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Abstract:
This article examines how the Palestinians have been represented in British political elite discourse between 1915 and 2015 as an exploration into the role of such discourse in framing the identity and thence shaping the fate of a community or people seeking national independence. It also makes some observations about the significance of political violence or war in bringing about paradigm shifts in the discourse. The analysis reveals that the way the British depicted the Palestinian Arabs and their cause has changed over time, but at no point did the discourse identify independent statehood for the Palestinians as a central or stand-alone objective of policy

Keywords: discourse, Britain, political elites, Palestinians, statehood, self-determination, Palestine Mandate, Palestinian statehood.

Introduction

This article is an exploration of how the Palestinians, or as it was once termed, 'The Palestine Problem', have been represented in British political elite discourse over the past one hundred years. It begins in 1915, during the First World War, as the British imperial authorities instituted plans for the expulsion of the Ottoman Turks from the area that became the League of Nations Palestine Mandate. It concludes in the contemporary era (2015), when the days of British imperial rule in Palestine have long since passed, but the British government remains a significant actor on the international stage. The British government is still a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council, and still pronounces on what it deems the appropriate parameters within which the national aspirations of the Palestinians should be addressed.

One objective of the article is to identify successive shifts in the way the Palestinian Arabs and their cause have been framed in British political elite discourse and weigh the role of exogenous factors in prompting such changes. A second objective is to explore how the discourse of power elites can set the parameters within which the fortunes of a community or people seeking self-determination or national independence are circumscribed or facilitated. The article pays particular attention, in line with critical theorists in International Relations,[1] to the 'how' of the exercise of power in the framing of policy choices. The third objective is to better understand how the operation of power politics has affected the Palestinians in particular.

The analysis focuses specifically on the discourse of the British 'political elite', as distinct from other sub-state or transnational actors, including the media and interest groups, although reference is made here to some such voices to give a flavour of the broader context within which the political elite operate. By 'political elite' and/or 'power elite' I mean 'a category of people whose privileged institutional positions and

reputations provide them with comparatively greater authority in social interactions',[2] both within institutions, states or empires and at the level of international relations.

On the issue of Palestine or the Palestinians, there has been no shortage of disagreement, even among the British power elite, throughout the period under examination here. Yet political debate or exchanges of views are part of the discourse and it is through the process of debate that dominant themes and concepts emerge, to be encapsulated in policy pronouncements. The sources most cited in this article are official government documents and statements, as well as the diaries and commentaries of individuals who rank among the political elite. In addition, as noted, there are some quotations from the media and individuals, such as British school teachers working in Mandate Palestine, who could not be considered members of the political elite, but whose views give a flavour of the range of views that existed within the parameters of the broader discourse. Overall, however, when reference is made here to 'the British', unless otherwise stipulated, by this is meant the key decision-makers in charge of formulating *official* British foreign policy.

By way of further clarification, I take it as read that such decision-makers regularly identify goals that they believe or claim they are pursuing at any given time. However, I do not thereby conclude that the consequences of their actions are the same as the goals they espouse. Thus, I do not subscribe to Arab conspiracy theories which attribute almost all developments in the Middle East to the *deliberate* schemes and plots of external actors or Israel. Equally, however, I do not attribute policy decisions to 'the cock-up' theory so often trotted out by some diplomats to explain events. There is order, but it is embedded in the discourse which has a dynamic of its own. The political elite are both the main architects of that discourse and its captives.

As will be apparent, the writings of Michel Foucault on discourse and how power relations are embedded and discernible within it, fundamentally informs the approach adopted in this article. More particularly, with respect to British 'discourse' on Palestine I am inspired by the work of Roxanne Doty[3] and Zeina Ghandour.[4] Doty provides a very clear exposition of how power relations, particularly imperial/subaltern relations, are immanent in the discourse. In her study of the British in Mandate Palestine, meanwhile, Ghandour's 'meta-narrative of British colonialism' encapsulates the combination of language, maps, legal texts, norms, tropes and representations that buttressed and shaped the British imperial outlook and undertakings in the first half of the twentieth century. Here I use the broader term 'discourse' (as opposed to 'narrative' or 'meta-narrative'), both for simplicity sake and to avoid implying the kind of order, coherence or rationalisation that the term 'narrative' may convey.[5]

In any case, the disjunctures or changes in the way the 'Palestine Problem' and the Palestinian people have been portrayed in British discourse show that there has been no single or fully consistent British 'narrative' on the people or the issue. And, as recounted below, the shifts in the way the British political elite have depicted the Palestinians and their cause over the past one hundred years have coincided with major changes 'on the ground' brought about by violent conflict or war. Accordingly, the findings here would seem to substantiate the contention that it takes 'shocks, new facts, reality gaps [or] ruptures' such as 'natural catastrophes, demographic shifts, knowledge breakthroughs, popular revolutions [or] declarations of war or peace'[6] to oblige political elites to reframe the issues and recalibrate their discourse. Yet, as discussed below, the extent to which such changes have served to further the Palestinian national cause is debatable, as discussed in my conclusions.

Summary of Phases in British Depictions of the Palestinians

The way the Palestinians were portrayed in British political elite discourse between 1915 and 2015 progressed through six discernible phases. First, during World War I and its immediate aftermath, the Arab inhabitants of the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea were accorded no national identity to distinguish them from Arabs in the surrounding areas which the British imperial forces sought to capture from the Ottoman Turks. They acquired separate status incidentally when the Jordan river was designated as a border between 'Palestine' and Transjordan, for which the British political leadership had different plans. Second, as of July 1922, when Britain was confirmed as the Mandatory authority in Palestine by the League of Nations, until 1948, when the British terminated their rule there, the Palestinian Arabs were depicted essentially as restive natives in a corner of the British empire in which the British authorities were expected, under the terms of the Mandate, to prepare the whole population, inclusive of Jewish migrants, for independent statehood.

Third, following the departure of the British Mandatory authority and the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948, when upwards of two thirds of the Arab population of Palestine became refugees, this became their primary status in British establishment discourse. These refugees were stateless, many of them crowded into refugee camps in the Gaza Strip (under Egyptian administration), the West Bank (ruled until 1967 by the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan), across the river in Transjordan (thereafter simply 'Jordan'), and in Lebanon and Syria. In addition to a refugee problem, the Palestinians were also understood in British political elite discourse as 'a problem' in two other respects – as a reminder of Britain's inability to deliver on its Mandatory responsibilities in Palestine, and as a cause for general Arab hostility to Western imperialism.

The fourth discernible shift in the way 'the Palestinian issue' was framed in British official discourse occurred after the war of June 1967, when Israel captured the West

Bank from Jordan, the Gaza Strip, along with the whole Sinai Peninsula, from Egypt, and the Golan Heights from Syria. For the next two decades, the activities of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), including guerrilla raids into Israel, hijackings, a show-down with the authorities in Jordan, and involvement in the Lebanese civil war, fed into a reframing of the Palestinians as a nationalist guerrilla or terrorist movement comparable to and manifesting links with other revolutionary groups, such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Army of National Liberation in Bolivia.[7]

There was a fifth change following the outbreak of the first Palestinian *Intifada* (uprising) in December 1987. Television coverage of Palestinian youths and children throwing rocks at Israeli soldiers in the West Bank and Gaza grabbed public attention in Britain as other Western countries. The media lead the way in portraying the Palestinians as a population in revolt against Israeli occupation. When King Hussein of Jordan then disengaged from the West Bank (1988) it was no longer possible to depict the Palestinians as primarily a Jordanian responsibility and the question of whether to deal directly with the PLO as 'the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people' (the term adopted by Arab governments) became more pressing.

