

PSC Conference: 50 More Years?

On 14th November 1998 we gathered for the 50 More Years? conference at SOAS. In his introduction the morning chair, John Gee, emphasised that while half of the conference would be devoted to looking back, the other half would consider where the Palestinians are now, and what the future might hold. It was important, he said, to learn from the past in order to plan for the future. It was also important to resist the rewriting of history and to challenge Israeli myths.

The first speaker, Gerald Green, was a member of the Haifa Volunteer Force of the Palestine Police for some time before the declaration of the state of Israel and was wounded twice, on one of which occasions his life was saved by a Palestinian surgeon. He remained there for some months after May 1948 to clear up. Like most of his colleagues, he knew next to nothing about Arabs or Jews when he arrived in Palestine but as far as he was aware the two communities had had good relations until 1936. The organisation he served was the most heavily armed police force in the world at the time, and it was therefore disgraceful that General Sir Hugh Stockwell did little or nothing to keep the peace in the last months before the end of the mandate. It was horrifying during this time to see lorryloads of dead bodies and thousands of Arabs leaving their homes in Haifa because of fighting which the deployment of four armoured cars could have prevented. The only concern of the British seemed to have been the safe withdrawal of their personnel. One of Green's tasks during his time in Palestine was to act as and driver-cum-guard to the Franciscan monk, Father Eugene Hull, author of a couple of very good books on the country. His advice to Green was to love God and learn how to use a gun. On 9th April 1948 Green was involved in a little known battle on the road from Haifa to Jenin when they tried to rescue a captain who had driven out of town without authority and had got stuck at a bridge blown up by the Jewish side. They were under fire for most of the time from 9.30 a.m. to 11 p.m. It later transpired that they had held off a 1000 strong Lebanese-Jordanian advance on Haifa. We also learnt about how some British soldiers was rescued just in time before being hung by the Hagannah.

Hanna Braun, who comes from an assimilated German-Jewish background, landed in Haifa with her family in October 1937. They had discovered their Jewishness courtesy of Hitler and were, like most immigrants at that time, not Zionists. Zionism only really became a majority doctrine after the Second World War before which, so the saying went, a Zionist was somebody who gave money to somebody else so that somebody else could persuade a third person to go to Palestine. Her mother said of Arthur Ruppin: 'I don't know why he became a Zionist - such a good family.' She also objected to the rules which said that as a Jew you were not supposed to buy anything Arab or employ Arabs. The system which was then being evolved was both nationalistic and socialist, in other words it was National Socialist. Whenever there was any violence either the Arabs, or sometimes Jewish groups which were regarded as dissident such as the Stern Gang or Irgun, were blamed so that collective Jewish responsibility for the deterioration of the situation was avoided. In the winter of 1937 Hanna Braun's family spent six months on Jerusalem, and being unaware of the tensions there, they visited the old city. Afterwards they were told by my Jewish friends that they had been lucky to get out alive, for Arabs were treacherous, disloyal and dirty. It sounded just like Hitler's view of the Jews.

Hanna Braun took issue with Gerald Green for maintaining that the Palestine Police had been pro-Arab. This may have been true of the ranks, but at the level of higher authority there was clear favouring of the Jewish side, witness the fact that most police stations fell into Jewish hands at the end of the mandate. Moreover, the tension between Jews and Arabs in Palestine went back to before 1922, for there was differentiation from very early on. The Jewish settlers wished to have nothing to do with the indigenous population, while taking over their country. The attitude of most Israelis today is graphically illustrated by the poster which Hanna Braun saw on the tube on the way to the conference. It showed the Omar mosque and read 'Come to Historical Israel'!

Haifa, where the Braun family lived, was for several years quite peaceful and the various communities there lived in harmony with one another. She was forever in and out of the houses of her Arab friends. Hanna Braun left Haifa for Jerusalem in 1945-46, after which, in 1947, the tension there increased and the town was besieged. Now a member of Hagannah, she was horrified by the news of the Deir Yassin massacre, because she had done watch duty and knew that this village was peaceful. The attempt to pin the blame on the Stern Gang was clearly a fig-leaf. After the declaration of the state she was also amazed that the so-called terrorist organisations were incorporated into the army. Visiting her family in Haifa she was dismayed to find that her Arab neighbours had gone, on being given eight hours notice to 'evacuate', and that strangers now lived there. This was all very disillusioning, but at this stage she did not become an anti-Zionist. In late 1949 she started teaching immigrants from such countries as Turkey, Bulgaria and Morocco in Haifa, and found them very far from happy with their situation as second class citizens. And in 1951, while on reserve duty in Eilat, she found a terrible atmosphere among Yemeni, Turkish and Iraqi immigrants there. They had reluctantly uprooted themselves from their countries on the false promise of heaven and earth. At the airport they were sprayed with DDT, and were then sent to different reception camps from their Ashenazi co-religionists. Their menfolk were immediately drafted into the army and both they and their families knew nothing of what had become of the other. They did not wish to learn Hebrew and many disliked the chauvinism of the new state. This was reflected in the half a million emigrants from the country.

At the time of the 1982 Lebanese invasion Hanna Braun moved from being a non-Zionist to the position of anti-Zionist. One year at a human rights conference in Coventry she spoke strongly against Israeli policies and discovered from some Israeli students why this change in her attitude had occurred. They challenged her to reconcile what she had thought in the early years of the state with her current position, to which she replied: 'I was young and silly then'. They answered: 'No, you were brave and clever. The brain shrinks with age!'

