

## **Examining the Origins of the Israel-Gaza Crisis and How Much Worse Can it Become?**

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The dreadful atrocities carried out by Islamic resistance group Hamas in Israel on Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> October have, quite rightly, concentrated the world's attention on the horror of what was perpetrated in the name of Palestinians.

What Israel suffered that day, at least 1,400 murdered in the most brutal way, including women and children and babies, as well as an estimated 200 people taken hostage is a hugely damaging psychological blow to Israel.

Israel believed that the combination of security and control implemented to deal with threats posed by Hamas which controls the Gaza strip as well as other groups active within the West Bank and East Jerusalem and from outside the country, most especially Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, provided sufficient deterrence against the sort of attack it's just suffered.

As would have been anticipated, Hamas' attacks on those living in Kibbutz communities close to Gaza as well as on the young people attending a music festival very close to the security fence, purposely built to thwart precisely the sort of incursion Hamas terrorists achieved, led to immediate retaliatory bombing of selected 'targets' in Gaza.

Such action has resulted at the time of writing of over 3,000 deaths of men, women and children the vast majority of whom can be assumed to have been innocent.

Indeed, the tragedy of what's a contested rocket attack on Al Ahli Hospital in Gaza City on Tuesday which has reported to have killed 500 people only adds to the awful vortex of death and suffering being experienced by Palestinians.

An already terrible situation has been made worse by the threat by the Israeli government to launch a military invasion of Gaza with the stated purpose of destroying Hamas' apparatus and personnel who inflicted the largest collective murder of Jews since the Second World War.

Though there's no evidence directly linking Iran, which supports Hamas, many commentators believe that it's highly likely to have provided tacit agreement.

Others claim that action by groups such as Hamas may be justified as a response to Palestinians who were dispossessed when the state of Israel was created in 1948.

The reality for Israel is that in confronting what's potentially its most serious crisis since its creation 75 years ago, it must find a way to recover from the outrage carried out on 7<sup>th</sup> October and in the process, reevaluate the purpose of the state and its relationship with both Palestinians within the country and its closest neighbours.

It's useful to summarise Israel's history.

The creation of the modern state of Israel – there is undisputed evidence of Israelite kingdoms, Israel and Judah, having existed in the Iron age in Palestine – was a consequence of concerted action by Jews to achieve a safe 'homeland' in the aftermath of the Nazi's holocaust during of the second world war when millions were murdered.

Having been conquered by the Romans, Jews engaged in a series of revolts against those viewed as having no legitimacy in Palestine.

Unsurprisingly, reaction by Rome was to impose even greater restrictions on the Jews.

However, and with dreadful resonance to the current ongoing situation, the Roman army in 70 CE, led by Titus who'd go on to become emperor, as a result of what's known as the First Jewish–Roman War (66–73 CE), besieged the Jewish city of Jerusalem considered to be a citadel of rebels.

After five months, Jewish resistance was sufficiently weakened by death of its defenders allowing Titus' troops to enter the city and, as well as killing many citizens, to destroy it as well as the symbolically important 'Second Jewish Temple'.

As scholars accept, this and, most especially, the expulsion of Jews by Rome from Palestine marked the beginning of what was to be their search for safety elsewhere in countries including Africa, Spain, Italy and Poland.

Poland is notable as being the country in which, having been occupied by the Nazis, 'death camps' were constructed – Belzec, Chełmno, Sobibor, and Treblinka – with the intention of extermination (murder) of hundreds of thousands of Jews (Holocaust Memorial Day, 2023).

Though 1948 was when Israel was created, its origin can be traced back to the nineteenth century when British politicians believed that a state consisting of Jews would be advantageous to this country's interests.

Combined with concerted Jewish campaigning, what's known as the Balfour Declaration, so named after its author Arthur James Balfour, 1st Earl of Balfour who, as foreign secretary in Lloyd George's government, on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1917, formally announced Britain's intention that there should be a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine.

As might be expected, this development was not welcomed by those living in Palestine then under the rule of the Ottoman Empire.

Cessation of hostilities of World War One led to Palestine being conceded by the Ottoman Empire and placed under the rule of the British as part of a mandate from the League of Nations.

Jews believed a return to what was considered to be their ancient home appeared a step closer.

The rise of the Nazis under Adolf Hitler which was accompanied by increased harassment and hostility towards Jews in Germany. Those who could flee did so to this country, America, the Soviet Union and what was then 'Mandatory Palestine'.

What those Jews who had survived the holocaust as well as brethren across the world, determined that this should never be allowed to happen again.

As part of establishing a state for Jews, the Jewish Resistance Movement was formed in 1945 and over a period of 12 months engaged in a campaign dedicated to undermining British authority in Mandatory Palestine.

The most notorious act was the bombing by Irgun on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1946 of the headquarters of the British Mandatory authorities of Palestine, the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, resulting in the killing of 91 and 46 injured.

Polish born David Grün (1886-1973), who'd immigrated to Palestine in 1906 and having altered his surname to Ben-Gurion in 1909 and risen to become a prominent leader of the Jewish community there in 1935, upon the ending of the British Mandate on 14<sup>th</sup> May 1946, declared the creation of the State of Israel and became its first Prime Minister.