That particular dilemma receded with the signing of the first 'Oslo Accord' in 1993, whereby the Israeli government formally recognised the PLO in return for its recognition of the state of Israel. This development marked the beginning of the sixth stage in British elite discourse on the Palestinian issue. From 1993 the British government has dealt with the PLO as the official representative of the Palestinian people, though it has refused to grant the Palestinian representative in London the status of ambassador (calling him instead head of the Palestinian General Delegation). Formal British government recognition of Palestinian statehood per se has been withheld. When the UN General Assembly voted to recognise Palestine as a non-member observer state in 2012, the British abstained.

As of this writing, the official British position is to call for 'a two-state solution' to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with the caveat that this must be achieved through direct negotiation between the government of Israel and the PLO leadership. Meanwhile, in keeping with the official position of the so-called Quartet (the United States, the United Nations, the European Union and Russia) the British government still maintains that Hamas, which presides in the Gaza Strip, is a terrorist organisation.

In the following sections the evolution of British political discourse on the Palestinians is examined in more detail. In the process the disjunctures in British elite representations of the Palestinians become apparent, as too the fit between British depictions of the Palestinian issue and British establishment preferences and constructions of legitimacy, authority and international order.

Phase I: People in the Path of Imperial Expansion

There are three documentary sources on which historians of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have focused most particularly in their efforts to delineate the origins of the conflict. These are (1) an exchange of letters between Sir Henry McMahon, British High Commissioner in Cairo, and Sherif Hussein of Mecca between July 1915 and January 1916 (the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence); (2) the Sykes-Picot Agreement negotiated secretly between Mark Sykes on behalf of the British and French diplomat Georges Picot in May 1916; and (3) a letter written by British Foreign Secretary Lord Balfour to Lord Rothschild, a leading proponent of the Zionist cause, dated 2 November 1917 (the Balfour Declaration).

In these documents the British authorities made separate and conflicting pledges to other contenders for influence in the outcome of the First World War in the Middle East. In his letter to Sherif Hussein of 24 October 1915 MacMahon informed Hussein that, subject to specified modifications, 'Great Britain is prepared to recognize and support the independence of the Arabs in all the regions within the limits demanded by the Sherif of Mecca'.[8] As subsequently interpreted by the Political Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office no later than 1919: 'The whole of Palestine…lies within the limits which HMG have pledged themselves to Sherif Hussain that they will recognise and uphold the independence of.'[9]

Under the terms of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, meanwhile, it was agreed that in the area comprising Palestine (delineated in brown on the map attached to the agreement) 'there shall be established an international administration, the form of which is to be decided upon after consultation with Russia, and subsequently in consultation with the other Allies, and the representatives of the Shareef of Mecca.'[10] That document, subsequently made public by the Russians after the Bolshevik Revolution, also envisaged the creation of a system of Arab states under French oversight in roughly the areas that became Syria and Lebanon and under British oversight in roughly the areas that became Transjordan and Iraq. Specifically on the issue of Palestine, however, the Sykes-Picot Agreement was not in direct contradiction to McMahon's undertaking to Hussein.[11]

The Balfour Declaration, by contrast, embodied a pledge on the future of Palestine that marked a new departure. In his letter to Rothschild, Balfour stated that:

> 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.[12]

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What is striking about this document for present purposes is the absence of any reference to the Arab population of Palestine – except as 'the existing *non-Jewish communities*' [emphasis added] who, it would seem, were deemed to have 'civil and religious rights', but no national identity or rights. There can perhaps be no more telling illustration of how the Palestinian Arabs were overlooked in British thinking at the time.

Taken together, meanwhile, the three texts, with their conflicting pledges, are expressive of the priorities and calculations of a government at war. The undertakings to Hussein were made to persuade him to marshal an Arab rebellion against the Ottomans. Sykes-Picot was an acknowledgement of French imperial aspirations requiring recognition and accommodation in the name of allied cooperation in the war effort. The Balfour Declaration, meanwhile, signified British establishment understanding of the influence that leading members of the international Jewish community could potentially wield, whether in Germany, to undermine Jewish support for German war aims, or in the United States, to keep Washington on side with British objectives.[13] Winning Zionist support for British imperial aspirations in the Middle East was thus part of a broader strategy to win the First World War.[14]

There were other factors which played a role in the genesis of the Balfour Declaration, including anti-Semitism in some quarters of the British establishment (expressed in the view that a Jewish home in Palestine was preferable to accommodation of more Jewish migrants in Britain).[15] In any case, when British imperial forces seized Jerusalem in December 1917 their victory was greeted in London as a welcome boost to morale for British forces bogged down in the trenches on the Western (European) front. Represented as 'a Christmas present for the British nation' it was celebrated with the ringing of church bells across Britain and a cartoon in *Punch* entitled 'The Last Crusade' depicted 'Richard the Lionheart looking down on the city and saying "My dream has come true!"'.[16]

What was absent in the British discourse during and immediately following the First World War was any indication that the Palestinians were identified as a people or national entity in the making. Up to a point the Jews were, though in a way that was redolent with prejudice. Mostly the Zionists featured as an instrument in the broader British narrative of the time about British imperial entitlements and objectives shaped around the quest to defeat and dismember the Ottoman Empire in competition with the French, and with a weather eye on the Americans who were critical of old-style European imperialism as antithetical to President Woodrow Wilson's championship of the notion of 'self-determination'.[17]

Phase II: Subjects of Mandatory Authority

As the foregoing illustrates, representations of the Palestinians and their rights are context specific. In the first half of the twentieth century the international order was still determined by competition between the imperial powers of Europe, particularly Britain and France, although the concept of self-determination and the possibility of a transition to a world made up of independent sovereign states was gaining credence. That, at least was how it appeared in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. However, after President Wilson articulated his call for such a transition and his administration participated in the establishment of the League of Nations that was designed to usher in the new order, the United States retreated into relative isolation.

As noted by Victor Kattan:

> Unfortunately for the indigenous peoples, the Great Powers were able to partition the [Middle East] region into separate territories with little regard for the interests of the inhabitants because international law had not outlawed colonialism in the days of the First World War. Rather, the victorious powers sought to 'civilise' the peoples of the colonial territories they acquired from Germany and Turkey through a system of mandates…[18]

Thus, according to historian William Roger Lewis: 'The fundamental questions of sovereignty and nationality, although of much academic interest to international lawyers, were largely ignored by the colonial experts responsible for the establishment of the mandate system.'[19] And, as argued by Lewis, in 1919: 'The overriding concern during the period following the Peace Conference was not how to establish the nationality of the inhabitants of the mandated territories but how to terminate German and Turkish Sovereignty.'[20]

Consequently, the body of international law—including the Covenant of the League of Nations—that existed in the Mandate period was not a significant determinant for British elite depictions of the indigenous inhabitants of Palestine. To arrive at a clearer picture of how the latter were seen, this analysis draws on other sources and three in particular. The first is a critique of conventional histories of the Mandate period by Zeina Ghandour,[21] in which she examines the construction of 'the natives', property rights and development objectives embodied in the legal instruments, surveys and maps devised by the British to administer Palestine. The second is the compilation of extracts from the personal diaries and letters of British personnel who lived and worked in Mandate Palestine, put together by A.J. Sherman.[22] The third is the diary of Sir Henry Gurney, Chief Secretary in the Mandate Administration from October 1946 until the termination of the Mandate in May 1948, published with detailed annotations by Motti Golani.[23]

