

Living Stones of the Holy Land Trust
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THE VERY STONES CRY OUT: THE GAZA CRISIS IN CONTEXT

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INTRODUCTION

On 26 October, nineteen days after the massacres carried out by Hamas, and nineteen days into the war, I watched BBC *Question Time* to gauge the mood of our politicians and the public. One member on the panel was Lee Rowley MP, a former deputy-chairman of the Conservative party and a junior minister. He has since been promoted in the reshuffle. When the question about Israel and Gaza came up, he was the first to speak and his opening remarks were the following (I quote),

The situation in the Middle East is extremely challenging, but it starts from a place on October 7th, where 1,400 people were brutally executed by a terrorist organisation. We have to start from there. And I'm afraid, for me, we have to stop there. There's no nuance to that. There's no context. There's no explanation. There is a reality that 1,400 people are no longer with us in this world due to terrorism ...

No nuance—I agree wholeheartedly, because the murders of those civilians, including tiny children and elderly people were deliberate and horrific. Nothing can possibly justify that. But 'no context'? 'No explanation'? Isn't that a rather irresponsible thing for a government minister to say?

I wonder if Mr Rowley is aware of the shameful way Britain abandoned the Palestinians to chaos, war, dispossession and statelessness in 1947-9, and that the Palestinians never wanted to be

ruled by Britain in the first place. Does he admit this is historical fact? Would he accept it is part of the context? I suspect he is blissfully unaware of what I am talking about. So let me start by setting out a few facts about the end of Britain's rule over Palestine which should be more widely known.

PART ONE

Hours before British rule was due to expire at midnight on 14 May 1948, the Foreign Office legal advisers in London advised that, once the mandate was no more, there would be nothing to choose in terms of legality between the establishment of a Jewish state in the areas allotted for it in the proposed UN partition plan, and a Palestinian state encompassing the whole of the area of the Mandate.¹ This reflected the fact that the partition plan was not legally binding, and that if any state was proclaimed in all or part of Palestine it would have to come into existence by force of arms.

In order to establish their state, the *Yishuv*, the Jewish community in Palestine, would have to seize control at gun point of what would become the sovereign territory for their state, and establish a government. They would then have to convince other states that it was a state with which they could do business like any other.

That was how Israel came into existence. After two failed attempts to join the UN, it succeeded on 11 May 1949. The particular process by which it became a state is known as secession, and is predicated on the use of force—of violence. Normally, that is against the forces of the state from which it secedes. In this case, however, the British had withdrawn, and the violence was against the Arab people of Palestine who constituted a majority of its inhabitants.² In their

1 Minute from Sir O Sergeant, 14 May 1948. FO 371/68664 Palestine, Eastern, para 7, quoted in V Kattan, *From Coexistence to Conquest: International Law and the Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1891-1949* (London: Pluto Press, 2009), p. 189. See also J McHugo, 'The Legal Vacuum Britain Created: How Britain Failed Its Sacred Trust of Civilisation towards the Palestinian People', talk given at the Balfour Project's *Abandoning Palestine* conference, May 2022, <https://balfourproject.org/the-legal-vacuum-britain-created-john-mchugo/#_edn2> [accessed 18/12/23].

2 For an authoritative and detailed analysis of how Israel came into existence as a state in international law, see J Crawford, *The Creation of States in International Law* (Oxford: OUP, 2nd ed., 2007), pp. 425-434. See also Kattan, *From Coexistence*.

advice, the legal advisers were correct in stating that ‘if a Jewish state is proclaimed it will be setting itself up by its own efforts and not through the acts of the UN commission [established to implement the partition plan].’³

Britain departed leaving the Palestinians defenceless. The army that was meant to protect them during the British Mandate was gradually withdrawn. Once the British were gone, there were no Palestinian institutions. As I have said elsewhere, ‘The relative few who had passports issued by the Mandatory government would now find them worthless. Palestinians would have no army or police to protect them. There would be no budget, no education or health services. No currency. The Palestinians would become a stateless people. Such was Britain’s legacy.’⁴

