bordering on treatment of inhabitants of occupied territories.

In his autobiography, U Thant, who was the Secretary General of the United Nations during the 1967 six-day war noted the defiant attitude of Israel to the UN, the international community and to all international norms, practices and conventions. Thus for 68 years, Israel forcefully occupies Arab lands and has refused all entreaties for a peaceful resolution to the problem. Though Israel seems to be the major obstacle to the realization of independence for the Arab Palestinians, there are numerous challenges facing the path to attainment of an independent State of Palestine.

II. THE CHALLENGES

Israel as the Biggest Obstacle

Jewish desire for turning Palestine into their “promised land” had a long historical tradition. The Zionist movement under Chaim Weizmann had intended to make Palestine a Jewish state. In collaboration with British officials some of whom are Jews, Jewish immigration into Palestine was given official support. A staunch Jew, Sir Herbert Samuel who became the first High Commissioner in Palestine under British mandate actively supported the Zionist aspiration for turning Palestine into a Jewish state before the British openly declared support through Arthur James Balfour.

Not only did the Jews want a “home” in Palestine, their desire was to turn the whole area into state of Israel as a right. According to some secret revelations contained in the personal Diaries of Israel’s first Foreign Minister and one-time Prime Minister Moshe Sharett, the political decisions concerning the occupation of “the rest of Eretz Israel” were taken as early as 1954, although implemented in 1967”

The Israelis used blackmail, terrorism, coercion, espionage, assassination etc to heighten tension and frustrate any concrete measure at reaching peace. Moshe Sharett in his Diary recorded numerous incidences of Jewish terrorism deliberately planned and executed with a view to blaming the Arabs. In one such incident on March 17 1955, the Israelis attacked and killed Arabs in Gaza and put the blame on Arab terrorism. As Sharett noted in his Diary:

“The army spokesman, on instructions from the minister of defense, published a false version according to which a unit of ours, after having been attacked inside our territory, pursued the attackers and engaged a battle which later developed as it did. Who will believe us?”

In another instance in 1955 Sharett recorded thus:-

“(Moshen) Dayan (Israelis Defense Minister) wants to hijack planes and kidnap (Arab) officers from trains.....Makleff (Israel Chief of Staff) wanted a free hand to murder [Syrian President] Shishakly. Lavon suggested the occupation of the Gaza strip..... the western powers are our main enemy and the only way to deter them is through direct actions that will terrorize them... Peres (Israel PM) shares the same ideology; he wants to frighten the West into supporting Israelis aims”

Israeli terror on Palestinians is unimaginable. Palestinians accused of supporting the struggle were imprisoned and humiliated irrespective of gender or age. In one instance it was reported that Israel captured 11 (eleven) Palestinian boys, brought them to an open field and dug a trench. The families of the boys were brought to watch as the Israelis put the eleven, who were roped together, into the trench and shot them. The corpses were left there for 48 hours before the families were allowed to bury them.

The Arabs themselves

Initially the Arabs were united in their opposition to Israel. All the wars fought from 1948-1973 were between “Arabs” and Israel; the Arab nations fought collectively or individually but with a common motive. However, there was disunity and rivalry among the Arabs often created by the struggle for supremacy between leaders. Some issues related to this include the collapse of the United Arab Republic, the rise of ambitious leaders like Saddam Hussein, Hafez Al-Assad, and Muamar Gaddafi etc. The unity and solidarity which the Palestinian problem enjoyed became completely eroded thereby reducing the issue from “Arab problem” to

“Palestinian crisis”. The Camp David Accord which should have served as a basis for resolution of the crisis turned out to be a major force in further dividing the Arabs. With the signing of the treaty Egypt becomes neutralized and the Arab lost leadership in the struggle against Israel.

The United Nations

The UN is expected to be the leading arbiter in the Palestinian problem but lacks the political will to address the issue due to subterranean influences, the most critical being the hypocrisy exhibited by some nations and individuals. The UN has, in this case as in most others, become like a toothless bulldog.

The United States

The well-known traditional ally of Israel, the US tends to become the strongest obstacle to the emergence of a Palestinian state so long as its emergence and existence would destabilize the Jewish state. For over five decades America has monopoly of brokering peace between the Arabs and the Israel. There is clear dishonesty and partiality in America's stand over the Palestinian problem; peace cannot be achieved when America supplies Israeli with men and materials of war and leads in diplomatic blockade of Palestinian ambitions. The recent decision of the Trump led American government to relocate its Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem symbolizing official recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital is the greatest onslaught on the peace process. The United States clearly does not wish well for the Palestinians and their long time ambition for an independent state. Even the two states proposal as a solution to the crisis is by all practical purposes thrown to the winds by the United States Trump administration.

Apart from the America Government's biased stand, the powerful Jewish community in America plays a great role in influencing public and private America opinion on the Palestinian issue.

The European Powers

Britain, which is seen as the architect of the current Arab-Israeli crisis is not committed to the Palestinian cause. As some historians say the Arab/Palestinian crisis began in 1917 with the Balfour Declaration, affirming British support for Zionism and the creation of an independent Israel state. Similarly Britain's submission of the Palestinian issue to the United Nations and the immediate declaration of an independent state of Israel by the Zionists have been described as pre-planned. Having paved the way for the Jews to secure a state, Britain has lost moral ground to speak for the Arabs despite the long history of Anglo-Arab relations. Other European powers have little interest on the Palestinian issue outside the politics of the United Nations or the UN Security Council.