In her work Ghandour identifies how imperial powers in general and the British in particular chose to mask their subjugation of colonised people with promises 'to match dearth with cornucopia, laziness with technology, amorphousness with

boundaries',[24] in short to bring order and progress, all underpinned by reference to legal instruments and expertise. To this end, in Palestine the British set about categorising the entirety of the land in terms of registered ownership (which had been a voluntary practice under the Ottomans and avoided by most of the rural population), desirability for development, and potential for sale or state appropriation.[25] They also drew up maps, ostensibly the better to implement plans for development. Ghandour writes:

> The science of cartography is only one, but an important manifestation of the mind of British imperialism. It is an integral part of the British imperial elite version of what constitutes knowledge… It contributes to the British conceptual construction of a territory.[26]

In 1923 the British Government's Chief Advisor on Survey and Land Settlement, Ernest Dowson was tasked with assessing the status of land tenure arrangements and agriculture in Palestine for the benefit of the Mandatory administration. [27] Even though his previous experience did not include time in Palestine, he completed his initial and damning appraisal in a matter of a few days. Dowson's report was peppered with words such as 'derelict', 'lack', 'apathy', 'evil', 'deadening', 'rubbish', 'sickness', 'unhealthy', 'afflicting', 'disability', 'annihilated' and 'blighted' and amounted to a damning indictment of the prevailing conditions and methods of local farming.[28] The report was used as the basis and justification for a wholesale restructuring of land tenure and usage in Mandate Palestine.

Reading the extracts included in Sherman's compilation it becomes clear that British employees in Mandate Palestine, were they teachers, policemen or administrators, also understood themselves to be improving or 'civilising' the natives. In a letter to his father on 26 May 1926 Stewart Perone, for example, offered his assessment of the value of using teaching methods and curricula based on the British model in Palestinian schools. He wrote:

> One naturally has qualms about forcing English ideas and institutions upon these people, but there is no doubt, that if you are going to do it at all, it is best to go the whole hog…it is an absolute fact that the boys in the schools here find their Arabic poets dull and uninteresting, while they lap down Shakespeare with avidity. By giving them an English education, therefore, one is not really de-nationalising them, because for the most part they have not the remotest idea of what their nationality implies; they have no traditions, and they are likely to find, on the whole, more akin to their own aspirations in Nelson and Cromwell than in Salah ed Din and Suleiman the Magnificent.[29]

The interlocutors recorded in Sherman's collection also made frequent and blatantly hostile references to the Jewish migrants to Palestine. The headmistress of a small

mixed school for girls in Jerusalem, an Anglican sponsored establishment, recorded in her diary:

> The Jews are much the most pushing, and if there were very many of them they would lower the tone of the school. It is queer, -- one hears people at home talk of the return of the Jews to Palestine, but it wouldn't be any good, one sees, for they are hated by both Christians and Moslems…Nothing but a thorough-going despotism for a hundred years will pull this country together, for there is no section of the community which you could trust to rule at all, and the country has lived for so long under the Turks, that it will take ages to instil into the people any idea of public service, or truthfulness, or cleanliness.[30]

As time passed, judgements such as this on the unlikelihood of Jews and Arabs ever learning to live amiably together in Palestine were voiced more frequently by the British living there. Both communities were criticised in language that patronised the Arabs and demonised the Jews, as these British servants of the empire began to realise that they themselves were increasingly the objects of hostility from both quarters.[31]

What was apparently plain to see in Palestine was not so well understood in London. There the priority was to run the whole empire and when the natives became restive, it was the job of the colonial police to restore order. Thus successive outbreaks of violence between Arabs and Jews in Palestine were dealt with by force and prosecutions. However, when the Arab revolt of 1936 targeted the British authorities directly, it was suppressed with an amount of vigour and brutality typical of the worst examples of colonial policing in the British Empire.[32] The methods deployed included house demolitions, assassinations, blockades on villages, arbitrary arrest and detention without trial.

That episode prompted the British government to instigate a commission of inquiry, the Peel Commission, which published its report in 1937. Among the causes it cited for the uprising and previous disturbances were 'the desire of the Arabs for national independence' and 'the advance of Arab nationalism outside Palestine'.[33] Since, according to the report, maintenance of the status quo would have required repression of the national aspirations of both peoples, it recommended that Mandate Palestine be partitioned into an Arab state united with Transjordan and an independent Jewish state – and the retention of British control of several cities.

The Peel Commission report thus signalled a recognition of Arab as well as Jewish aspirations for national independence, though the conclusions had more to do with how best to manage such aspirations and avoid the costs of confrontation and rule by force, than with recognising the rights of indigenous peoples to sovereign statehood. Peel did after all envisage that the British government would retain control

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of key cities and that a prospective Arab entity in Palestine would be appended to Jordan.

The significance that the British political elite attached to the maintenance of international order and discipline in the face of competing nationalisms was illustrated in a study published in 1938 by Lord Davies, which it seems highly appropriate to reference here, given the origins of this article.[34] In this work Davies not only argued for the establishment of an international police force, but identified Palestine as the ideal location for its headquarters.[35] Davies' recommendations did not achieve official acceptance.

Meanwhile, the Peel Commission proposals were rejected by both the Palestinian Arabs and, after some deliberations, the Zionist leadership. Deeming it infeasible to implement the recommendations by force, the British government eventually also rejected the proposals, and in the White Paper of 1939, which instigated curbs on the number of Jewish migrants permitted to enter Palestine, it was stated that:

> The objective of His Majesty's Government is the establishment within 10 years of an independent Palestine State in such treaty relations with the United Kingdom as will provide satisfactorily for the commercial and strategic requirements of both countries in the future….
> The independent State should be one in which Arabs and Jews share government in such a way as to ensure that the essential interests of each community are safeguarded.[36]

This document, and in particular the introduction of limitations on Jewish immigration generated hostility between the British Mandatory authorities and the Zionist leadership, as Jewish refugees escaping Europe in the face of the Holocaust were denied entry to Palestine. After the war Zionist paramilitaries turned on the British administration and forces in Palestine and the latter responded violently.[37] Their actions infuriated the American administration, whose focus was on the plight of European Jews in the wake of the Holocaust and, as the war in Europe ended the US government insisted that 100,000 Jewish refugees be allowed immediate access to Palestine.

Under pressure from the Americans, harried and attacked by Zionist paramilitaries, despised and resented by the Palestinian Arabs, bankrupt and war-weary, in 1947 the British government opted to refer the Palestine question to the United Nations. According to Elizabeth Monroe:

> The British public had taken Palestine in its stride for years, and had looked on 'disturbances' and 'violence' there much as it had viewed 'the trouble' in Ireland—as an unpleasant experience that was part of the white man's burden, rather than a symptom that, unless relieved, was bound to recur.[38]

What changed public attitudes was the execution of two young British sergeants by Jewish terrorists in an act of reprisal. As Monroe recounted:

> Picture papers front-paged photographs of the hanged men, disgust was expressed at the placing of booby traps on their bodies, liberal opinion was exercised over small outbursts of anti-Semitism in several British towns. At a most unsuitable moment, the event quickened anti-American feeling, for the excesses which the Zionists had perpetrated in advertising campaigns for funds in America that included remarks which stirred even the stolid British to anger.[39]

In November 1947 the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 181, which called for the partition of Palestine, according to a plan which did not envisage an amalgamation of Arab Palestine with Transjordan. The Jewish leadership accepted the plan, the Arabs rejected it. Meanwhile, the UN and Washington looked to Britain to aid implementation of the partition, but the British (elite and public) had had enough. The government reasoned that it would take force to implement partition and not only would British public opinion not tolerate the costs involved, but they would be seen to be acting in the interests of the Zionists and against those of the Arabs, with negative consequences for British interests elsewhere in the region.