None of this occurred in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Iraq, the other four countries that were mandated territories in the Middle East. By 1947 all were independent sovereign states under a constitutional form of government, however fragile these may have been. In Palestine, too, Britain had been under an obligation as the ‘Mandatory’ to establish representative institutions. As the American scholar, Penny Sinanoglou has pointed out, Britain’s mandate was unworkable so long as Arabs and Jews were not brought together in a joint, representative legislature.⁵ On the other hand, the Jewish community, the *Yishuv*, had established its own institutions which would quickly be transformed into the institutions of the new state of Israel. The leaders of the *Yishuv* had always opposed the establishment of an assembly for Palestine elected on a ‘one man one vote’ basis, or a one person one vote basis, until such time as Jews constituted a majority. Their intention had always been to establish a state with an ethnically Jewish majority from the river to the sea, or in as much of that territory as possible.

The militias of the *Yishuv* began their work well before the mandate ended. One of their motives was to make partition irreversible. In fact, right up to the final weeks of the mandate, there was a strong possibility that the partition plan, which was always provisional, would

3 See note 1 above.

4 See McHugo, ‘The Legal Vacuum Britain Created’, note 1 above.

5 P Sinanoglou, *Partitioning Palestine: British Policymaking at the end of Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), p. 70.

be abandoned in favour of some sort of UN trusteeship over Palestine which would have allowed time to attempt to reach a peaceful solution.⁶

But David Ben Gurion, the leader of the *Yishuv* and Israel's first prime minister, would have none of this. On 20 March 1948, three months before the mandate ended, a representative of the Jewish Agency told *The Times*, 'the Jews of Palestine have already put a sort of partition into force, and we are maintaining it.'⁷ By early April, they were fairly sure that the process of British withdrawal from Palestine was now too far advanced for the British army to intervene effectively, and they went on the offensive. Although much of their effort was directed at establishing control over the areas allocated for the Jewish state in the never implemented partition plan, they also set out to conquer other areas, too. This made the committing of war crimes inevitable—both in the areas allocated for the Jewish state and elsewhere. If Israel did not do so, it would be in no position to resist the expected intervention by the armies of the neighbouring Arab states once the mandate ended.

The decision to establish Israel by force of arms, and these military operations which took place before the state was proclaimed, made widespread ethnic cleansing inevitable. The Haganah commanders concluded that 'war is war, and there is no possibility of distinguishing between good and bad Arabs.'⁸ The distinction between 'good' and 'bad' here, it must be stressed, is subjective, because there was absolutely no moral reason why Arabs should not fight to defend their homes, or in support of their neighbours who were doing so. Ben Gurion declared that 'we shall enter the empty villages and settle them.'⁹ Half the ethnic cleansing took place while Britain was still responsible for the good government of Palestine, and the security of all its people. The other half took place after the proclamation of the state of Israel, during its war against the Arab regular armies. That war came to an end through armistice agreements brokered in early 1949, leaving Gaza swamped by refugees who had lost their homes as a direct consequence of the establishment of Israel. More would be subsequently shooed across the border by the Israeli army during times of peace.

6 For this, see Kattan, *From Coexistence*.

7 Quoted in Kattan, *From Coexistence*, p. 168.

8 B Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 99.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 371.

So that is the first part of the context necessary to understanding why the Gaza crisis erupted: Britain's shameful abandonment of the Palestinian people to their fate and the manner in which Israel was created. I can almost hear Mr Rowley saying, 'well yes, but all that happened a long while ago.' That brings us to our next question: why was the question of Israel and Palestine not resolved peacefully at some point over the ensuing three quarters of a century? And why was it still smouldering until it burst into a conflagration again on 7 October? To answer those questions, I will look next at the aftermath of the establishment of Israel up to the 1967 Six Day war, then turn to what I believe to be the three reasons why Israel has not been able to make peace and, indeed, why under Netanyahu it has come to frustrate all efforts to make peace.

After that, I will look at a very different part of the context, and turn from Zionism to Islamism and the background to the rise of Hamas and the extreme antisemitism which it has imbibed.

