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Israel and Palestine: neighbours, yet worlds apart – and why Britain matters



Sir Vincent Fean's 39 years of diplomatic experience include serving as Consul-General in Jerusalem (2010-14), Ambassador to Libya (2006-10), and High Commissioner to Malta. An Arabist, he has engaged in senior policy-making, government affairs and negotiation in Whitehall, the Middle East and Western Europe. He is now Vice-Chair of the Balfour Project (www.balfourproject.org), a UK charity raising awareness of Britain's historic responsibilities in Israel/Palestine, and advocating equal rights for

Palestinians and Israelis.

A team in the UK Foreign Office deals with the Middle East Peace Process, also known as Israel/Palestine. Problem: there is no Process, and no Peace. There is increasing injustice and violence. The UK has a role to play, given our historic responsibility in the region and our declared support for equal rights and the rule of law.

As the British Mandate was crumbling in 1948, the state of Israel came into being through bitter strife, with the expulsion or flight of most of the Palestinian population. Israel won a war in 1967, and occupied militarily the remaining 22% of Mandate Palestine: East Jerusalem, the rest of the West Bank and Gaza. International law is clear that territory occupied in armed conflict cannot be annexed, so any annexation that is de jure in terms of Israeli law – eg East Jerusalem - is illegal in terms of international law. Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organisation recognised Israel on its pre-'67 borders in 1988, and sought a state on the 22%. Since UN Security Council Resolution 242 (drafted by the UK in 1967), the international community has sought an outcome: restored land for peace. That means ending the 1967 occupation to enable two states, Israel and Palestine, to coexist with mutual security: the oft-repeated aspiration of the Biden administration, the UK and the EU.

Today that may look like a pipe-dream, but it remains US/European policy to keep alive the hope of two states. European governments can do something now that the US will not do: recognise the state of Palestine, alongside Israel. It is in the logic of the two-state solution for governments to recognise both states, as a precursor to negotiations. Making recognition follow negotiations gives Israel a veto. Israeli PM Netanyahu will use that veto. He said recently that the Jewish people "have an exclusive and unquestionable right to all areas of the Land of Israel", including the occupied West Bank. His Government rejects the solution of two states in favour of perpetual occupation and annexation: de jure in terms of Israeli law in the case of East Jerusalem, de facto in the case of settlements (or as the French say, "colonies") elsewhere in the West Bank. The then Irish Foreign Minister, Simon Coveney, was right to say in the Dail that settlements are annexation.

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The Palestinians are in desperate straits, but at least now there is clarity about Israeli Government intentions: what it has it intends to hold, assuming impunity. Palestinians live with varying degrees of deprivation, depending on where they live. Refugees in Syria and Lebanon; two million people locked into Gaza; West Bankers, recently banned from building anything in their own countryside, where they face violent attacks by ideologically motivated settlers; East Jerusalemites, paying full Israeli taxes but receiving one third of the services delivered to West Jerusalemites, and the 21% of Israel's population which is Palestinian. They relied on the Israeli judicial system to defend their rights, with mixed results – but PM Netanyahu says that the Israeli Parliament can over-ride any Supreme Court ruling by a simple majority vote. His coalition of Likud, Ultra-Orthodox and Jewish Supremacist Religious Zionist parties has such a majority.

Palestinians in occupied East Jerusalem, the rest of the West Bank and Gaza are in a bad place politically. The split remains between Hamas, which runs Gaza, and Fatah, which runs the Palestinian Authority (PA) in Ramallah. President Abbas, to whom the West speaks, is old, weak and unpopular, particularly among the young. Ironically, he has done exactly what the West wanted: PA security cooperation with the Israeli army, continued advocacy of two states, and fruitless negotiations with any Israeli leader willing to meet him (including Netanyahu, once upon a time). Palestinian democratic renewal is desperately needed; no national elections since the Hamas/Fatah split in 2007. Abbas cancelled elections in May 2021, with his Fatah party splintering.

Desperation in the face of repression leads to violence: last year saw the highest number of West Bank Palestinians (over 150) killed by the Israeli army in 15 years, with nightly army incursions into the West Bank cities of Jenin and Nablus. Over 30 Israelis were killed in uncoordinated Palestinian attacks in Israel and the West Bank. Israel's new Minister of National Security, Jewish Supremacist Itamar Ben Gvir, promises to show the Palestinians who's boss. The fragile truce between Hamas and Israel could break at any moment.

The British role

UK imperial history includes the 1917 Balfour Declaration (Israel's birth certificate) and Britain's rule over Mandate Palestine until 1948, culminating in shameful withdrawal, leaving the Mandate territory in chaos for the parties to fight over. Past actions and inaction give us British a certain moral and political responsibility for what happens now, and what happens next. UK/US/EU policy remains to see two states living side by side – peace with justice, in line with international law, Resolution 242 etc. When last in office, Netanyahu said that Israel had no Palestinian partner for peace. Today, Netanyahu's Israel is not a partner for peace on the basis of two states, which he has excluded, ordering instead a massive expansion of illegal settlements in the West Bank: annexation.

The UK Government is well-informed. Middle East Minister Lord Ahmad was in Israel and the West Bank last week, and to his credit visited the West Bank hamlets of Masafer Yatta, where 1,000 Palestinians face eviction by the Israeli army. Rishi Sunak will visit Israel in May. He should visit Palestine, too. In Israel he should heed those – including the respected Policy Working Group led by ex Ambassadors Ilan Baruch and Alon Liel – who ask Israel's friends to oppose illegal, discriminatory actions by its Government, grievously harming Palestinians and putting at risk Israel's own future well-being.

Britain rightly supports resisting and penalising Russia's brutal attempt to seize and annex Ukrainian territory, in grave breach of international law. Those same laws apply to Israel's annexation of Palestinian land. If the UK wants to be taken seriously, our Government must not exhibit double standards: not one law for our foes, and another for our friends.

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