Even so, in the manner of their departure the British were widely blamed by the Arabs for supporting the Zionist cause. As Sir Henry Gurney, Chief Secretary in the Mandate Administration from October 1946 to May 1948, recorded in his diary, in order to make an orderly and safe exit from Palestine, the British administration had to rely on the help of the Zionists.[40] In fact, since the suppression of the 1936 Arab revolt the British Mandatory authorities had not only used cooperation with the Zionist forces to protect themselves, but had significantly damaged the capacity of the Palestinian Arabs to take on the Zionists when the show-down between them came in the wake of the British departure.

Phase III: The Palestinian Refugee Problem

As the foregoing illustrates, for the British political elite the whole story of their time in Palestine was one of irreconcilable promises, violent contestation and ultimate collapse. No doubt their sense of failure had a bearing on the way they depicted both the Palestinians and the Israelis thereafter. Embarrassed by their own role, they sought to explain the mess they left by depicting the Zionists as ruthlessly determined and/or the Palestinians as hopelessly disorganised. As the British departed the Zionists declared the independence of Israel and battle was joined between them and not just the Palestinian Arabs but armies sent by the surrounding Arab states. That the Arab Legion fielded by the Jordanians included some British personnel was a portent of an enduring British commitment to the Hashemite Kingdom and its position in the Arab-Israeli conflict thereafter.

The war of 1948 is remembered to this day by the Israelis as their War of Independence and by the Arabs as *Al-Nakba* (the catastrophe). By the end of the war Israel was in possession of 73 per cent of Palestine and around 750,000 Palestinians, nearly three quarters of the Arab population of Mandate Palestine, had become refugees, finding refuge in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and thence Jordan, as well as Syria, Lebanon and beyond.

While the United States recognised the Israeli government as the de facto authority in the new state within minutes of the Israeli declaration of independence in May 1948, the British government waited several months before following suit. On this and many subsequent occasions the British government was at pains to square legalities with practicalities, including the implications for their position on other issues. Meanwhile, it took until 1949 for ceasefire agreements to bring an end to the first Arab-Israeli war. In the meantime British officials participated in the drafting of UN Resolution 194, adopted in December 1948, which:

> *Resolves* that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible.[41]

Inclusion of the phrase 'at the earliest practicable date' and the stipulation that to return the refugees had to be willing to 'live at peace with their neighbours' is telling. Those drawing up the resolution, not least the British, were signalling that implementation of the resolution would be conditional. As it transpired, the Israeli authorities refused to facilitate the repatriation of more than a few Palestinian refugees and Arab governments refused to resettle the refugees in their countries or give them full citizenship.

In these circumstances and having relinquished official responsibility for Palestine, the British political elite adopted a line which placed the onus on Israel and the Arabs to reach accommodation and, given the dispersion of the Palestinians, they were effectively depicted as a casualty of war and a 'refugee problem' as opposed to potential participants to future negotiations. Meanwhile, in British government circles 'memories of discomfiture in Palestine were soon crowded out by events of far greater significance to Britain's future',[42] not least the preoccupations of the Cold War.

Across the Middle East, however, British diplomats were not allowed to forget the British role in the creation of Israel and the Palestinian problem.[43] The *Nakba* was a humiliation that fuelled the cause of Arab nationalism and anti-imperialism. Anthony Parsons, who served as a British diplomat during the twilight years of the British

Empire, wrote in his memoires: 'I have seen with my own eyes, ever since I left Palestine in 1948, how this unsolved problem has infected the whole region.'[44] Reflecting on the reasons why a former British Foreign Secretary had seen fit to issue the Balfour Declaration, he asked:

> But did we have the right, even in those imperialistic days, to pre-empt on behalf of a third party a territory to which we had no claim, without regard to the wishes of the people of that land? Was it even expedient to adopt a commitment which, to anyone with any knowledge of the region, contained a contradiction certain to make its implementation in full an impossibility?[45]

Yet Parsons was unusual in his readiness to shoulder blame. There were others who preferred to lay the blame on Israel, often in tones that were denigratory if not racist. Arnold Toynbee, director of research at Chatham House and, for a while simultaneously, at the Foreign Office, described the Jews murdered by the Nazis as 'the vicarious victims' of German resentment over military defeat in 1914-18 and the Palestinians as 'the vicarious victims of the European Jews' indignation over the "genocide" committed upon them by their Gentile fellow westerners in A.D.1933-45'.[46]

British establishment understanding of their legacy in Palestine must in any case be viewed in the context of Britain's rapid exit from empire around the world, which happened at breakneck speed between 1947 and 1971. The nadir of Britain's position came not with the ignoble exit from Palestine, but in the Suez debacle of 1956. The way the British leadership and particularly Anthony Eden, the Prime Minister, reacted to Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal combined imperialist arrogance and hubris with self-righteousness, variously describing Nasser as Hitler and an Arab upstart. At the time, however, Eden represented an old guard that was fast losing ground to a younger generation eager to put Britain's era of colonialism firmly in the past.

A *Times* editorial of 27 August 1956 vividly exemplified the heated debate that raged in British elite circles at the time. Railing against the critics of empire for their silence on atrocities committed by Russia or China, the editorial asserted:

> But let Britain seek to keep law and order in some territory she is bringing along to self-government, let her say it is in the interests of the people of that territory that they should walk before they run, and at once the cry of colonialism goes up.[47]

The intervention of the Americans in ending the Suez war and obliging the British and French governments, in collusion with that of Israel (with whom the British shared a mutual suspicion at the time), to end their attempt to capture the Suez Canal and topple Nasser, was a profound humiliation. Realisation of the enormity of

British government perfidy in this instance ruined what remained of its credibility across the Arab world and alienated Washington. British political elite discourse in subsequent years reveals a loss of self-confidence, wounded pride and mortification that, in contrast to the French, they were deemed the embodiment of all that was considered heinous in imperialism.[48]

Phase IV: Land for Peace

The Arab-Israeli war of June 1967 transformed the parameters of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Reacting to sabre-rattling by Nasser, the Israelis launched a pre-emptive attack on their Arab neighbours in a devastating war with the superpowers on opposite sides. By the end Israeli forces had captured the Sinai Peninsula (and Gaza Strip) from Egypt, the West Bank from Jordan and the Golan Heights from Syria.

Among the British Foreign Office Arabists and some leading politicians this war confirmed their conviction that the Palestine problem constituted the most potent source of instability and danger in the region.[49] Yet the outcome of the war also had benefits for the British government, in so far as it dealt a fatal blow to the cause of Arab Nationalism, hitherto the driving force behind anti-British sentiment in the Arab world. Also, it meant that the Palestinian refugee problem was overtaken by the new reality of Israeli occupation of Arab territories captured in war—the permanent retention of which was by then forbidden under international law.

