

Who are the Palestinians?

PROFILE OF A NATION

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IN THE *Sunday Times*, 15th June 1969, Mrs Golda Meir, the Israeli Premier, declared: 'There was no such thing as Palestinians . . . It was not as though there was a Palestinian people . . . and we came and threw them out and took their country from them. They did not exist.'

A myth exists that Palestine was once an uncultivated land without people. The miracle of Zionism, thus the myth continues, is that it has developed a state with modern technology, and 'turned the desert into green fields.'

Today there are over four million Palestinians: almost half of the Palestinian community now live in exile, while the remainder are under Israeli occupation. 340,000 live in the State of Israel (ie pre-1967 borders), while a further 670,000 live under Israeli occupation on the West Bank, and 340,000 are also under occupation in the Gaza Strip.

The presence of the Palestinian people can be traced back into history. The name Palestine came from 'Philistia'. This was the land of the biblical Philistines, or Peoples of the Sea, who occupied the southern coastal area in the 12th century BC. Anthropologists examining human remains find that 50,000 years ago the Palestinians were of mixed racial stock. From the 4th millenium BC until 900 BC the predominant native stock were the Canaanites.

Towns like Jericho, Megiddo and Beth-Shan were centres of civilisation in Palestine in the early Bronze Age. By the middle Bronze Age new practices linked the people in Palestine with the civilisation of Phoenicia.

The history of Palestine is long, and the conflicts centred in the area are many, and of little relevance to the present conflict in Palestine, apart from to

point out that amongst the invaders of Palestine were the Hebrews. The Kingdom of Israel lasted in Palestine for a mere two hundred years.

Throughout the long history of the land of Palestine the Hebrew (or Israelite, or Jewish, to give it its alternative names) community was not predominant, although Jews lived there continuously from their original entry into the land. In later years they enjoyed religious rights along with the Muslims and Christians.

In contemporary times, at the time of the Balfour Declaration in 1917, the Jewish community in Palestine was a mere 8 per cent. The total population of Palestine in that year was about 700,000 inhabitants. Of these 644,000 were defined as Arabs (574,000 Muslim, 70,000 Christian) and 56,000 Jews.

In 1922 the census showed: total population 757,182; 590,000 Muslims, 83,794 Jews, 73,014 Christians, 9,474 others.

In 1931 a second census showed a population of 1,746,000: 1,179,000 Arabs, 554,000 Jews and 32,000 others.

Even when the Jewish state was proposed in the United Nations partition plan, there was no Jewish majority, let alone a Zionist majority, in Palestine.

Not only was Palestine inhabited by a people, but it was being farmed, and its economy developing. Palestine lies within the Fertile Crescent—hardly justifying the Zionist myth of desert land. For centuries Palestine had been known for its citrus fruit. Trade with the world left from ports along the Mediterranean coast such as Haifa and Jaffa.

Reports from the crusaders confirm the agricultural development in Palestine. C.R. Conder in *The Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem* (1897) reports: 'The hills of Palestine were covered with brushwood, the plains of Caesarea dotted with oak. In the more open lands, wheat and barley, oats, indian corn, durrah, rice, millet, lentils, beans and sesame were grown. Cotton and flax and indigo were

cultivated in the plains and in the Jordan valley. Madder grew at Tripoli and Damascus. The flax of Nablus was as good as that of Egypt.'

In fact Jewish management of Palestinian estates was far from the success that Zionists claim. Sir Moses Montefiore, a Zionist colonist, purchased a thriving orchard of 1407 trees producing a wide range of fruits—sixteen in fact—but only a few years later, in 1875, the total had decreased to only 900 trees. 'Knowing that similar gardens and fields in possession of the natives are very profitable, he (Sir Moses) was rather surprised at the result,' wrote his biographer.

During the 19th and early twentieth century, Palestine began to develop with increasing trade, and hospitals and schools increased. But basically the Palestinians indulged in local crafts and peasant work on the land.

The struggle of the Palestinians is long, and it is wrong to believe that revolution in Palestine is a new development. Palestine, for centuries, has been under colonial rule, of which the Israeli occupation is seen as merely the latest. Nationalist movements began to emerge in the early years of this century, and by 1916 the British Government had promised self-determination to Palestine and other Arab communities in return for support in the First World War.

Entering the war in 1916, the Arabs occupied the strategic town of Aqaba on 6th July, and occupied the energies of the Turkish forces in Medina during the whole period of the war. 'It was the Arabs almost entirely who wiped out the Fourth (Turkish) Army, the still intact force that might have barred the way to final victory,' wrote Captain Liddell Hart, chief military commentator with the Allied Forces. Yet that pledge of independence to the Arabs was betrayed one year later when the British Government issued the Balfour Declaration offering a Jewish Home in Palestine to the Zionist movement in Europe. The occupation by the Turks brought to

an end, Palestine then came under British occupation, euphemistically termed the Mandate.