* * *

I believe it is perfectly possible that a solution to what was then known as the Arab-Israeli conflict could have been found in the first few years after the establishment of Israel.¹⁰ After their military defeats, the Arab states moderated their positions and accepted the UN partition plan as a basis for negotiation. The three states bordering Israel, Egypt, Jordan and Syria, all secretly put out feelers for a separate peace. Any of these could have been successful but Ben Gurion was not prepared to make any real concessions in return. Israel was the stronger party, and he could afford to do this. These feelers were therefore not followed up. On the advice of his silver-tongued foreign minister, Abba Eban, he had ensured that Israel's declaration of independence did not set out the extent of the land it claimed. Not only did it now treat all the land it had occupied in 1948-9 as its sovereign territory, but it saw the cease-fire lines as provisional—it reserved to itself the option to expand further. This was something Ben Gurion hoped to do, provided it did not lead to the dilution of Israel's Jewish population by adding too many Arabs.

¹⁰ The material in this section is drawn primarily from Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall* (New York: Norton, 2014 edition).

This left the displaced Palestinian refugees living resentfully in their camps. Israel admitted no legal or moral responsibility for their plight, which was absurd, and it still doesn't admit that responsibility to this day. The refugees in Gaza and their descendants were left in a political vacuum under Egyptian military rule. At first they and refugees on other fronts would cross the armistice lines trying to return to their homes, harvesting or even sowing crops, or collecting possessions. They soon found that to do so meant risking their lives. Gradually, over time, anger and resentment at their dispossession turned to outright hatred. Terrorist actions targeting ordinary Israeli civilians by dispossessed Palestinians increased over the early 1950s. These bred a parallel hatred on the Israeli side, and a policy of retribution as a form of deterrence which ratcheted up Arab anger and hatred.¹¹ The rhetoric of Arab governments also became more extreme. In 1962, for instance, President Nasser of Egypt referred to 'the cancer in the Arab region that is Israel'.¹²

* * *

It was during the 1967 Six Day War that Gaza came under Israeli occupation. Since then, there have been attempts by the international community to broker a comprehensive peace between Israel and the Palestinians, but they have got nowhere, essentially because Israel has been unwilling to accept the implications of legitimate Palestinian rights in international law and which were eventually set out in the 2002 Arab League Peace Initiative.¹³ Those rights would have led to a

11 On this, see Shlaim's *The Iron Wall* and Morris's, *Israel's Border Wars, 1949–1956: Arab Infiltration, Israeli Retaliation and the Countdown to the Suez War* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997). The fact that terrorism became increasingly the motive for infiltration back into Israel, whereas those who had originally tried to return had generally been trying to recover what rightfully belonged to them, is borne out by the witness of Glubb Pasha, who commanded the Jordanian Arab Legion. See John Bagot Glubb, *A Soldier with the Arabs* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1957) and Ariel Sharon, who was then the Israeli officer in charge of cross border retaliatory raids; see his autobiography, *Warrior, The Autobiography of Ariel Sharon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), p. 79. It is thus confirmed by the principal military antagonists on both sides.

12 P J Vatikiotis, *Nasser* (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 251.

13 <https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=a5dab26d-a2fe-dc66-8910-

Palestinian state on the entirety of the Palestinian Territory occupied in 1967—East Jerusalem, the rest of the West Bank, and Gaza. Only one Israeli prime minister may have been on the point of recognising these rights, and that was Yitzhak Rabin who was assassinated by a Zionist militant. We can never know whether he would have crossed what would have been a Rubicon for Israel if he had lived.

To my mind there are three reasons why Israel has been unable to recognise Palestinian rights. The first is the deeply held belief that the land of Palestine—*Eretz Israel*—rightfully belongs to the Jewish people, implying that the right of the Jewish people to the land trumps all others.