The clarity of international law on the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force thus provided the basis for a response from the UN Security Council, of which the British government was of course one of the five Permanent Members. British Ambassador to the UN Lord Caradon took the lead in drafting the English text of Resolution 242, adopted unanimously by the Security Council on 22 November 1967. It enshrined the principle of exchanging 'land for peace' and this principle (referencing 242) became the basis for subsequent international pronouncements on the conflict. Article 1 of the resolution:

> *Affirms* that the fulfilment of Charter principles requires the establishment of a just and lasting peace in the Middle East which should include the application of both the following principles:
>
> (i)   Withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict;
> (ii)   Termination of all claims or states of belligerency and respect for and acknowledgement of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every state in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force.[50]

In demonstration of classic British pragmatism, the omission of the definite article 'the' before 'territories occupied in the recent conflict' provided for interpretation in the event of implementation.[51] The French text of 242 used the phrase 'Retrait des forces armees israeliennes des territoires occupies lors du recent conflict' and is deemed equally authoritative to the English version, thereby compounding the potential for alternative interpretations.[52]

Resolution 242 also affirmed the necessity 'for achieving a just settlement of the refugee problem', but that was as far as it went in acknowledging the Palestinians. The emphasis was on 'states' not peoples or nationalities—and thereby substantiates the significance attached to acquiring UN recognition of Palestinian statehood by the current PLO leadership (who did not formally accept the Resolution until 1988). As reflected in the terms of 242 meanwhile, in addition to a refugee problem, the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza, inclusive of refugees, also became a population under occupation. That was how many Palestinians had seen themselves previously, under Jordanian rule, though neither the British nor the Jordanian government had done so.

That this population could not be ignored was made manifest when the PLO, under the leadership of Yasser Arafat, began conducting raids across the river from Jordan against the Israelis in and beyond the West Bank. With their hijackings and other acts of terrorism Palestinian groups affiliated to the PLO won world attention and notoriety. In 1970 there was a showdown between the Jordanian government and the PLO ('Black September') which led to the expulsion of Arafat and his cohort of guerrilla fighters to Lebanon. The official British position during this episode was firmly on the side of the Hashemite monarchy, whose survival the British considered essential not only for the stability of Jordan, but also, by extension, for the prospects of finding a resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.[53]

Meanwhile, the British retreat from empire proceeded apace and in 1971 the government withdrew British forces from 'East of Suez', including the Arab Gulf states. Thereafter, the Arab oil-producing states and Iran nationalised their energy industries, which enabled them to demand higher prices for oil, resulting in the first major oil price boom. Among the winners in this bonanza were British banks, into which much surplus Arab oil wealth flowed, and British businesses, which capitalised on a massive expansion of infrastructure projects in the Gulf. Rich Arabs also flocked to London to spend their new found oil wealth. [54]

It was against this backdrop that, during the course of the 1970s, opinion in the British political elite, along with that of members of the wider British community, not least those in the business sector, indicated more pronounced support for the general Arab position on the conflict with Israel. The British government did not go so far as to join the Arab states in recognising the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinians, but the existence of the Palestinians, and not

simply as refugees, was acknowledged. This trend began in 1970, when Foreign Secretary Alec Douglas-Home, addressing a Conservative Party meeting in Harrogate, said: 'we must not ignore the political aspirations of the Palestinian Arabs and their desire to be given a means of self-expression'.[55]

Throughout the 1970s the centrepiece of all British official pronouncements was nonetheless to call specifically for the implementation of Resolution 242, the terms of which were reaffirmed by the UN Security Council in Resolution 338, following the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, when the Egyptians and Syrians launched their surprise attack on Israel and Egypt succeeded in recapturing parts of the Sinai. Egypt's relative success in 1973 provided US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger with a basis upon which to lay the foundations for a peace deal between Israel and Egypt—subsequently brokered by US President Jimmy Carter at Camp David in 1977—on the basis of the exchange of occupied land for peace.

It was in the year following the 1973 war that Sir Alec Douglas-Home delivered the David Davies Annual Memorial Lecture on the subject of 'Britain's Changing Role in World Affairs'. In the course of his speech he said:

> The need for a clear-eyed and realistic view of international problems is well illustrated by our relationship with the Middle East. It is easy to talk in general terms of human values or of material interests we have in common. Everybody, for instance, wants peace, but this is seldom the first or absolute priority for any country. For whereas the first need of a country is for peace the first duty of any government to its people is for security…But no country can in these days guarantee its own security, neither Israel nor any country of medium size. However deep seated the enmity in this mid-20th century, reconciliation must be the order of the day and in return the international world must guarantee security.[56]

Douglas-Home went on to endorse the efforts of Kissinger, whom he referred to as 'a brilliant leader of the peace-makers'[57] to find a resolution to the Middle East conflict. On this occasion Douglas-Home did not mention the Palestinians, only the Arab states and Israel. He did make a reference to the Jews, who, he said were mistreated and 'prevented from returning home' by the Soviet Union. Overall, however, he was at pains to emphasise that, in the context of the Cold War, Britain should remain engaged in world affairs, but accept that its security required working together with other states and in particular in alliance with the United States and Western Europe. Britain had joined the European Community (EC) in 1973.

As a member of the EC, the British government became party to a number of EC statements on the Arab-Israeli conflict that signalled increasing concern for the Palestinians. The first such communique following British accession opined that for 'the establishment of a just and lasting peace' account should be taken of 'the

legitimate rights of the Palestinians'. [58] In a statement to the UN of December 1976 the EC members clarified that, in their view 'the exercise of the right of the Palestinian people to the effective expression of its national identity could involve a territorial basis in the framework of a negotiated settlement'.[59] A subsequent EC statement of June 1977 actually called for 'a homeland for the Palestinian people'.[60]

In the 1980s – 'the Thatcher years' – the issue of PLO representation of the Palestinians became a feature of policy debates. Even before his appointment as Foreign Secretary in Margaret Thatcher's first cabinet, Lord (Peter) Carrington had already formed the opinion that the PLO represented the majority of Palestinians and 'If there were ever to be any sort of productive negotiation, it must include them'.[61] Once in office, Carrington took a leading role in drafting the EC's *Venice Declaration* of 1980,[62] which called for the Palestinian people to be able 'to exercise fully their right to self-determination' and stated that the PLO would have to be involved in peace negotiations. This and European support for a Saudi peace proposal of the time were intended to make up for the failure of the US-brokered Egypt-Israel Treaty to make any serious provision for resolving the Palestinian issue.

The effect was to profoundly irritate not only the Israeli goverment but also the American administration.[63] Yet, the conclusion of the Egypt-Israel deal confirmed US leadership in the diplomacy of peace-making between Israel and the Arabs. As it transpired, Carrington's role in coordinating the British position with that of other EC members proved short lived. The surprise invasion of the Falkland Islands by the Argentinian armed forces happened on his watch at the Foreign Office, and he deemed it his duty to resign. For the remainder of the 1980s the stamp of Margaret Thatcher was more evident in British official dealings with both the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Thatcher spelled out her position on both the PLO and the Palestinians during a visit to Israel in May 1986. Addressing guests at a banquet in her honour she urged the Israelis to allow Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza to elect their own representatives, proposing this as the best way 'to encourage the emergence of responsible political leaders ready for peace'.[64] Interviewed by Israeli journalists subsequently, she said she could not see a role for the PLO in peace negotiations 'unless the PLO renounces terrorism, accepts 242, the United Nations resolution, which of course implies Israel's right to exist, and they would recognise that explicitly'.[65] Questioned on her understanding of 'self-determination' for the Palestinians, she replied that she did not envisage an independent Palestinian state, as 'that would cause endless problems and would never be acceptable'. Instead, she suggested, 'the most popular and most acceptable—widely acceptable—idea is for the West Bank to be part of a federation with Jordan'.[66]

The manner in which Thatcher incorporated *both* the requirements of international law *and* her own understanding of practical considerations in her remarks and

proposals exemplified the standard British establishment position on the Palestinians, not just in her era but before and after.

