

The Israel-Hamas war and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

By Colin Chapman

Summary

Hamas's attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 and Israel's response have pushed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the top of the international agenda and created an existential crisis for Israel. This paper attempts to explain the background to these events by surveying the history of Israel's dealings with Gaza since 1948. After asking whether there should be a distinctively Christian approach to the conflict, it explores the possibilities for a just and peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Colin Chapman wrote the book *Whose Promised Land?* while working in Beirut in the early 1980s. It was first published by Lion in 1983, and has been through five revisions, the latest in 2015. SPCK will be publishing a revised, updated edition of the book in October 2024, which will cover all the issues raised in this paper in greater detail.

Introduction

Hamas's brutal attack on 7 October 2023, and Israel's war on Hamas in Gaza have brought the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to a head. 'Gaza,' writes Tareq Baconi, 'is one microcosm, one parcel, of the Palestinian experience.'¹ And the Israeli journalist, Amira Hass, describes Gaza as the embodiment of 'the entire saga of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.'² Recent events have pushed the conflict to the top of the international agenda, and created what many have described as an existential crisis for Israel.

But why does this particular conflict arouse so much more passion than most other conflicts in the world today? Western powers played a major role in encouraging Zionism, and have been heavily involved in the region ever since because of their own strategic interests. The Cold War played out there in the 1970s and 1980s, and the ongoing cold war between different powers in the region has almost escalated into open warfare. In 2007, Arno J. Mayer wrote that 'Israel's destiny is only partly in its own hands. The country is as much at the mercy of world politics as it was at its creation in 1947–9.'³ The fact that the recent events have aroused so much passion in the western media and on university campuses suggests that

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it has raised major questions for us in the western world – about our colonial past, double standards, generational divides and profound realignments in western culture. One further reason for special interest is that this is the region in which Judaism, Christianity and Islam came into existence and have been interacting with each other over many centuries.

Christians often disagree with each other over Israel-Palestine, partly because of the different ways in which they understand the significance of the State of Israel in the light of the Bible, and partly because they have different understandings of the history. In this paper I argue that the overriding

1 Tareq Baconi, *Hamas Contained: the rise and pacification of Palestinian resistance* (Stanford University Press, 2018), p.227.
2 Amira Hass, *Drinking the Sea at Gaza* (Hamish Hamilton, 1999), p.7.
3 Arno J. Mayer, *Ploughshares into Swords: from Zionism to Israel* (Verso, 2008), p.6.

concern of Christians should be to seek peace and justice between those most closely involved. Focusing on the background to these events in Israel and Gaza – rather than on the conduct of the war since 7 October – offers a way of understanding the roots of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and points to what might be a peaceful and just resolution.

What happened on 7 October 2023, and what followed?

Hundreds of armed men from Hamas and other Islamist militias broke out of Gaza and engaged in a very brutal attack on several kibbutzim and crowds at a music festival. They killed around 1,200 people, and took about 240 men, women and children into Gaza as hostages.⁴

Israel responded with a full-blown military incursion involving aerial bombardment and armoured columns entering the Gaza Strip. By 17 June 2024, according to the Hamas-run Ministry of Health, more than 37,000 Gazans had been killed and over 85,000 injured. At least 1.8 million people have been displaced, and around 60 per cent of buildings have been destroyed or damaged.

The USA, the UK and other countries have asserted Israel's right to self-defence and have continued to supply weapons and give moral support, while at the same time calling for restraint. Other countries have been more critical of Israel's conduct of the war, and in January 2024 South Africa brought a case against Israel to the International Court of Justice in The Hague accusing it of engaging in genocide. Many interpreted the Court's initial response as a recognition that it was 'plausible' that Israel's actions in Gaza *could* constitute genocide. The Presiding Judge has pointed out, however, that the response simply stated that 'In the Court's view, the facts and circumstances... are sufficient to conclude that at least some of the rights claimed by South Africa and for which it is seeking protection are plausible.'⁵ It also required Israel to take all measures to prevent genocidal violence by its armed forces, to prevent and punish incitement to genocide, and to ensure that humanitarian aid is delivered to Gaza.⁶ It is hard to see how Israel has complied with this provisional ruling, and it may take several years for the Court to determine whether (under international law) genocide has been committed by Israel in Gaza.

What is the background to these events?