Israel Investments and Development in the Occupied Territories

Israel's huge investment in the form of continuous building of settlements and tourism development in the occupied territories are clear indication of Israel's plan for permanent ownership of Palestinian lands as an occupying power. Sizeable numbers of Jewish settlers have been accommodated inside Arab lands either to ease population pressure or simply to show Israel might. This situation, no doubt, is a serious challenge in the evolution of a Palestinian state from a land that had suffered unguarded encroachment.

Problems of Refugees

Huge population of Palestinians had been forced out their homeland since the creation of Israel. It is estimated that over 6 million Palestinians live outside Palestine, in neighboring Arab countries especially Jordan and Lebanon, most of them with stateless status. It is doubtful if pre-1967 Palestinian state can accommodate the expected returnees even though not all Palestinians are expected to return as many would be content with the pride of having an independent state than living in that state.

Problems of Arab Spies

Surprisingly some Palestinians have been compromised and contracted to spy for Israel. The activities of Arab informants have serious effects on Palestinian unity, military secrecy and covert planning. Most Israeli military strikes and attacks on so-called targeted terrorists, with precision, were based on insider information provided by the Palestinians themselves.

American, European and Russian Arms Race

The Middle East has been turned into a testing ground for American-European arms and a major arms market, thereby prolonging among others, the Arab-Israeli crisis. It is said that without death the global economy will collapse.

Resistance Movements and Ideological Differences

The sharp ideological divide and internal rivalries between the movements for the liberation of Palestine contributed to lack of organization, focus and coordination in facing Israel challenges. These differences range from Pan-Arabism, Arab Nationalism, Pan-Islamism, moderate or extremist approach to the Palestinian cause.

In the early years of the struggle Fatah was seen as the leading light but suffered challenges from rival organizations notably Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), Arab National Movement and the Abu Nidal organization. By far the biggest challenge is the rivalry between Fatah and Hamas. While Fatah/PLO seek for establishment of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel on negotiated terms, Hamas favoured establishment of an Islamic state in Palestine as a counterweight to secular Arafat's PLO.

The struggle for supremacy between Fatah and Hamas often degenerate into open conflict especially after the formation of the Palestinian National Authority [PNA] in 1994 in line with the Oslo Accords. Yasser Arafat was the first elected PNA President in 1996 and following his death in 2004 Mahmoud Abbas took over the leadership. In 2006 Hamas won more seats than Fatah in the Palestine Legislative Council principally due to its radical position. In June 2007 fighting broke out between Fatah and Hamas in the Gaza strip, Abbas moved the administration to West Bank and formed a care-taker government that excluded Hamas. This arrangement received the blessings of the European Union, US and more importantly, Israel but to Hamas and other opposition groups, Abbas's action was a betrayal. The Palestinian cause has suffered a serious setback with the split, which gave control of Gaza to Hamas and West Bank to Fatah.

Global Diplomatic Manoeuvres

One of the worst diplomatic manoeuvres over the Palestinian problem came to light when Nigeria abstained from voting during the Dec. 29, 2014 United Nations Security Council Resolution ending Israel occupation of Palestinian territory by 2017:

**“The Palestinians needed nine votes
in the 15-member Security Council
but fell short of one when at
the crucial moment Nigeria's permanent**

Representative at the UN,

Joy Ogwu, abstained from voting.

Nigeria had earlier assured the Palestinians of its support for the creation of an independent Palestinian state. In 2011 while speaking at the UN General Assembly, Nigeria's Foreign Minister, Gbenga Ashiru reiterated Nigeria's support for Palestinians bid for UN membership as a sovereign nation in line with the two-state solution. In 1988 Nigeria was among the first countries to support admission of Palestine into the UN on observer status.

Nigeria's contradictory Foreign Policy on the Israel-Palestinian issue took root since independence. The relationship changes from the regional government's bias to the Federal government's non-aligned “open door” policy, to an era of direct hostility, to a period of friendship.

It is not clear why Nigeria or rather its leadership decided to “disappoint” the Palestinians. Three probable reasons could be given:

1. Nigeria's economic ties with Israel. The need to maintain those ties and avoid hurting Israeli government interest as well as Israel investors in Nigeria.
2. In recognition of Israel's support to Nigeria in the fight against terrorism. Nigeria had to be careful on the side it takes to avoid losing that much-needed Israel support under such circumstance.
3. Nigeria is afraid of hurting the “feelings” and well-known position of the United States on the Israel-Palestinian issue. To maintain cordial relations with the US and win its support was necessary for a Nigerian lowly-rated president.
4. President Jonathan's Christian mentality, which probably meant support for Israel as a crusade. As one writer opined “President Jonathan with his Pentecostal pastors may have thought an extension of support for Israel would have amounted to a Christian obligation”.

III. CONCLUSION

The European powers particularly Britain played a major role in creating a problem that seems to defy solution due to multitude of interests. The Palestinians deserve a home, an independent state; they should not continue being a people without a country.

The path to the emergence of an independent Palestinian state should be made, probably not in the battle field but through vigorous diplomatic efforts. The Palestinian cause has achieved fairly sufficient successes in the UN General Assembly such as upgrading from “observer entity” to “non-member observer

status” and its designation as “State of Israel” by the UN Secretariat. It is reported that as of September 2015, 193 member states of the UN have recognized the state of Palestine while others endorsed the PLO as legitimate representative of the Palestinians. The major challenge is in the Security Council in view of Americas support for her best ally and probable use of veto power.

However nothing can stop the wind of change in the light of the global awareness of the Palestinian situation. One such change of heart came from the popular American Jewish religious leader, Rabbi Michael Lerner who said:

**“Tell the Israel Prime Minister
Netanyahu... that the way to
get security for Israel is to
stop the occupation of the
West Bank (and other Arab territories) and help create a Palestinian state”.**

REFERENCE

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