This can be found in Zionist texts as early as Herzl's *Der Judenstaat* in 1896, where David, the poverty stricken ten-year-old son of a Jewish pedlar from Galicia which is now part of Poland says of *Eretz Israel* in broken German, 'it is our land, Dere ve can be happy'.¹⁴

Or consider what Chaim Weizmann said in a speech to a Zionist audience in Manchester in 1907, 'The Arab retains his primitive attachment to the land. The soil instinct is strong in him, and by being constantly employed on it there is the danger that he might feel indispensable to it with a moral right to it.'¹⁵ Note how Weizmann's words imply not only that a Palestinian Arab does not have a right to the land, but should not be allowed to acquire one. He interpreted the Balfour Declaration as meaning that Arabs only had the right to their private property and to do business in Palestine, but no political rights. Or consider the words of a leader article in *The Jewish Chronicle* on 21 May 1921, 'the real key to the Palestine situation is to be found in giving to the Jews as such, those rights and privileges in Palestine as will enable Jews to make it as Jewish as England is English, or Canada is Canadian ...'

We might also remember one of the reflections with which the Revisionist Zionist leader Jabotinsky ended his pamphlet *The Iron Wall*, 'Either Zionism is moral and just, or it is immoral and unjust. But that is a question we should have answered before we became Zionists. Actually, we have settled the question, and in the affirmative.'¹⁶

a13730828279&groupId=268421> [accessed 18/12/23].

14 T Herzl, *Altneuland* (Haifa: 1961, tr. Paula Arnold), p. 222.

15 N Rose, *Chaim Weizmann: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), p. 106.

16 Text quoted from the translation available at <<http://en.jabotinsky.org/media/9747/the-iron-wall.pdf>> and <<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/quot>

Jabotinsky, of course, was the ideological forerunner of the Likud party of Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's current prime minister.

After 1967, such ideological attitudes made it much harder for Israel to recognise that the Occupied Palestinian Territory belonged to the Palestinian people as of right. During the still-born negotiations for Palestinian autonomy that accompanied the negotiations for the peace treaty with Egypt in the late 1970s, the Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin made sure there were no references to 'Palestinians' in the official Hebrew text of the draft agreement. Instead Palestinians were referred to as 'the Arabs of *Eretz Israel*'.¹⁷ He also, incidentally, scuppered what Sadat had intended would be a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace, not just a bilateral peace between Israel and Egypt. Later, during the negotiations over the Oslo Accords in the first half of the 1990s, diplomatic ambiguity was used to ensure that Israel did not cross that Rubicon which would have led to a Palestinian state on the Occupied Palestinian Territory ('the OPT'). The Palestinian rights that Israel conceded under the Oslo Accords were consistent with either self-determination leading to a sovereign state, or merely to autonomy; they did not cross the Rubicon of committing Israel to Palestinian entitlement to the occupied territory as of right.

Not all Israelis shared this perspective concerning *Eretz Israel*. Some who were willing to consider at least territorial compromise over the OPT were wary of Israel acquiring large numbers of Palestinians who would have a right to citizenship. In January 1968 Abba Eban used words redolent of extreme antisemitism when he wrote in an Israeli cabinet minute that there is a limit to how much arsenic the human body can absorb.¹⁸ Such attitudes also lay behind the considerable amount of ethnic cleansing that Israeli forces carried out after they took possession of the territories in 1967 including, notoriously, the Christian village of Imwas, the Biblical Emmaus. This brings us to the second of the three reasons why Israel has been unable to make peace: Israel's quest for security. The desire to retain parts of the OPT was also based on security considerations.

the-iron-wall-quot> [accessed 18/12/23].

17 Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*, p. 384.

18 A Raz, *The Bride and the Dowry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 268.

It must be recalled how Israel was originally established: by going to war in order to set up an ethnically Jewish state at the expense of others. Israel now made security demands to protect what it had acquired in that war, without acknowledging that, once again, they inevitably trespassed on legitimate Palestinian rights. If Israel had accepted the legitimacy of those rights it could have tried in good faith to negotiate a quid pro quo to meet its security concerns. It did not do so. Instead, it tried to bludgeon the Palestinians into submission by military force and by refusing to negotiate on the basis of international law.