On 24 October, just days after the attack, Antonio Guterres, the Secretary General of the UN, pointed out that there was a context to these events; they 'did not happen in a vacuum'. He went on to argue: 'The grievances of the Palestinian people cannot justify the appalling attacks by Hamas. And those appalling attacks cannot justify the collective punishment of the Palestinian people.' The only way to



Derived from a United Nations map (March 2007). Source: Wikimedia Commons. Public domain.

understand the context of these horrific events, therefore, is to review the history not only back to 1967 and 1948, but also to the 1880s.⁷

- When the Zionist movement began in the 1880s with an increasing number of Jews fleeing antisemitism and pogroms in Eastern Europe and settling in Palestine, the Jewish community, rooted there since biblical times, numbered no more than five per cent of the population. In 1896 Theodor Herzl wrote *The Jews' State: An Attempt at a Modern Solution to the Issue of the Jews*, and in 1897 convened the first Zionist Congress in Vienna. In 1917 the British government declared support for the Zionist movement through its Balfour Declaration. It is clear from the writings of early Zionist leaders that while they spoke publicly about the need for a 'homeland' for the Jewish people, the vast majority clearly wanted ultimately to establish a Jewish state.

Many historians in recent years have described Zionism as a 'settler-colonial movement' because the

4 Reports by Al Jazeera and Haaretz have raised questions about the widely accepted versions of what actually happened on the day.
 5 BBC News, 'What did ICJ ruling mean in South Africa's genocide case against Israel?' (see <www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c3g9g63j117o>).
 6 Application of the Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v Israel), Order of the ICJ dated 26

January 2024 (available at <www.icj-cij.org>).
 7 One of the most comprehensive accounts of the history of Gaza is Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Gaza: a history* (Hurst, 2014); one of the best accounts of the whole conflict is Ian Black, *Enemies and Neighbours: Arabs and Jews in Palestine and Israel, 1917–2017* (Allen Lane, 2017).

attitudes and tactics of the new immigrants were similar to those of settlers in previous years in the Americas, Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. The label of 'settler-colonial' is hotly contested by some Israeli historians and others because of the significant differences between Zionism and these other settler movements.⁸ While the Zionist movement differed from many colonial movements, it certainly was a settler movement which resulted in dispossession for many Palestinians who had been living in the land for centuries. It is also how Zionism is perceived today by the majority of the Palestinians who have been at the receiving end of the movement.⁹ When it is argued that many Jews who came to Israel were expelled from Arab countries, the response of many Palestinians is that Jews emigrated from these countries partly because Israel appealed to Jews from all over the world to settle in the land, and partly because of anger in these countries over the creation of Israel.¹⁰

- What happened before and after the creation of the State of Israel in May 1948 is described by Israelis as their 'War of Independence', and by Palestinians as 'The Nakba', the Catastrophe. According to the 1947 UN Partition Plan, Palestinian Arabs would have made up 42 per cent of the population of the Jewish state. But in the months before and after the creation of Israel, around 750,000 Palestinians were forced from their homes in the area that was to become the Jewish state in a process which has been described by both Palestinian and Israeli Jewish Revisionist historians as 'ethnic cleansing'.¹¹ Palestinian Arabs now comprise around 20 per cent of Israeli citizens. The refugees of 1948 ended up in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, and the UN estimates that there are over six million Palestinian refugees in these countries today.¹² Having always been an integral part of Palestine, the Gaza Strip became a separate entity in 1948. Around 65 per cent of the present population of Gaza are either refugees from 1948 or their children and grandchildren. Some Hamas militants have therefore been sending rockets into areas in Israel where their parents or grandparents had lived before 1948.
- Israel occupied Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights during the Six-Day War in June 1967. In November 1967 the UN Security Council required 'withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict', and 'termination of all claims or states of belligerency' on the basis of 'the

inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war'.¹³ Israel, however, has consistently refused to withdraw from these territories. Most countries have therefore regarded Israel's occupation, and all the settlements built on the West Bank, as illegal under international law. If we can adapt the famous saying of Bill Clinton, 'It's *the occupation*, stupid!'¹⁴

- Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement, was formed in 1987 during the First Intifada (Palestinian Uprising). Although its original Charter issued in 1988 was based on a strongly Islamist ideology and contained antisemitic tropes, a revised statement of principles issued in 2017 was more pragmatic and appealed more to international law than to Islamic ideas. Hamas won an election in Gaza and the West Bank in 2005, and to forestall a takeover by Fatah (supported by the US and several western powers), Hamas drove Fatah out and took complete control of Gaza. The US and the EU refused to recognise Hamas's victory, because Hamas refused to agree to certain conditions. Israel then began its blockade of the Strip which has continued until today, meaning Israel has complete control over Gaza's coastline, its northern and eastern borders, and over all people and goods entering or leaving the Strip.
- In response to the blockade, Hamas has regularly sent barrages of rockets into Israel and carried out terrorist attacks inside Israel. Before October 2023 Israel had responded with six incursions into Gaza. The first incursion in 2000 (prior to Hamas's election victory) caused widespread destruction and the killing of 300 Palestinians and 30 Israeli soldiers. 'By the time it concluded,' writes Tareq Baconi, 'Sharon had effectively pulverized the economic, social, and political fabric of the West Bank and Gaza'.¹⁵ A report produced by the UN Human Rights Council claimed that both sides had been guilty of war crimes, but that Israel had engaged in 'a deliberately disproportionate attack designed to punish, humiliate and terrorize a civilian population'.¹⁶ Subsequent attacks on Gaza were described by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) as 'mowing the grass'.¹⁷ Dov Weisglass, an aide to Prime Minister Olmert, explained that Israel's approach to the blockade was 'to put the Palestinians on a diet, but not to make them die of hunger'.¹⁸ Adapting Clinton's saying once again: 'It's *the occupation and the blockade*, stupid!'
- Israel's disengagement from Gaza in 2005, which involved the withdrawal of 8,000 Jewish settlers

8 'Zionism as settler colonialism', Wikipedia. For a response to this argument, see Ilan Pappé, *Ten Myths about Israel* (Verso, 2017), chapter 4, 'Zionism is not Colonialism'.

9 E.g. Nur Musalaha, *The Palestinian Nakba: decolonizing history, narrating the subaltern, reclaiming memory* (Zed Books, 2012); Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: a history of settler colonial conquest and resistance* (Profile Books, 2020).

10 'Jewish Exodus from the Muslim World', Wikipedia.

11 Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (One World, 2006); Musalaha, *The Palestinian Nakba*.

12 'Survey of Palestinian Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, 2016–2018,' chapter 5 (available at <www.reliefweb.int>).

13 United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 (S/RES/242).

14 The sentence 'It's the economy, stupid!' was originally coined by James Carville, and popularized by Bill Clinton <<https://politicaldictionary.com/words/its-the-economy-stupid/>>.

15 Baconi, *Hamas Contained*, p.53.

16 UN Human Rights Council, 'Report of the United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict' led by Richard Goldstone (published 25 September 2009) <www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/special-sessions/session9/fact-finding-mission>.

17 See Black, *Enemies and Neighbours*, p.429.

18 Baconi, *Hamas Contained*, p.106.

from 21 settlements, was presented by Sharon as a magnanimous gesture and a significant concession to the Palestinians. One major reason for the withdrawal was the cost of defending the settlements against constant attack from within Gaza. Dov Weisglass, however, explained that the underlying motive was what he called ‘the freezing of the peace process ... The disengagement is actually formaldehyde. It supplies the amount of formaldehyde that is necessary so that there will not be a political process with the Palestinians.’¹⁹ Although Israel withdrew its settlements from Gaza, the general consensus is that, in international law, Israel is still regarded as the occupying power.²⁰ Some Israelis were confident that their withdrawal could turn Gaza into a prosperous ‘Singapore of the Middle East’. But the blockade did more than simply strangle the economy. Writing in 1995, Sarah Roy, a Jewish academic at Harvard, described Israel’s policy as ‘de-development’, ‘the deliberate systematic de-construction of an indigenous economy by a dominant power.’²¹

- The underlying factor behind Hamas’s attack on 7 October was its refusal to accept Israel’s continuing occupation of Gaza and the West Bank and its stifling blockade which had made Gaza into what is often described as ‘the largest open-air prison in the world’. The words of the leader of Hamas’s militia in 2014 could equally well have been spoken before 7 October 2023: ‘The occupiers and all the world must know the truth about what our people are asking for. All we want is for the occupation to go away, from our supplies and the milk of our children, our fuel... This cannot be allowed to go on after today.’²² One of the immediate triggers, however, was the fact that Saudi Arabia was in the process of normalising relations with Israel, which implied a weakening of commitment to the Palestinian cause. The renewal of open conflict stopped that process in its tracks.

If most of us were shocked by the brutality of Hamas’s attacks on 7 October, should we not also feel some shock when we are reminded of Israel’s dealings with Gaza since 1948? Could the word ‘brutality’ not also be used to describe what Israel was doing to Gaza before 7 October?

Should there be anything distinctive about a Christian approach to the conflict?