Phase V: Autonomy in the Occupied Territories

Until 1988 the idea that Jordan could resume responsibility for the West Bank as a means to resolve the Palestinian problem remained at least conceivable. However, in 1988 King Hussein of Jordan announced that his government was disengaging from its historical responsibilities there. The impetus for this decision came from the outbreak of the first Palestinian *Intifada* in December 1987.

This uprising was not in fact the work of the PLO leadership (by then mostly residing in Tunis, having been escorted out of Lebanon by the US navy, to prevent them from a worse fate at the hands of the Israelis who invaded Lebanon in 1982). Indeed Arafat had to scramble to claim a leadership role in what was essentially a spontaneous grass-roots uprising in the Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip and West Bank. British television coverage of civilians, including children, throwing stones at armoured Israeli troops claimed media headlines and the Palestinian cause gained new adherents not only among the British public but also among parliamentarians.[67]

Thenceforth the Israeli authorities faced a hard task in convincing public opinion worldwide that they were the victims and the Arab states the aggressors. Not until the second *Intifada* (2000-03), when the Palestinians deployed suicide bombers against Israeli civilians, did the discourse shift back somewhat. However, international action to address the Palestinian issue had to wait a while, because in August 1990 Iraq invaded Kuwait and reversing that occupation under American leadership took precedence until Autumn 1991.

The Kuwait war coincided with the end of the Cold War and unravelling of the Soviet Union. Although British forces participated in the Desert Storm campaign to liberate Kuwait, the government was barely visible in the diplomatic manoeuvres which followed. When the Americans (along with the Russians) convened the Madrid Peace Conference in November 1991 the EC was in transition to becoming the European Union (EU) and was accorded no more than observer status at Madrid. A British diplomat complained at the time that the Foreign Office was having difficulty finding out what was going on behind the scenes and received more information from the Russians than the Americans.[68]

As of 1993 the centrepiece of the new 'Middle East Peace Process' was the Oslo Accords, brokered in secret by the Norwegians and then adopted by the American administration of Bill Clinton. When the deal was signed on the White House lawn all but a few recalcitrant Israelis and sceptical Palestinians, among them Edward Said, dared voice objections. Subsequent analyses[69] have pointed out the flaws in the deal, not least the fact that Arafat extended recognition to the state of Israel in return

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for no more than recognition of the PLO as the representative of the Palestinians. Palestinian statehood was not promised or mentioned.

The British authorities joined other Europeans in suggesting that statehood for the Palestinians could be an outcome. Yet they held back from pronouncing on what the outcome should be, preferring to leave it to the parties, with US mediation, to reach their own conclusions. The Oslo Accords laid out a timetable for Israeli forces to gradually withdraw from Palestinian population centres in the West Bank and Gaza and some surrounding areas (amounting to roughly forty per cent of the Occupied Territories in total), and for the Palestinians to take over responsibility for civil administration in those areas. They were to have control of 'internal security' in the main Palestinian towns (designated Area A) and shared control, with the Israelis, of internal security in the surrounding villages (Area B)—while the Israelis were to retain full control in the remaining 60 per cent of the West Bank (Area C) where all Israeli settlements were located.

The political geography of the Oslo process could not have been more complex. The British media, as others, struggled to explain the intricacies in short news bulletins, though there was massive coverage of what appeared to be a good news story. Certainly there was optimism that this could be the beginnings of a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian component of the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, more attention was given to the simultaneous high level talks between the Israelis and Syrians— until those collapsed irreparably at a Geneva summit in April 2000. The Jordanians quietly agreed a peace deal with the Israelis in 1994. British media coverage of the separate tracks nonetheless depicted a race to the finishing line, with the Palestinians left till last.

In the early years of the Oslo process the media also publicised instances of competition between the different European states to identify and fund niche projects in the Palestinian territories—a port and an airport in Gaza, for example. The British government opted to help the Palestinians with financial issues[70] and even discussed the possibility of a new currency with the Palestinian Authority. Increasingly over time British officials focused their attention on assisting the Palestinians with their security arrangements, with police training and vehicles. Collectively the EU managed and funded the first Palestinian elections in the occupied territories in 1996, in which Arafat won the presidency and a Palestinian legislature was established. In both media and official British discourse the impression was conveyed that the Palestinian Authority was being helped to make a success of autonomous rule, delivering on security, social services and economic development, and thence proving the capacity of the Palestinians to run their own affairs and live in peace alongside the Israelis.

British official statements paid no heed to the problems of establishing a viable entity when the Palestinians were still under Israeli occupation. Episodes of violence

continued and when prevented by the Palestinian police, the latter were accused by the Palestinian populous of policing the occupation to the benefit of the Israelis. British ministers and diplomats explained that their task was to persuade the Palestinians that the better they behaved the more they could expect to receive from the Israelis. However, once Binyamin Netanyahu and his Likud Party came to power in Israel in 1996, the 'Oslo process' stalled.

Under Netanyahu the Israelis dragged their feet on incremental withdrawal from more territory and accelerated the expansion of Jewish settlements. Even the Americans began to chafe at Netanyahu's obduracy and British ministers, as their European counterparts, became more vocal in criticising Israeli settlement expansion. Prime Minister Tony Blair, however, was not among those critics. Shortly after Blair and the Labour Party came to power in 1997, Britain held the rotating presidency of the EU. It fell to Robin Cook as British Foreign Secretary to inform the Israeli government of EU objections to its plans for a new Jewish settlement in East Jerusalem. On this and several other occasions, Blair let Cook take the flack and then intervened to placate the Israelis.

As I discuss at some length elsewhere[71] Blair came to office with an ambition to reposition or 'rebrand' Britain as a 'force for good in the world'. After playing a leading role in the intervention in Kosovo and in forging the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland, Blair represented himself as a skilled peacemaker capable of making a difference in the Israeli-Palestinian context. His approach was to focus on winning influence in Washington and finding opportunities to assist the Clinton administration in the peace process.

According to EU officials in Brussels[72], under Blair's leadership the official British position on the Israeli-Palestinian issue transited from the middle ground in Europe to a position closer to Washington than most others. Not only did that prevent the British government from playing the role of bridge-builder inside Europe, but it also rendered the British political elite less interesting or important to the Israelis, since they felt no need for an interlocutor with the Americans. In any case, British policymakers as others in Europe were rendered impotent when the Camp David summit of July 2000 between President Clinton, Ehud Barak (who replaced Netanyahu as Israeli Prime Minister in 1999) and Yasser Arafat collapsed in disagreement and Clinton, attempting to shield Barak from criticism at home, heaped all the blame on Arafat. The outbreak of the second Intifada followed within weeks and the whole Oslo process never recovered.