The third and final reason is the historical narrative promulgated by Israel and accepted by many people in the countries we still refer to as ‘the West’. Avi Shlaim wrote about this nearly twenty years ago, in a very enlightening article entitled ‘the War of the Israeli Historians’.¹⁹

A heroic, nationalist narrative of the history of the Zionist movement and the state of Israel had been generally accepted in the West up to the early 1980s. Crucial elements of this narrative were that Israel came into existence by peaceful means, only responding to Arab attacks in order to defend itself. The Palestinian refugees left voluntarily, often urged to do so by their own leaders, and despite the pleas from Zionist leaders for them to remain. After its ‘war of independence’, Israel was faced with Arab refusal to make peace; across the decades Israeli politicians could find no Arab or Palestinian partner for peace. There were other elements to this narrative, the denial of the existence of the Palestinians as a people; the assertion that the indisputable existence of Jewish communities in the Holy Land across the centuries meant that it had always remained a land that rightfully belonged to Jews as a people, and even that Jews should be seen as the true indigenous people of this land. This meant that the immigrant Zionists were only coming back to reclaim their legitimate rights which overrode those of the Palestinians.

This narrative is downright misleading. It has been comprehensively discredited by the scholarship of the Israeli ‘new historians’ such as Avi Shlaim, Ilan Pappé and Benny Morris, whose work also happens to be broadly consistent with that of Palestinian scholars such as Rashid Khalidi and Nur Masalha. The reason why it no longer stands up to

¹⁹ A Shlaim, *The War of the Israeli Historians*. It is available at <<https://users.ox.ac.uk/~ssfc0005/The%20War%20of%20the%20Israeli%20Historians.html>> [accessed 18/12/23].

scrutiny is that documents released by Israeli state archives show this to be the case. Shlaim writes in particular of the Israeli foreign ministry archives, of how they were shown to be positively bursting at the seams with documents showing Arab efforts to reach peace, but which successive Israeli governments kept secret at the time.²⁰ Yet this heroic, Zionist narrative is still widely held. Although I haven't looked into this, I suspect it is very much the narrative pushed in Israeli school textbooks.

To sum up this part of this lecture. There are three reasons why Israel has found it difficult to make peace to this day. First, Zionist ideological considerations have made it hard to admit Palestinian rights. Secondly, the manner in which Israel was created left it with security dilemmas which could only be resolved at the expense of the Palestinians and for which it would have to make concessions—which it was unwilling to do. Thirdly, Israel has propagated a version of history which denies both Palestinian rights and the sufferings Israel has inflicted on a people that had been essentially peaceful until their lives and homes were threatened. Yet, unfortunately, that narrative still has a hold on many people in Israel and the West. I wonder if it does on Mr Rowley? I conclude this first half of my talk by asking whether it is any surprise that deaf ears to their cries for justice should lead some of the dispossessed to hatred and extreme actions. I will now turn to the other half of the context: turning from Zionism to Islamism, to Hamas, and to its journey to the atrocities of 7 October.

PART TWO

The word 'Zionism' was coined by Jews; the word 'Islamism' was not coined by Muslims. So we have to be careful about what we mean by it, and not to stray into Orientalism. For the purposes of this talk, I mean by Islamism an ideology through which an Islamist's focus of identity is at least as much on being Muslim as on being a patriotic citizen of their country, with the consequence that he or she wants government and society to be ordered in accordance with Islamic precepts. It does not necessarily imply either violence or authoritarianism, but of course violent and authoritarian Islamists certainly exist.

²⁰ Ibid.

Islamism, in this sense of the term, arose at roughly the same time as Zionism in the late nineteenth century. The early Islamist Jamal al-Din Afghani was a contemporary of Herzl and died in 1897. He wanted Muslims to stand up to the domination of the West, for Islam to be reformed and corrupt rulers overthrown so that modern Islamic civilisation could take its place as equal to that of the West, each civilisation learning from and benefiting the other in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Afghani was not only a father of Islamism, but an originator of the anti-colonial movement. The two went in parallel. They both come together with Arab nationalism in the figure of Rashid Rida (1865–1935), who I believe is still understudied in the West.