One possible starting point would be the two Beatitudes: ‘Blessed are the peacemakers ...’ and ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness ...’ (Matthew 5:9, 6). Since the Greek word *dikaio sunē* can equally

well be translated ‘justice’, N.T. Wright’s translation reads ‘Blessings on people who hunger and thirst for God’s justice.’ There must be a connection between peacemaking and addressing issues of justice.

Even if Christians can agree on this as a starting point, it isn’t easy to see how it works out in practice. Eight years ago British Christians were divided over Brexit, when those in favour of Britain leaving the EU and those against both pointed to biblical principles to support their case.²³ Twenty years ago Christians were divided in their response to the Iraq war, with some supporting it on the basis of Just War Theory, and others condemning it.²⁴

If Just War theory is applied to this current conflict, on the basis that Israel is acting in self-defence, many would argue that it has not conducted the war fairly – if only because of the lack of proportionality. We are dealing here with a situation in which Palestinians base their defence on the legitimacy of armed resistance in opposing occupation, and Israelis on the right of self-defence.²⁵

On what basis, therefore, do we make moral judgements about the rights and wrongs of what Hamas and Israel have done? Our response will depend on answers to two basic questions: firstly, if we can *understand* the anger and despair of Palestinians in Gaza, does this mean that we have to *defend and justify* the 7 October attacks? Secondly, if we can *understand* the trauma that Israel experienced on 7 October, do we have to *defend and justify* the way Israel has responded in its attack on Gaza?

What makes this particular conflict different from other conflicts is that many Christians are particularly sympathetic towards Israel because of the way they interpret the Bible. These are usually called ‘Christian Zionists’ because they support the Zionist movement and the creation of the State of Israel for biblical and theological reasons. They believe that promises and prophecies about the nation and the land in the Old Testament have been fulfilled through the Zionist movement, the creation of the State of Israel, and Israel’s capture of East Jerusalem in 1967.²⁶ Many Christian Zionists would therefore raise no objections to Jewish settlers on the West Bank who point to the Hebrew scriptures as the title deeds giving them a right to the land that they occupy.

For some Christian Zionists these ideas about the nation and the land are linked to their beliefs about the second coming of Christ. They believe that the return of Jews to the land must precede his second coming, and those who accept the theological system of Dispensationalism also believe that a temple will have been rebuilt on the site of the present Dome of the Rock. Many expect a larger proportion of Jews will welcome Jesus as Messiah when

19 Baconi, *Hamas Contained*, p.65; Black, *Enemies and Neighbours*, p.399.

20 Martyn Lynk (UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territory from 2016 to 2022) <<https://dawnmena.org/can-international-law-prevail-in-gaza-and-israel/#:~:text=Under%20international%20law%2C%20an%20occupation,the%20Gaza%20Strip%20constitutes%20an%20>>.

21 Sarah Roy, *The Gaza Strip: the political economy of de-development* (Institute of Palestine Studies, 1995), p.4.

22 Baconi, *Hamas Contained*, p.220.

23 Paul Mills and Michael Schluter, ‘Brexit in a Fractured Europe’, *Cambridge Papers*, Vol 26, No. 1., March 2017.

24 E.g. Nigel Biggar, *In Defence of War* (Oxford University Press, 2013), chapter 7. ‘Constructing Judgement: the case of Iraq’.

25 It has been argued recently, however, that the right of self-defence does not apply to Israel’s response to Hamas, since Gaza is not a foreign country; it is occupied territory, for which Israel is responsible in international law. See, e.g., Avi Shlaim, ‘All that remains’, *Prospect Magazine*, December 2023 <<https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/world/israel/64132/all-that-remains>>.

26 See Stephen Sizer, *Christian Zionism: road-map to Armageddon?* (IVP, 2004, 2021).

he returns to Jerusalem. It isn't hard to see how beliefs of this kind colour the way many Christians think about the history and politics of the whole conflict.

The opposing interpretation, often labelled 'Covenant Theology', is that all the promises and prophecies about the land and the nation in the Old Testament are looking forward to the coming of the kingdom of God on earth, and therefore need to be understood in the light of the New Testament understanding of the kingdom of God. Mark's summary of the message of Jesus ('The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news.' (Mark 1:15)), declares that the time that the prophets were looking forward to has actually arrived, and that God is about to establish his kingly rule in the world.²⁷ Christians who start with this assumption will understand the strong connection which most Jews still feel to the land. But they are not likely to agree that Jewish claims to the land that are based on scripture and tradition should take precedence over Palestinian claims that are based on centuries of settlement.