Phase VI: Statehood—to be or not to be?

It was in the Blair years at No.10 Downing Street that the terms 'discourse' and 'narrative' entered mainstream political and media parlance. Hitherto use of these terms was largely confined to academia. However, in government the New Labour

leadership proved far more invested than previous incumbents in managing the presentation of policy and shaping the agenda of the media. According to Mark Leonard, the young man appointed to head up New Labour's project on 'Re-Branding Britain', globalization had blurred the distinction between domestic and foreign policy and 'who you are' is almost as important as 'what you do'.[73]Leonard proposed defining and agreeing 'a new set of stories that link the British past to its future and which take account of the changes in Britain today'.[74]

The key figure in the team that Blair assembled around him at No.10 Downing Street was his so-called 'spin doctor' Alastair Campbell, who presided over daily press briefings and kept New Labour ministers 'on message' such that contradictory statements and *ad hoc* pronouncements were kept to a minimum. It was in this context that journalists began to refer to the government's 'narrative' on the issues of the day and spent as much time trying to find holes in the narratives as in simply reporting them.

The two key messages that the Blair government highlighted in his first term were that Britain could increase its influence by representing itself as 'a force for good in the world' and that: 'In the end values and interests merge' and 'the spread of our values makes us safer'.[75] After 9/11 when Blair was in his second term, his rhetoric on Britain's role in the world shifted from promoting 'good' to combatting 'evil'. The evil in question was 'terrorism with a global reach' and the dictators such as Iraqi President Saddam Hussein who could be expected to assist terrorists with 'weapons of mass destruction' (WMD).

Such were his powers of oratory that Blair was able to present the case for invading Iraq more compellingly than President George W Bush and his administration in Washington. Whereas the Bush team claimed a link between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, Blair avoided such unproven assertions. However, he and Campbell did set about presenting the case against Saddam Hussein in a government dossier on Iraq's WMD that they claimed was substantiated by available intelligence findings. Hence, the credibility of Blair and his government was undermined when no WMD were found following the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

On the subject of Palestine Blair did not indulge in overblown rhetoric, though his pronouncements and interventions in the US-led peace process did suggest more optimism that the conflict could be resolved within that framework than was perhaps warranted. Like many EU bureaucrats, he became caught up in the details of implementation of successive initiatives, from the Oslo process in the late 1990s to the Mitchell Report issued in the context of the second *Intifada*, to the Road Map that was launched after the invasion of Iraq in 2003.[76]

The Road Map was the first official document to enshrine the principle of a 'two-state solution' to the conflict. Prior to that, the furthest the British, in conjunction with the

EU, had gone was to reaffirm the 'unqualified right to self-determination' of the Palestinians 'including the option of a state'.[77] This affirmation was issued in a statement released in March 1999, with US encouragement, as a gesture to dissuade Arafat from going ahead with his intention to declare statehood unilaterally on 4 May 1999, when the 'interim period' envisaged in the Oslo Accords was due to expire and 'final status' issues were supposed to have been resolved in negotiations. Blair was among those who wanted to avert such a declaration, on the grounds that the only way Palestinian statehood could and should be attained was by agreement with the Israelis.

The impetus for the drafting of the Road Map was a speech made by Bush in June 2002 in which he issued the first US public endorsement of the idea of a Palestinian state. The caveat was that Bush wanted a change in the Palestinian leadership as a condition.[78] Nonetheless, EU members, including the British government, took this as an opportunity to draft what became 'A Performance-Based Roadmap to a Permanent Two State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict'[79] and Blair attempted to persuade Bush to launch it before the invasion of Iraq. However, not only did the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon persuade Bush to delay doing so until June 2003, but he also secured a letter from Bush in which the US President expressed the view that Israel would not be obliged to withdraw all Jewish settlements in the West Bank and that the Palestinian refugees should not expect to return to their former homes inside Israel—both issues which, according to the Road Map, were supposed to be resolved by negotiation.

Reflecting on this development, in his memoires Robin Cook recounted how:

> Tony Blair was wheeled out to the Rose Garden by President Bush to endorse the new line, which he dutifully did. For some people it was a moment which represented the nadir in Britain's subordination to the foreign policy agenda of the Bush administration. It appears to have been the event which tipped fifty-two former ambassadors into signing their open letter to Tony Blair expressing their dismay that he had endorsed 'new policies which are one-sided and illegal and which will cost yet more Israeli and Palestinian blood'.[80]

For their part, the Palestinians also objected to the Road Map plan for an interim phase in which the putative state of Palestine would have 'provisional borders'. More to the point, the Road Map required changes in the Palestinian governing structure which set the scene for endless wrangling among all the players over how much reform of the Palestinian Authority was enough to meet Israeli demands.

The broader context had a bearing also. This was the era of the 'War on Terror'. Estranged from Washington over the US decision to take the war to Iraq, key European governments were keen to find other issues on which to regain favour in

Washington. Labelling Hamas a terrorist organisation was identified as a suitable gesture and in September 2003 the EU added the political wing of Hamas to its list of terrorist organisations. Thus was sealed the fate of the Palestinians when, in the elections of January 2006, the voters delivered a majority for Hamas.

Under EU law the EU and its members could not fund a terrorist organisation and all their efforts to build a viable administration for the prospective Palestinian state fell into disarray. Following the shoot-out in Gaza between fighters of the Islamist Hamas movement and members of the secular Fatah faction, traditionally the dominant player in Palestinian politics and leadership of the PLO, in 2007, Hamas established full control in the Gaza Strip and Fateh presided in the West Bank. Even though the British, and especially Blair, who became Quartet representative after stepping down as Prime Minister in 2007, tried to help a government of technocrats under President Abbas make a go of self-government in the West Bank, the vision of a unified Palestinian state and Authority, covering both the West Bank and Gaza, receded.

Israel placed Gaza under a blockade and went to war with Hamas in December 2008, November 2012 and July 2014. In each case public opinion polls in Britain as well as other European states showed a rise in support for the Palestinians and criticism of Israel.[81] Various governments also demonstrated increased support for the Palestinians, though not that of Britain, which, by 2010 was in the hands of a new Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition. In November 2012 the UN General Assembly passed a motion recognising Palestine as a 'non-member observer state'. At least 17 European states voted in favour, including Austria, France, Italy, Norway and Spain. Britain and Germany abstained.

In October 2014 British Members of Parliament voted 274 to 12 in support of a non-binding motion to recognise Palestinian statehood. The Conservative leadership remained opposed to recognition of a Palestinian state unless and until that was the outcome of resumed peace negotiations. Coalition junior partners, the Liberal Democracts, were more disposed to vote in favour,[82] while Labour MPs were divided.[83]

The same month as the British parliamentary motion was passed the Swedish government decided to formally recognise Palestinian statehood. Yet, on 16 December 2014 the EU Parliament voted in favour of a more conditional stance, to support 'in principle recognition of Palestinian statehood and the two-state solution, and believes these should go hand in hand with the development of peace talks, which should be advanced'.[84] On 30 December 2014, the UN Security Council rejected a Palestinian resolution demanding an end to Israeli occupation within three years.