The Palestinians launched appeals, protests, arguments and demonstrations urging the British government to respect Arab rights in Palestine. But with the London Government closely influenced by the Zionists in Europe, the anger of the Palestinians flared into the first countrywide demonstration in April 1920; a second in May 1921; a third in August 1929, and between 1936 and 1939 an all-out revolution developed which was preceded by a six-month general strike.

The strike paralysed the economic life of the country, and British efforts to crush the strike increased the determination of the Palestinians.

British attitudes towards the Palestinians and the Zionists swayed from time to time; from open support and collaboration with the Zionists to efforts to frustrate the Zionists' activities in Palestine.

Strict measures were taken by the British against both Palestinians and Zionist militants on occasions. But while a Jewish Brigade was formed under the command of the British Army, no equivalent was established for the Palestinians; some of those who joined the Jewish Brigade were underground Zionist terrorists later to attack both the British and Palestinians alike.

As education improved in Palestine during the early part of the century, and with the growing threat of Zionism, nationalist consciousness grew amongst the Palestinian Arabs, and their protests became more articulate.

While protests were expressed through political channels and demonstrations and strikes, the increasing consciousness was also expressed through cultural activities. A number of literary clubs were established during the Mandate period. The first was inaugurated in the early twenties when three were opened in Jerusalem, two in Nablus, one in Acre and one in Jaffa. By the end

of the Mandate every major town had one or two such clubs, with membership ranging from between 3,000 in the case of the Arab Club of Nablus, which sponsored the Palestine Arab Party during the thirties, and about 100 as in the case of the Literary Arabic Club of Beersheba. Clearly under the limitations imposed by the Mandate authorities, these cultural clubs had strong political interests.

During the last two decades of the Mandate, the Palestinian press was becoming increasingly important as a medium for political writing. Newspapers in Palestine dated back to 1980 when three appeared at the same time: *al-Asma'i*, *al-Quds* (ie Jerusalem) and *al-Nafa'is al-Ariya* (Modern Treasures). Three years later the long-lived *Filastin* (Palestine) was established as a semi-weekly. Two others appeared in 1913: *al-Maahal* (The Spring) and *al-Munadi* (The Caller). By the end of the twenties all had disappeared, except *Filastin*. Their political line was nationalist, demanding independence and self-determination for Palestine.

Other newspapers appeared during the Mandate. The most important was the *Jerusalem Review* which appeared in 1932 as an organ for a group of Arab intellectuals who advocated immediate Arab unity as a means of containing the Zionist threat to Palestine. This paper was suppressed by the Mandate authorities and was closed down during the Palestine revolt of 1936. The Palestine Communist Party journal *al-Munabbih* appeared in the late twenties, and was replaced after two years by a monthly *Ila-al-Amam* (Forward). This advocated a Palestinian state, with the Jews playing a role in it proportionate to their numbers in the country. The most important was *al-Ittihad* (Unity) founded in 1934.

The different papers allied themselves with various political trends and movements throughout the Mandate period, and played a vital role in the political development of the country. In 1946 the circulation of *Filastin* was 9,000 copies daily, in a

total population of 1,200,000 people. An equivalent circulation to the *Guardian* today in Britain; hardly possible in a land without people!

In that part of Palestine which became Israel in 1948 there existed some 475 villages and towns scattered throughout the land. Today, only 90 of those villages remain; the other 385 have been totally razed to the ground by the Zionist settlers, according to a report published in early 1973 by the Israeli League for Human and Civil Rights.

An industrious people in their own homeland, the Palestinians today in exile are no less energetic. A recent survey in Palestinian High-level Manpower showed: The number of Palestinian university students compares well with the number of Israeli university students. Research indicated that over 4,000 Palestinians are graduating annually, compared to 3,132 Israeli students (1966 figures); the rate of growth in the number of Palestinian graduates is perhaps greater than that of the Israelis; the ratio of higher level manpower and the ratio of present Palestinian university students to the total Palestinian population is higher than the ratio for any Arab country (including Egypt and Lebanon); half the university-educated Palestinians work as teachers. Teaching, engineering, management and medicine represent the four most important professions practised.

For the Palestinians today, education is considered as a means to national self-preservation. For an exiled community, a versatile education provides greater opportunity for mobile professions, enabling the Palestinian to gain well-paid employment for himself, and his family 'back in the camps'.

Many young Palestinians today believe strongly that their education is an integral part of the Palestinian revolution. Education widens the possibilities for liberation, and lessens the technology gap between the Arab community of Palestine and the settlers who have occupied that land and established the state of Israel.

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