If there is no easy way to find common ground between the two ways in which Christians interpret scripture, is it possible for Christians to put disagreements about biblical interpretation and eschatology aside and concentrate on the justice issues? This is not as easy as it sounds because many Christian Zionists believe that their understanding of the Bible's teaching about the Jewish people and the State of Israel must trump any ideas of justice based on international law and commonly accepted ideas about human rights. Robert Benne, for example, writes: 'I have offered a theological justification for Israel's exceptional case: God has a continuing covenant with Israel that includes land and the promises of return. These combined special claims override even the "natural rights" of the Palestinians to their land.'²⁸ Most Christians, however, are right to believe in some natural and universal concepts of justice which cannot so easily be set aside.

Since the Christian world is deeply divided in its response to this conflict, it's hard to claim that there must be a distinctively Christian approach to understanding and resolving it. There is a real need, therefore, for Christians to engage in some 'hard talk' among themselves. But they should at least be united in their passion for truth and justice, their ability to empathise with both sides in the conflict, and their determination to work towards peace and reconciliation.

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What might be 'the things that make for peace'?²⁹

If there is to be any hope for the future, everything depends on whether Israelis, Palestinians and the watching world can make progress in the following areas.

Challenging reductionist responses

Some of the responses to 7 October in recent months view the conflict through one particular lens, and therefore don't seem to see the need to study the historical background.

Many responses have focused almost entirely on the appalling cruelty and brutality of the 7 October attacks, emphasising the rape, the mutilation, and the killing of babies and children. They have pointed to past Hamas statements calling for the destruction of the State of Israel, and declarations claiming willingness to carry out the same attacks again in the future. Israel's war on Hamas – in its aerial bombardment, its invasion with ground forces and its blockade of supplies of food, medicine, water and electricity – are seen as justified because of the extreme violence of the October attacks. The journalist Jonathan Cook sums up how this argument is presented: 'the evil perpetrated by the enemy is so exceptional, so unconscionable that it justifies a response in kind.'³⁰

Some responses have emphasised the challenge posed by Islamism. Ed Husain, a former fundamentalist Muslim,³¹ sees the Muslim Brotherhood as an example of 'religious totalitarianism', and Hamas as 'the Palestinian arm of the Muslim Brotherhood'. He therefore believes that 'The time has come to tackle the Brotherhood and shut down its financial, media, charitable and political arms in Britain.'³² All the emphasis here is on the extreme Islamism of Hamas, and on warnings that Islamism poses a direct threat to other countries.³³

Others see the Israel-Hamas war primarily through the lens of antisemitism. Thus, Melanie Phillips sees antisemitism as 'fundamentally genocidal', and argues: 'That's why its various iterations throughout history – Christian and Islamic theological antisemitism, Nazi racial antisemitism and, yes, contemporary Palestinian antisemitism – have all held that the Jews must be removed from the face of the earth. These unique characteristics are all present in the demonization of Israel. That's why, although individuals hostile to Israel may not be anti-Jew, the agenda they have adopted has antisemitism at its core.'³⁴ Antisemitism of any kind clearly needs to be vigorously condemned. But in this analysis there is no

27 See Peter Walker, 'Centre Stage: Jerusalem or Jesus?', *Cambridge Paper*, Vol 5, No. 1, March 1996 (available at <<https://www.jubilee-centre.org/archives>>).

28 Robert Benne, 'Theology and Politics,' in Gerald R. McDermott, *Christian Zionism: fresh perspectives on Israel and the land* (IVP Academic, 2016), pp.245–6.

29 Luke 19:41–42. 'As he [Jesus] came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes."

30 Jonathan Cook, 'How the Western media helped build the case for genocide', 20 March 2024 <<https://jonathancook.substack.com/p/listen-how-the-western-media-helped>>. In many of his pieces Cook has drawn attention to Israelis

who have questioned the reliability of accounts of what happened on 7 October put out by the IDF.

31 Ed Husain, *The Islamist: why I joined radical Islam in Britain, what I saw inside and why I left* (Penguin, 2007).

32 Ed Husain, 'Five Ways to Crack the Islamist Conundrum,' *The Sunday Times*, 10 March 2024.

33 See Colin Chapman, 'Christian Responses to Islam, Islamism and "Islamic Terrorism"', *Cambridge Papers*, Vol 16, No. 2, June 2007.

34 Melanie Phillips, 'Islamophobia and antisemitism are not the same,' *The Times*, 27 February 2024.

attempt to understand the very particular context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And Islamophobia probably needs to be challenged alongside antisemitism.