In March 2015 British Prime Minister David Cameron explained that he saw a two-state solution as in the interests of the Israelis as well as the Palestinians, since 'if

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there is no two-state solution, the situation ends up moving towards a one-state solution, which I think will be disastrous for the Jewish people of Israel'.[85] He also stated that settlement expansion 'makes a two-state solution more difficult and that, in turn, will make Israel less stable, rather than more stable'.[86] The need, therefore, as he saw it, was not only to call on the Israelis to cease settlement building, but also to urge a resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, in the interests of achieving a two-state solution.

Following the May 2015 Conservative election victory and formation of a new government, Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond explained to the House of Commons why his government did not see fit to follow the example set by Sweden the previous October:

> We believe the European Union countries individually unilaterally recognising Palestine is throwing away an opportunity that the European Union has to exercise leverage by collectively holding out the prospect of recognition or non-recognition as a way of influencing behaviour.[87]

Exactly how this stance would incentivise the Israeli government to change its 'behaviour' under the leadership of Binyamin Netanyahu, who, in the run-up to his election victory in 2015 actually rowed back on his previous acceptance of the principle of a two-state solution, was not clear. Nor did Hammond clarify what change of behaviour was wanted from the Palestinians, except, presumably, a return to negotiations. He did indicate that the Palestinian factions remained disunited, but did not provide a remedy.

Meanwhile, according to the Foreign Office website, in a section entitled 'UK and the Occupied Palestinian Territories', the 'Mission' of the British government was, at the time of this writing, described thus:

> We work to improve the United Kingdom's security and prosperity through a just peace between a stable, democratic Palestinian State and Israel, based on 1967 borders, ending the Occupation by agreement. Our aim is to improve the ties of friendship between the Palestinian and British peoples.[88]

Conclusions

The foregoing account of how the Palestinian issue and people have been represented in British discourse leads to four broad conclusions. First it demonstrates both continuity and discontinuity in the way the Palestinians have been framed or represented in British political elite discourse since 1915. There is continuity in that at no point has the British government endorsed the rights of the Palestinians to independent sovereign statehood as a stand-alone objective. There

is also continuity in the way the dominant themes in the discourse temper references to international law and legality with practical considerations and reservations. There is discontinuity in the way the Palestinians and the nature of the 'Palestine Problem' have been defined, as indicated in the six successive phases detailed above.

The Palestinians have been variously defined as 'natives', 'refugees', the West Bank inhabitants of Jordan, a guerrilla organisation, a popular resistance movement, a population denied their human rights and requiring humanitarian assistance and a state-in-the-making. Throughout, the Palestinians have been defined as 'a problem'. Even the call for a 'two-state solution' is not a call for Palestinian statehood *per se*. They are to have a state, provided the Israelis agree, as a formula for resolving a conflict, not by right.

Second, the foregoing exploration demonstrates, in this particular case study on the British and the Palestinians at least, that shifts or changes in the way the 'Palestine Problem' has been represented have coincided with major exogenous developments or shocks, including wars and peace agreements, between the protagonists and/or, though not necessarily, affecting the British political elites directly. In this particular case international and/or external developments appear to have been more instrumental in changing the discourse than domestic factors, though the former appear to have affected media discourse and public opinion and these no doubt contributed to or compounded shifts at the political elite level.

Third, the findings here bear out the contention of critical theorists that discourse, particularly the discourse of power elites, in which are embedded norms, moral positions, legal language and practical considerations, can pose a powerful barrier to realisation of independent agency on the part of non-elite groups. Thus, in this particular case whatever tactics or strategies are adopted by the Palestinians, their aspiration for independence has continued to elude them, even when they have done as bidden by not only the British but also the Europeans in the EC or European Union and the Americans.

However, fourth, in so far as the second conclusion (above) holds true, and war does make a difference, the Palestinians could well conclude, in keeping with the insights of Franz Fanon, that resort to war and violence can force change in the prevailing discourse when reasoning cannot.

Even so, in some respects the Palestinians have come full circle. Regardless of how they were seen before the British came to Palestine, by the end of the Mandate British officials clearly understood that the Arabs were the majority population and realised that the better organised Zionists stood to gain control of most of the land once the British withdrew. They also saw that a binational state or coexistence was very unlikely to work. But they deemed the various partition plans as unworkable and the resulting Palestinian state as non-viable. Today the British government ministers

say they want a 'two-state solution', i.e. partition. On the question of viability they say this must be a consideration, but tend to define it in terms of the viability of the Palestinian Authority, which is unobtainable while Gaza and the West Bank are divided and Israel controls most of the occupied territories.

Meanwhile, having finally begun to win recognition for their rights to independence, many Palestinians are far less enthusiastic than they were in the 1990s about what implementation of a 'two-state solution' could deliver. Crucially also, just as in 1939 and 1947, the British authorities baulked at trying to implement partition against the wishes of either or both the Jews and the Palestinian Arabs, so too today there are no British or other power elites volunteering to enforce the two-state solution. Judging by past experience, the discourse will keep adapting to redistribute blame and responsibility until an even bigger war forces more profound change.

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[57] *Ibid.*

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[61] *Reflect on Things Past: The Memoires of Lord Carrington*, p.339.

[62] Venice Declaration 1980, *Bulletin of the EC*, 6–1980: 10–11, point 1.1.6.

[63] *Reflect on Things Past: The Memoires of Lord Carrington*, pp.340-42.

[64] Recorded in British Information Services, Policy Statement, *Israel and the Palestinian People* (27 May 1986), p.4.

[65] Margaret Thatcher speaking in television interviews in Israel on 27 May 1986, reproduced in Recorded in British Information Services, Policy Statement, *Israel and the Palestinian People* (28 May 1986), p.2.

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[67] See James Rodgers,*Headlines from the Holy Land: Reporting the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (London: XXX, 2015) and David McDowall, *Palestine and Israel: The Uprising and Beyond* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1989) pp.117-122.

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[71] Rosemary Hollis *Britain and the Middle East in the 9/11 Era* (London: Wiley Blackwell and Chatham House, 2010).

[72] As ascertained by the author in interviews with officials at the European Commission in Brussels.

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[75] Speech by the Prime Minister Tony Blair to the Economic Club of Chicago, 22 April 1999, posted by the Foreign Office as 'Doctrine of the Internal Community'.

[76] For the details see Rosemary Hollis *Britain and the Middle East in the 9/11 Era* (London: Wiley Blackwell and Chatham House, 2010) pp. 70-85 and 135-157; Rory Miller, *Inglorious Disarray: Europe, Israel and the Palestinians since 1967* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp.167-172; and Jonathan Rynold and Jonathan Spyer, 'British Policy towards the Middle East in the Post-

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[77] European Union, Presidency Conclusion, Part IV, Berlin, 25 March 1999.

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[85] House of Commons, Daily Hansard, Debate, Oral Answers to Questions, Home Department, 23 March 2015: Column 1126.

[86] House of Commons, Daily Hansard, Debate, Oral Answers to Questions, Home Department, 23 March 2015: Column 1126.

[87] House of Commons, Daily Hansard, Debate, Oral Answers to Questions, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 9 June 2015: Column 1036.

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Rosemary Hollis is Professor of Middle East Policy Studies and Director of the Olive Tree Scholarship Programme at City University London. She was previously Director of Research (2005-08) and Head of the Middle East Programme (1995-2005) at Chatham House. Her research and publications focus on British, EU and US relations with the Middle East as well as conflict and security issues in the region. Her book entitled *Britain and the Middle East in the 9/11 Era* was published by Wiley-Blackwell and Chatham House in 2010.