I mention Rashid Rida because, as we shall see, the notorious antisemitism in the Hamas charter can be traced back to him. But, with apologies to Mr Rowley, this needs to be explained and quite a bit of context is required in order to do that.

As a young man, well before he descended into antisemitism, Rashid Rida was a politician and journalist, as well as a religious scholar. He advocated democracy and taught that all the values we see as integral to democracy were present in Islam. He went further, and argued that the truest possible form of democracy stemmed from Islam. In his day, advocates of democracy in Arab countries tended to be secular nationalists. Rida argued that Islam, if correctly understood and correctly practised, would provide a more secure basis for democracy than the values of nationalism. In his view, true Islam would provide a better system of government for religious minorities like Christians and Jews than what he called ‘national fanaticism’. In 1898 he wrote in defence of Dreyfus, and saw the persecution of Dreyfus in France as an example of European racism, something absolutely incompatible with Islamic values. He also saw the renaissance in Judaism—very possibly a reference to the Zionist movement—as an example Arab countries could emulate. It was when he discovered that the Zionist movement was determined to establish an ethnically Jewish state at the expense of the Arab and Muslim population of Palestine that he recoiled, and his attitude changed completely.²¹

He was instrumental in the attempt to set up an Arab democratic constitutional monarchy covering the whole of what was then called

²¹ For the development of Rashid Rida’s relationship with Judaism and Zionism, see G Achcar, *The Arabs and the Holocaust* (London: Saqi, 2011), pp. 110–7.

Syria, Greater Syria, or Syria within its historic or natural frontiers, at the end of the First World War. This was all the land from the edge of the Sinai to what is now the Turkish border: Syria, Israel/Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan. As Elizabeth Thompson has shown, this attempt nearly succeeded but was frustrated by Britain and France for their own imperial purposes.²² In this, they were aided and abetted by the Zionist movement. Rida had trusted the West, because of its language of international law and President Wilson's 14 points. Now he felt deceived. This embittered him against the West and against Zionism. He descended into the antisemitism which became a feature of his later years. In 1922 he wrote:

The war taught the East that Europeans are liars who call things by their opposites Why? because they have made so many promises about liberation and independence publicly and privately Then the land of Arab Palestine was sold to the Jews. The Arabs were enslaved and humiliated at the hands of those who claimed to liberate and rescue them! These were the Mandatory powers, sent in the name of the League of Nations.²³

In articles he wrote in 1929 he adopted many tropes of European antisemitism, including material stemming from *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. He also searched Islamic sources for anti-Jewish material, and publicised the *hadith* (a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad), 'The Jews will fight you and you will be led to dominate them until the rock cries out: "O Muslim! There is a Jew hiding behind me. Kill him!"'²⁴ It would not surprise me if that *hadith* was in the minds of some of those who killed helpless civilians on 7 October. He also wrote something that would develop into a trope of violent Jihadi Islamism: Jews 'love life too much', whereas Arabs (and, by implication, Muslims) are more numerous, and have been hardened by war.²⁵

22 See E Thompson, *How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs* (London: Atlantic, 2020).

23 Thompson, p. 311.

24 Achcar, pp. 112-6.

25 *Ibid.*

The writings of Bernard Lewis must be treated with caution. His work is marred by a willingness to blame the Arabs for the West's own mistakes in the Middle East and a propensity to pander to the prejudices of Western audiences. Nevertheless, I go along with his statement that in Islam 'unambiguously negative attitudes' always existed towards Jews, but 'there is little if any deep-rooted emotional hostility directed against Jews—or for that matter any other group—such as the anti-Semitism of the Christian world.'²⁶ Since Lewis wrote those words in 1984—only a few years before the Israeli 'new historians' began to make their mark—the question of the treatment of Jews in Arab and majority Muslim countries across the centuries has become a political football. That is why I still prefer the analysis by Lewis.