Recognising that the status quo cannot continue indefinitely

There is little point in discussing resolution of the conflict unless there is agreement that the present situation is intolerable. Because the occupation has continued for so long, we may need reminding what it has meant for the Palestinians living on the West Bank: the building of 240 settlements with around 700,000 settlers, and a whole network of roads which can be used only by the settlers. There are 645 'fixed movement obstacles' (including 49 checkpoints) where Palestinians often face long delays and humiliating searches.³⁵ Special permission is needed to enter Jerusalem. Only 15 per cent of the nine-metre high Separation Barrier/Security Fence that was built from 2003 onwards follows the 1967 border, and the remaining 85 per cent cuts into the West Bank. There is no airport, and Palestinians travelling abroad have to travel via Amman in Jordan. Israel has total control of water supplies. Land is regularly taken over for settlements and military purposes, and it's extremely hard to obtain permission for new building. Bedouin are frequently forced off their land, and security forces do little to prevent settlers attacking Palestinian property. More than 500 Palestinians on the West Bank have been killed by Israeli forces or by settlers since 7 October. Gideon Levy of *Haaretz* writes that 'Israel has seized the opportunity [of the war with Hamas] to intensify the occupation.'³⁶

In 2021/2 three substantial reports were published by Amnesty International,³⁷ the UN Human Rights Council,³⁸ and B'Tselem (the Israeli human rights organisation),³⁹ presenting evidence supporting their claim that what Israel had created in the Occupied Territories amounts to a system of apartheid. In a recent podcast, Gabor Maté, a Canadian Jewish physician, described what he experienced when visiting the Occupied Territories during the First Intifada in 1986: 'I cried every day for two weeks at what I saw – the brutality of the occupation, the petty harassment, the cutting down of Palestinian olive groves, the denial of water rights, the humiliations. And this went on and it's much worse now than it was then.'⁴⁰

If 7 October and its aftermath have taught us anything, they should have made the world aware of the situation in Gaza created by the occupation and the blockade. We can only hope that these events have demonstrated

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the truth of what the political scientist Meron Benvenisti wrote in 1995: 'The alternatives are simple and cruel. Either one people controls the other, dooming them both to eternal violence, or else a way must be found to live in a partnership based on shared sovereignty.'⁴¹

Outside pressure, impartial mediators, and inclusive negotiations

Whenever there has been a peace process in recent decades, outside powers have been heavily involved. Immediately after the Hamas attack on 7 October, the USA stood firmly behind Israel, continuing to supply weapons and vetoing resolutions at the UN which were critical of Israel. While it seems that the US is the only power that can put pressure on Israel, it remains to be seen whether any measures it decides to take – like limiting or stopping the supply of munitions – will force Israel to change its tactics. Iran has supported Hamas for many years, supplying it with weapons and moral support. Qatar and Egypt have been heavily involved in negotiations over a ceasefire, and have attempted to influence Hamas. There will need to be a huge amount of pressure on both sides from these outside powers if there is to be any significant progress.

One major problem has always been that no single power is capable of playing the role of honest broker. The US has been so firmly committed to the support of Israel for many decades that it cannot possibly do so. The UK is also ruled out by its support for the Zionist movement in the Balfour Declaration, its role in the Mandate for Palestine between 1920 and 1948, and its unquestioning support for American policies. The UN is virtually powerless because resolutions of the General Assembly have no binding authority, and because Security Council resolutions critical of Israel, until recently, have consistently been vetoed by the US. It also lacks moral authority because so many states critical of Israel have poor human rights records. It is therefore impossible to find an impartial mediator.

One of the lessons of the process which led to the end of the conflict in Northern Ireland is that the extremists on *both* sides of the conflict – Catholic and Protestant – had to be brought into the negotiations. If at the present time it seems unthinkable that Hamas would ever be prepared to sit round the table with any of the extreme right-wing members of the present Israeli government, it must have seemed just as unthinkable that the two sides could ever come together in Northern Ireland.

35 OCHA, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Annual Report 2023.

36 Gideon Levy and Alex Levac, 'While War Rages in Gaza, the West Bank Has Undergone a Metamorphosis,' *Haaretz*, 30 March 2024.

37 Amnesty International, 'Israel's apartheid against Palestine: Cruel system of domination and crime against humanity' (Index No: MDE 15/5141/2022), 1 February 2022.

38 'Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the

Palestinian territories occupied since 1967' by Michael Lynk (A/HRC/49/87), 12 August 2022 (first released in advance unedited form in March 2022).

