

**A Tragedy for both the Middle East and Western Society
(Can Canada help to resolve this conflict?)**

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The struggle for a just and comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict and to its core — the Palestinian Israeli conflict — has now reached the end of its first century. What is remarkable about this protracted conflict is not only the persistence of violence and injustices in the relations between Israelis and Palestinians but also the extent to which this conflict has become a moral issue. Whether in Europe, North America, Asia, or the Middle East itself this tragedy has deeply disturbed the cultures and societies of many of the states, peoples, and civilizations throughout the world.

When the Ottoman Empire began to totter at the turn of the 20th century the Palestinian inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire were caught in an impossible crossroads of historical change and world transitional struggles. The Palestinians were not clearly defined as a separate political entity because they were active participants in the political life of the Ottoman Empire and wished to see the continuation of an Islamic empire. At the same time they became swept up in the early phases of Arab nationalism and Syria — a hot bed of this emergence — still saw Palestine as the southern province of Syria. The Palestinians themselves have not adjusted to the new economic reforms brought about by the last ditch attempts of the Ottomans to modernize the education, economy, and even political and military structure of the Empire.

Moreover, Palestinian society was deeply divided by the leading clans and families who resided in Jerusalem, Jaffa, and Haifa and their separation from the Palestinian majority living in tiny villages throughout the land. The city clans had begun to modernize by seeking education beyond religious catechism and by engaging in Ottoman politics such that some of them had actually become members of the new Ottoman parliament. Still, they had not found a form of social and political organization which could earn the loyalty of both the urban dwellers and the fellahin or peasants.

As they tried to make sense of their rapidly changing Ottoman context they were shocked to begin to learn about a new movement of Eastern European Jews who were beginning to migrate from their oppressed and impoverished lives in rural Russia, Poland, and the Baltic states towards Palestine. The fright generated by these new immigrants was that they made the strange claim that Palestine was their homeland and they were returning to it to create a new Jewish state after 2,000 years of exile. This fear of a foreign and alien society making a claim on the Palestinian ancestral homeland was inexplicable and deeply disturbing to these Arabs of Palestine.

When the Zionist movement entered negotiations with the Turkish Empire the Palestinians were relieved that the Ottomans refused Zionist offers, but they were also deeply perturbed that the Zionists felt that they had the financial resources to rescue the Ottoman Empire from its terminal decline. When war broke out in Europe and the British Empire and the Turkish Empire were on opposite sides the bell tolled for Palestinian history, but they were not in much position to affect the outcome.

Only the Hashemites still living in the Arabian desert realized quickly the dangers and opportunities in what was becoming the Great War. They decided to try and negotiate an agreement with the powerful British side in which they would lead an Arab revolt against the Ottomans in return for promises of Arab independence after the war ended. Sadly for them this was only the first of at least three British promises made about the future of Palestine during the war. This promise of the Hussein – McMahon correspondence turned out to be the weakest of the British promises.

As the British military rolled into the Middle East it became clearer to all involved that the British would become one of the central actors determining the future of the end of the Ottoman Empire. British diplomacy was focused on assuring British naval control of all access to India, but the French were determined to establish their own foothold in the Middle East. As a whole generation of young British and French men were dying in the trenches in the brutal war with the Germans the leaders of both France and England became more and more determined that they would win new territory for their Empires. Thus began the secret negotiations between Sykes and Picot which became the firm basis of the second plan for the post Ottoman Middle East.

The United States President Woodrow Wilson had enunciated his fourteen point plan for the world future laying heavy emphasis on the right of oppressed peoples to self-determination. This promise of Wilson excited the devastated minorities of Eastern Europe, especially the Poles and the Jews. However, the Arabs were sure that self-determination would most of all apply to them and that they would not find themselves again under foreign rule. Wilson was not able to convince the European great powers to subsume their imperial ambitions under Wilsonian idealism. They fully intended to fulfill the main elements of the Sykes – Picot agreement which were completely contrary to the idea of Arab self-determination.

Canada, Australia, and the troops from India were very proud of their role in helping the British Empire win the war in Europe. They would not have understood how much their voices helped the British and French defeat the Wilsonian principal of self-determination. As often in these world conflicts middle powers strengthen the side with which they were allied to produce results they would never have wanted. In the British attempt to bring America fully into the war they thought that appealing to Jewish public opinion in the United States would strengthen their case in America. When Wilson was told of the early stages of the drafting of the Balfour Declaration he expressed his string support thinking of it as an important instance of providing a future for the oppressed people of Eastern Europe. With Wilson's support, the British government

approved the issuing of the Balfour Declaration as part of its imperial strategy and thus was born the third British promise about the future of Palestine.