So, after almost two millennia of being stateless and suffering ill-treatment and all-too-frequent pogroms by those they lived amongst, Jews across the world believed themselves able to finally fulfil the long-cherished dream of establishing their own homeland in which they could practice their faith in safety.

Unfortunately, as history has shown with unnerving consistency, Israel's creation as part of a 'Two State' solution by which the country was divided between Palestinians and Israelis, merely heightened existing tensions and has been the basis of continual conflict.

On 15<sup>th</sup> May 1948, war broke out between it and its Arab neighbours.

Forces from Egypt, Transjordan, Syria, and Iraq entered Palestine and attempted to take control of the Arab areas by attacking Israeli forces and Jewish settlements.

As a consequence of 10 months of fighting on of the former British Mandate, the Sinai Peninsula and southern Lebanon, Israel had gained control of the area the UN had proposed for the Jewish state, as well as almost 60% of the area proposed for the Arab state.

Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians being were forced from their homes and lands or simply fleeing and which, as all but the most enthusiastic defenders of Israel, including the United Nations, spawned the bitter enmity and resentment that has characterised Israel's history over the last 75 years.

With backing from other countries, most notably, the United States, the former territory of Palestine consisted of three parts, Israel, the West Bank, controlled by Egypt and the Gaza Strip which was controlled by Egypt and the West Bank of Jordan.

However, such control lasted only until 1967 when, tensions between Israel and Egypt led to the 'Six-Day War'. Palestinian Arab territories of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza, and the Sinai Peninsula, as well as the Syrian territory of Golan Heights, now came under Israeli control.

The Six-Day War meant that Palestinians were subject to what they regarded as oppression by occupying forces.

In the last half century and despite a number of international interventions intended to achieve peace between Israel and the Palestinians, the situation is no better.

Israel's actions in setting up illegal settlements and in imposition of even greater security and control of Palestinians has led to ever deeper hostility.

Resentment of their treatment and has led to resistance by Palestinians well as intifadas (uprisings) that, in turn, led to even harsher controls and imposition of security interventions characterised by ill treatment and killings by the Israeli army.

A vortex of violence has caused ever more suffering for Palestinians and questioning of those in whom authority was vested to speak on their behalf and, of course, seek to improve their prospects, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO).

Belief that the PLO was increasingly ineffectual led to the formation of Hamas in 1987.

Even within the Palestinians there's disagreement and conflict.

Which brings us to the current state of affairs by which positions have become as entrenched than ever between Israel, scarred by the experience of the Holocaust proclaims it will never allow such

an appalling tragedy to be visited on its people again and believes safety can be only be achieved through a military solution, and Hamas, as well as other terror groups, who state their intention to destroy the state of Israel.

Little wonder many ask whether a lasting peace, as originally envisaged by the 1948 Two State solution, can ever be implemented?

What makes the current situation so dangerous is the potential for other states such as Iran to become drawn into a conflagration that would have wider implications for world peace particularly if, as a consequence, America, considering Israel was under threat, believed it needed to intervene.

From a political perspective the events of 7<sup>th</sup> October will continue to produce reverberations that for the foreseeable future with implications far beyond the region.

There are some who speculate the current conflict could end in apocalypse.

Eminent historian Professor Niall Ferguson in his *Sunday Times* article 'Will there be a World War Three? Israel-Hamas war risks escalation' (2023), is as stark an outcome as could potentially befall the world as a consequence of the atrocities carried out by Hamas on 7<sup>th</sup> October.

Economically, the price of oil is already being affected which will have repercussions for the price of goods produced and with an unwelcome knock-on impact for rising inflation.

Politically we're already seeing the strains in international relationships which have taken years to establish.

The malign hand of Russia cannot be ruled out if it sees advantage to the world's attention being drawn away from its illegal invasion of Ukraine.

Socially there's bound to be further destabilisation in the Middle East which could result in uprisings of the sort witnessed in the Arab Spring that led to conflict in Syria.

Here in the UK, we've seen an increase in both antisemitism and Islamophobia which will undermine relationships already at a low point.

If ever there was a time for cool heads and wisdom to be exhibited, now is the time.

Visits to Israel by international leaders are welcome in that though they're intended to provide support to Israel in the aftermath of the attacks by Hamas, they also appear to be about attempting to persuade PM Benjamin Netanyahu, an avowed right-wing hawk, to proceed with caution.

Most particularly, as the rest of the world agrees, the innocent the people of Gaza should not be subject to action which punishes them for acts they had no part in.

We can only hope that out of the current maelstrom of violence some glimmers of hope can be detected and that those with genuine influence convince the leadership within Israel, the occupied Palestinian territories and other Arab countries look over the precipice and recognise that further conflict represents a calamity of the worst sort.

For the sake of those who continue to suffer and to avoid further unnecessary bloodshed we must hope there's a genuinely intended strategy to finally develop and implement a peaceful solution in that most troubled part of the Middle East.

In all honesty, however, given where what we've seen in the last two weeks, it must be acknowledged, it's extremely difficult to envisage this happening.

### **References**

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