39 B'Tselem: The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, 'A regime of Jewish supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea: This is apartheid', 12 January 2021.

40 'Israel/Palestine and Trauma with Gabor Maté': an interview on YouTube <<https://youtu.be/IrcYQyudLzY>>.

41 Meron Benvenisti, 'The Case for Shared Sovereignty,' *The Nation*, May 2007.

Ensuring that international law takes precedence over religious claims and realpolitik

Whenever Jews and Muslims base their claims for sovereignty on religious beliefs, there is no chance of finding a political solution because their beliefs on these issues are incompatible. According to Martin Gilbert, 'Rabin [the Israeli Prime Minister] knew that if ... the conflict were to be theologized, there never would be peace. For, to theological conflict, there are no compromises, and therefore no solutions.'⁴² Most Jews and Muslims are likely to be shocked if they are asked to put some of their religious beliefs relating to Jerusalem and the land on one side. But it is the fundamental clash between the beliefs of the two faiths in these areas that suggests that the only way to resolve the conflict is to give priority to international law instead. In this context it is appropriate to point out that international law first developed in seventeenth-century Europe after decades of religious wars, as a way of transcending religious differences.

The other issue, however, is that the interpretation of international law is often at the mercy of the political interests of individual countries. For many years, for example, the US agreed with most other nations that the West Bank was 'occupied territory', and that Israel's occupation was illegal in international law. Since 1981, however, the West Bank and Gaza have been 'disputed territories', and in 2019 Secretary of State Pompeo announced the view of his government that they were not inconsistent with international law after all.⁴³ International law is therefore at the mercy of 'the game of nations' – a game whose players now include the US, the UK, the EU, Turkey, the Arab world, Iran, Russia and China.

Giving serious consideration to the two-state and the one-state solutions

Several world and religious leaders in recent months have repeatedly called for progress towards the two-state solution, which would mean the creation of a Palestinian State in the West Bank and Gaza. The problem here is that Israel has fiercely resisted the idea, and world powers have done nothing in recent years to prepare the ground for creating such a Palestinian State. The call for the two-state solution has therefore become an almost meaningless mantra. Many observers have been saying that the two-state solution has been dead in the water for decades, simply because of Israel's total control of the West Bank and because its settlements make it impossible for a viable, contiguous Palestinian state to be created.⁴⁴ The settlements would either have to be evacuated or come under Israeli sovereignty, or would result in a large Jewish minority in a Palestinian state.

Because Israeli policies on the West Bank seem to have

made the two-state solution unworkable, and as Israel has already in effect created one single state, many in recent years have been arguing for the one-state solution. This could be either a single state, a bi-national state, or a kind of federation.⁴⁵ The biggest objection to this solution is that Israel would have to cease to be 'a/the Jewish state', because it would need to become a secular state in which there was complete equality between Jews and Arabs.

If the status quo is unsustainable, a new formula has to be found that enables seven million Jews and seven million Palestinians between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea to live together. Many are fearful that, if and when the present fighting in Gaza comes to an end, and if Israel were to allow the creation of some kind of Palestinian State, it would be under Israel's control, and its occupation of the West Bank would merely be reproduced in Gaza.

Involving activists on both sides who believe in a peaceful solution

One of the tragedies of 7 October was that several of the Israelis killed were activists who had been working to bring Israeli Jews and Palestinians together. Several organisations in Israel – like Neve Shalom, Standing Together and the Hand in Hand network of schools – have been very intentional in bringing Jews and Palestinians to work together. An organisation called Musalaha, the Arabic word for 'reconciliation', has been active for over thirty years, bringing Israeli Jews and Palestinians together, taking them out into the desert on camels for several days to enable them to hear each other's stories. If twenty per cent of Israelis are Palestinian Arabs, they need to be able to share their experience of living and working alongside Israeli Jews. Politicians need to find ways of enlisting the help of activists on both sides who have been building bridges for many years between the two communities and demonstrating that genuine co-existence is possible.

Addressing the scourge of antisemitism

It should not be hard to demonstrate that questioning Zionism and criticising Israel are not necessarily antisemitic – if only because many of these questions and criticisms have been voiced repeatedly by Jews, including Israeli Jews. But the situation has been made more complicated in recent years because of the new definition of antisemitism proposed by the International Holocaust Remembrance Association.⁴⁶ While few have questioned the definition itself, the main criticism has been that the examples attached to it make it easier to label any criticism of the State of Israel as antisemitic. It is unfortunate that many governments and church bodies have adopted this new definition. This has made it difficult for individuals to voice any criticism of Israel and much harder to decide when legitimate political criticism of Israel crosses a red line and becomes antisemitic.