By this time the Palestinians and other Arabs were preoccupied with the invasions of French and British troops and only the Syrian national movement continued to demand Arab independence. However, this Syrian movement was not willing to forego its claims in order to strengthen the Hashemite claim to Syria and Palestine. Even if the Arabs had not been divided it is unlikely that they could have resisted the British and French steam roller toward paving the roads of European mandatory control in Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon, and even trans-Jordan.

Western and international assessment of the rights and wrongs in this conflict can not focus solely on individual events of the present no matter how painful and bloody they are. To reach an assessment of the human rights situation requires attention to the historical context and the implications of this conflict in European and North American history and international law. In the period just after WWI neither the Palestinian community nor the Jewish community in Palestine could possibly have been expected to understand how much the two movements were historically linked and how much they both had suffered from the same international failures of the 19th century. On the international scale the terrible human losses of the European combatants blinded them to the tragedy they were unintentionally designing for the Middle East. President Woodrow Wilson was right that the oppressed Jews of Russia and Eastern Europe needed a different chance at life both for the individual and for the group as a whole.

The British and the French misled themselves and the international community in arguing that the mandate system would be a big improvement over direct colonial control. But in fact, the mandate system became a constant source of conflict between the mandatory power and the Arabs over which it ruled. This was true of the British relationship with the Palestinians as well as with the Zionists and between the British and the Iraqis. It was just as true of the tendentious relationship between France and the political forces of Syria. In some cases the mandatory power specialized in a divide and conquer theory in which they emphasized internal disagreements among ethnic groups, religions, tribes, and regions as was done in Iraq and Syria.

The Arab revolt against the British mandate in the 1930's was crushed severely by the British military. The result was a severe economic decline for the Palestinians. There was also a devastating blow to the leadership of the Palestinians and to any organized structure they might have had in preparation for the decisive conflicts against the Jews after WWII. Palestinian society faced the Zionist military at a time when it was economically very weak, politically divided, and unable to provide any services that could protect the rural population from the impact of war.

The Palestinians had chosen an all or nothing strategy in the hope that by totally denying any legitimacy to the Zionist claims or to the Jewish community within Palestine they would be able to maintain complete Palestinian control over all of the territory of Palestine. This approach over estimated their own strength and dramatically

underestimated the will of the Zionist leadership and its military and civilian structure. This all or nothing approach led to disastrous defeat for the Palestinians - a massive exodus of refugees from Palestine - and in the last fifty years military occupation by Israel of both Gaza and the West Bank. The international community eventually began to reflect this all or nothing approach either by wholly supporting the new state of Israel or by completely denying its rights. This dichotomy maintained the intensity of the conflict and weakened all attempts at peace and reconciliation.

In the last weeks, a new United Nations report on the Gaza confrontation between the Israeli military and the Palestinians of Gaza again reflected that dichotomy again. This was true even though the Goldstone report concluded that war crimes were committed by both sides. Attention was almost completely focused on the critique of the Israeli military. Hamas found itself again without the necessary condemnations of the international community which would have made it more likely that they would have understood the failure of their strategy of firing missiles at Israeli civilians. The Israelis looked at the Goldstone report with intense fury distancing themselves still further from any attempt to win respect for their rule, of law in the international arena.

Canada in the 1950's under Lester Pearson found an effective mediating role for a mid-sized state in proposing and implementing the first examples of the United Nations peace keeping forces that could separate Israeli forces from Egyptian forces. Such a Canadian attempt at being an honest broker with trust worthy relationships on both sides has become a rarity on the Israeli- Palestinian conflict. Canada must search again for the creative solution which would allow it to be helpful in resolving the conflict. It must not import the norms of the conflict into Canadian society. Canadian human rights advocates must think carefully about whether they wish to be part of a chorus of criticism of one or the other side in the conflict or they wish to be part of the international effort to resolve the conflict which requires showing respect for the needs of both the Israeli and the Palestinian people. Finally, the new Canadian liberal leader — Michael Ignatieff — has shown in his life's work has shown the importance of not only individual human rights but group rights to national identity, national dignity, and national sovereignty. Following this lead Canada could play an important role in this stage of conflict resolution as it has tried to do in earlier stages.