What is certain is that European style anti-Semitism, which had already penetrated the region, became more widespread after the First World War at the time when Britain and France were partitioning the region and Britain was sacrificing the legitimate rights of the people of Palestine in order to facilitate the Zionist project. I'm sorry to say that much of this came via Arab Christians, who often had exposure to French style antisemitism, and via the secular elite. In the 1930s, Nazi propaganda also became influential. I understand that the antisemitic riots in Iraq in 1941 known as the *farhud* were secular in inspiration. The nakedly antisemitic statements that some Arab foreign ministers uttered on the floor of the Security Council during the 1947 debate on the resolution to partition Palestine were all made by secular politicians, and contained tropes taken from Christian, European antisemitism.²⁷

Hamas, however, is an Islamist, not a secular movement. Its roots lie in the Muslim Brotherhood, a populist Islamist movement founded in Egypt in 1928 which aimed to turn back the tide of westernisation on social and cultural matters. It soon evolved into a political movement, and elements of this movement used violence. They carried out assassinations and conducted guerrilla warfare against the British occupation forces in Egypt. In 1953 it acquired a new member in Sayyid Qutb, a secular intellectual who had become

²⁶ B Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 32.

²⁷ For this, see J Strawson, *Partitioning Palestine: Legal Fundamentalism in the Palestinian Israeli Conflict* (London: Pluto Press, 2010).

a very angry Islamist. He was angry at the subversion of the fabric of Muslim society by the spread of western customs and ideas (notably with regard to the position of women), imperialism, Zionism and the extreme poverty of the Egyptian poor.

Qutb, like the Muslim Brotherhood itself, saw Islam as a self-referential system of thought which had no need of anything from the West, except for morally neutral technologies when it was expedient to adopt them. Ever since Afghani, Islamists had denied that there was anything intrinsically ‘Western’ about such technologies, which could have been developed anywhere in the world. For Qutb, Islam provides a comprehensive programme for ‘worship and human relations, government and economic policy, legislation and moral guidance, belief and behaviour, this world and the world to come’.²⁸ He joined the Muslim Brotherhood, and became the head of its propaganda section. No other organisation, he wrote, ‘can stand up to the Zionists and the colonialist Crusaders.’²⁹ He spent time in prison, where his writings became more extreme and he formulated a vision of a revolutionary movement based on the thought of Abu ‘l-‘Ala’ Mawdudi whose doctrine was that sovereignty belonged to God alone. Qutb taught there should be no separation between politics and religion, and that Islam is a way of life based upon action. Violence, he taught, should—when necessary—be used to bring about an Islamic ordering that will remove all obstacles to the spread of Islam. Not surprisingly, Qutb is seen as the intellectual godfather of today’s violent Islamist movements.

One of these movements is Hamas. It originated in December 1987 among a group of Muslim Brotherhood members in Palestine just after the outbreak of the First Intifada. The following year, it published its charter³⁰ which is notorious for its vicious antisemitic material, some of it taken from the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which it acknowledges as its source—the authors either unaware, or in denial, about the fact that it was a forgery. It also contains a variant of the *hadith* publicised by Rashid Rida almost sixty years earlier, about the

28 Quoted in F Morrissey, *A Short History of Islamic Thought* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), p. 200.

29 *Ibid.*

30 For an English translation, see Yale University law School’s Avalon Project website, <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp> [accessed 18/12/23].

rock calling out that there is a Jew behind it and calling on Muslims to kill him.

The charter is also interesting in other ways. It is the charter of a Palestinian nationalist liberation movement, not of a movement with universalist pretensions like Al-Qa‘ida or so-called ISIS, save for the fact that it calls on Muslims all over the world to support it and join its struggle. In fact, fighting ‘the Jews’ for Palestine is a duty incumbent on every individual Muslim. It is firm in its ideology that Palestine is an Islamic land—something curiously reminiscent of Zionist claims that Palestine belongs to the Jewish people—but it also states, echoing Rashid Rida, that ‘under the wing of Islam followers of all religions can coexist in security and safety.’ It even says that ‘nationalism, from the point of view of Hamas, is part of the religious creed’. It calls for a return to Islam as the system that should govern society, and for Islamic consciousness to be defused among the masses. This is very much in the spirit of Sayyid Qutb. Some of the assertions in the Charter, such as ‘the Qur’an is our constitution’, are taken direct from the Muslim Brotherhood. It contains a strong plea for social solidarity and justice, and even claims to support human rights because of its Islamic tolerance. It condemns all ways of trying to reach a compromise settlement with Israel, which it sees as illegitimate and to be removed through jihad.