A clearer definition which acknowledges the difference

42 Martin Gilbert, *Israel: a history*, (Black Swan, 2008) pp.566–7.

43 Robbie Sabel, *International Law and the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Cambridge University Press, 2022). p.322.

44 E.g. Avi Shlaim, *Israel and Palestine: reappraisals, revisions, refutations* (Verso, 2009).

45 Jonathan Kuttub, *Beyond the Two-State Solution* (Nonviolence International, 2022); Ghada Karmi, *One State: the only democratic future for Palestine-Israel*

(Pluto, 2023); Dahlia Scheindlin, 'An Israeli-Palestinian Confederation Can Work,' *FP (Foreign Policy)*, 29 June 2018. A movement named 'One Democratic State Campaign' was set up in 2020 by Jeff Halper, an American-Israeli Jewish anthropologist.

46 See <<https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definition-antisemitism>>.

between antisemitism and criticism of the State of Israel would help us to confront the alarming increase in the number of antisemitic attacks in the UK and the USA. While this increase must be connected in some way to the Israel-Hamas conflict, it is totally unacceptable that people in the West should hold Jews living alongside them responsible for Israel's actions and take their anger out on them. Some of the pro-Palestinian protestors have clearly been guilty of antisemitism, and certainly have not helped the Palestinian cause. Those who want to speak on behalf of Palestinians need to distance themselves from anything that could be interpreted as antisemitic and join others in condemning every expression of antisemitism. They also need to listen to writers like Jonathan Freedland⁴⁷ and Noah Feldman⁴⁸ who have written eloquently about how expressions of anti-Zionism and recent criticism of Israel's policies are heard within Jewish communities.

Listening to Palestinian Christians

In 2009 an ecumenical group of Palestinian Christian theologians produced a document, 'Kairos Palestine',⁴⁹ in which they challenged Christians around the world to understand the situation of Palestinian Christians who had been living under occupation since 1967. The document had a strong biblical and theological basis and called Israel's occupation 'a sin against God'. Its message was summarised: 'As Palestinian Christians we hope that this document will provide the turning point to focus the efforts of all peace-loving peoples in the world, especially our Christian sisters and brothers... We believe that liberation from occupation is in the interest of all peoples in the region because the problem is not just a political one, but one in which human beings are destroyed.' Palestinian Christians have been disappointed that 'Kairos Palestine' has received a less than enthusiastic response from churches around the world. Several Palestinian church leaders have made even stronger appeals to western churches after the events of 7 October.⁵⁰

Conclusion

Chaim Weizmann, one of the main architects of the Balfour Declaration and the first President of Israel, wrote in his autobiography, *Trial and Error* in 1949: 'I am certain that the world will judge the Jewish state by how it will treat the Arabs.'⁵¹ If Gaza is a microcosm of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it tells a powerful story of how Israel has actually treated the Palestinian Arabs since 1948, and how the Palestinians have responded. If a concern for justice is a vital part of peacemaking, any response to the Israel-Hamas war must not only take into account Hamas's attacks on 7 October 2023 and the way Israel has waged this war, but also the historical background – and especially the crippling effects of Israel's occupation since 1967 and its blockade of Gaza since 2007.

As we have watched on TV how the conflict has unfolded, we can only hope that the world has begun to understand the roots of the conflict and to recognise that the status quo is unsustainable. In a situation where religion and politics are so closely intertwined, where both sides have no doubt committed war crimes, and where powerful nations in the world are concerned about their own interests, seeking to apply international law will have to be one of the most important 'things that make for peace'.



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47 Jonathan Freedland, *The Guardian*, 16 February 2024 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/feb/16/jews-uk-attack-palestine-antisemitism-labour-britain>>.

48 Noah Feldman, 'The New Antisemitism', *Time*, 11 March 2024 <<https://time.com/6763293/antisemitism>>.

49 The document may be found on the website of Kairos Palestine here

<<https://www.kairos-palestine.ps/index.php/about-kairos/kairos-palestine-document>>.

50 E.g. Rev Dr Munther Isaac, Academic Dean at Bethlehem Bible College, and Senior Pastor at the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church, Bethlehem.

51 Chaim Weizmann, *The Illustrated Edition of Trial and Error* (London: East and West Library, 1950), p.566.

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Next issue: Chronic pain