You did not need the events of 7 October to learn that Hamas has been instrumental in many terrorist atrocities. One weapon it has deployed, and for which it is notorious, is the suicide bomber. I mention this here because many people seem unaware that suicide bombing in an Islamist context is a very modern phenomenon indeed, only appearing during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in the early 1980s. The earliest Hamas suicide bombings occurred as recently as 1993–4.

Before 7 October, there had been hints that Hamas might one day moderate its position. It released a ‘Document of General Principles and Policies’ in May 2017 which makes interesting reading if put side by side with the Hamas Charter. It is a much more ‘modern’ document, and you sense it was probably written by members of a later generation who had received a more sophisticated education. The original Charter demonstrates Islamic learning, but otherwise there is a certain crudeness to it, not least in a couple of factual inaccuracies. By contrast, the Document of General Principles and

Policies looks as though it could have come from a think tank in London or Washington. It even seems to have an official English text. There are changes of substance, too. It is purged of the Charter's vicious antisemitism, and distinguishes firmly between Zionists and Jews. It has what one might call a more modern approach to the position of women. It still rejects the legitimacy of the state of Israel, and is adamant that all of Palestine—between the river and the sea—belongs rightfully to the state of Palestine.

Yet paragraph 20 contains a rather Delphic paragraph which refers obliquely to the so-called two state solution advocated by the PLO:

Without compromising its rejection of the Zionist entity and without relinquishing any Palestinian rights, Hamas considers the establishment of a fully sovereign and independent Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as its capital along the lines of 4 June 1967, with the return of the refugees and the displaced to their homes from which they were expelled, to be a formula of national consensus.³¹

Personally, I read this as a sign of Hamas being prepared at that time to compromise whilst strongly maintaining all Palestinian rights. That is a very reasonable opening position for negotiations. But I can also quite understand why so many Israelis were not prepared to trust this statement, given the many atrocities the movement had carried out. It did not formally repudiate the vicious antisemitism contained in the Hamas Charter. Here, I have been told, there are parallels with the IRA and Sinn Fein.³² They, too, moderated their positions but did not repudiate earlier statements. They just moved away from them. Was Hamas doing the same back in 2017? Think of the great difficulty Northern Irish Unionists have had in trusting Sinn Fein.

31 I copied this text from the Document of General Principles and Policies from the Hamas website when preparing the text of my lecture which I delivered on 18 November. Since then, it appears that access to Hamas's website has been blocked. For a copy of the text which is still available, see the website of The Jewish Virtual Library: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/hamas-2017-document-of-general-principles-and-policies#google_vignette>.

32 Private conversation with a leading member of the cross-community Alliance Party of Northern Ireland.

At least pressure from civil society and the international community led to an evolving peace process, so that now Unionists have sat in an assembly where Sinn Fein would be the largest party if it were currently in session. In Northern Ireland, at least, the peace is holding.

CONCLUSION

Let us leave Northern Ireland and go back to Israel and Palestine. Much confidence building has always been needed on both sides and trust is missing. I see the failure of trust, the reasons for which I have tried to outline today, and the repeated refusal of successive Israeli governments to acknowledge basic Palestinian rights in response to Palestinian moderation, as having caused an impasse. They deluded themselves that there was no need for progress towards peace. The world had bigger problems like climate change and Ukraine, and so did the region—think of Syria, Yemen and Iraq. The world no longer cared about the Palestinians. Wealthy Arab states began to normalise relations with Israel—‘a peace of the rich’, as the Israeli novelist David Grossman scathingly described it in *The Financial Times* on 12 October. It was that impasse that was suddenly shattered five days earlier. That is why, now, ‘the Very Stones cry out’. I wonder if Mr Rowley can hear. I fear he may not be even listening.

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