Leyla Mantoura pointed out that she was the only one of the morning panel who had been born in Palestine (in 1927). Her father was a doctor and her family were conservative in outlook; by European standards they would have been considered strict. She went to a mixed school where at five she began English, at six French and at seven German. Her father travelled a lot in his job, at first by mule, and used this opportunity to gather information about Arab folklore. Jerusalem was at that time a very mixed community and friendship crossed cultural boundaries. In the absence of Dr Wallach at the Jewish Communal Hospital, her father deputised and in 1946 he received a letter of appreciation signed by 42 ex-patients. One of her own friends was a professor at the Hebrew University; he advised Leyla to get a gun to protect herself.

Leyla Mantoura told us that even in the Mandate days the Jewish Agency worked hand in hand with the British Government and received enormous amounts of money from Jews abroad. The Arab leadership was, by contrast, based on traditional family structure, and this did enormous harm to their cause. The strike of 1936-38 was as much directed at the Palestinian leaders as against the Zionists. Contrary to what Gerald Green had maintained, the Palestine Police were very brutal against the Arabs, and they also trained and armed Jews such as Moshe Dayan and Chaim Weizman. In 1936 her father was imprisoned for publishing a book called 'Conflict in the Land of Peace' which was damning of the British Government; he was also removed from the High Commission guest list.

In 1946 Leyla was sitting in the garden of the King David Hotel when the bomb which blew up the left wing in which the mandate offices were situated, and witnessed the carnage which resulted. Among the dead were her future husband's father. Other atrocities followed, largely committed by Jews, that is Palestinian Jews, for Israel did not yet exist; for example in 1947 the Semiramis Hotel was attacked and 33 people were killed, but the attitude of the Jewish authorities was that these were the acts of extremists. In July 1948 the family decided to move for four or five weeks to the Latin Patriarch's area until the fighting had died down. She saw their own house being torched and evacuated, and her father had to start again from scratch at the age of sixty-eight. In 1967 their old house was turned into flats, and recently she rang an agency to ask about renting one of these. When she told the employee her name, and was then asked if she was an Arab, she was told that the flat was no longer for rent!

After lunch Nur Masalha, a Palestinian from Galilee, made the link between the past and the future. He began by looking at the history leading up to the contemporary situation. 1948 stands for the Palestinians in relation to 1967 as the First World War stands in relation to the Second for the British. In his 'Expulsion of the Palestinians', Nur set out to show that the Naqba was the inevitable outcome of the concept of transfer in Zionism, and should be seen in this wider context. The military conflict in 1948 was only a part of the story. According to different estimates between 418 and 531 villages, including Bedouin settlements in the Negev, were destroyed at that time. The 'transfer solution' became central to Jewish Agency policy in 1937. In 1948 Ben Gurion played a key role in the implementation of this policy; keeping his cabinet in the dark, he informed only those military commanders who played a crucial role in the expulsions. Ben Gurion justified his actions using the arguments of a long-running debate within the Zionist movement which had reached the conclusion that without compulsory transfer a Jewish state would be impossible. Partition was not accepted as a viable solution because every city had an Arab population of 50% or more.

There were three prongs to the policy of transfer. Firstly, from 1937 there were secret transfer committees, and the same people who served on these were involved in the 1948 expulsions. Secondly the Plan Dalet advanced the expulsions. And thirdly a whispering campaign was used to spread rumours of massacre. This was particularly effective in Eastern Galilee. One tactic, used at Safed, was to surround a town on three sides and leave an exit in the direction that they wished the population to flee.

Nur spoke about the sources used for reassessing recent Palestinian history. Firstly an increasing amount of Hebrew/Israeli documents is becoming available and is extremely useful, but tends to overestimate high politics. Then there is Palestinian oral history which,

on the whole, is a richer source than diaries and emphasises the suffering of ordinary people. Refugees from Galilee, for example, tell of the twenty-eight small and large massacres in their area which even other Palestinians had not heard about. All visiting statesmen to Israel are taken pro forma to Yad Vashem, but there is not memorial to the Palestinians, no Naqba library. And yet in 1948 the Palestinians lost their homeland.

What lessons are there to be drawn from what happened in 1948? The terms of this debate are changing. Earlier in the year Nur had held a dialogue with Israeli historians, and there is not doubt that that Palestinians are beginning to win the historical and moral arguments. Alongside this is the strategic argument about the possibility of forcing Israel to accept the Palestinians as equals, in a situation of such an asymmetry of power caused by continuing US support. How do we make sure that the refugee problem is not simply dissolved? While dispossession continues, is reconciliation between victims and victimisers possible? There is no sign of liberal Zionists taking any degree of responsibility for what has and is happening, but some historians are doing so. If Germany could accept its responsibility for what it did, and the Chief Constable of Manchester could accept that his force is 'institutionally racist', why should Israel not be equally honest? In fact just such a form of racism is endemic in Israel, resulting in an apartheid state.

In Nur's view, there is a way to end this disastrous situation, and that is bi-nationalism. The crisis post-Oslo has brought this potential solution into sharp focus, for it offers only a new and more pernicious form of apartheid. The autonomous areas are unlikely to achieve anything like genuine sovereignty, and in any case the Likud government saw the Wye Plantation agreement quite differently from the Palestinians. The most optimistic expectation is that the PNA will eventually control between 40 and 60% of the West Bank. The consequences of this would be catastrophic for the Palestinians. The bi-national solution, which is certainly not an ideal remedy, therefore comes back into consideration.

Until recently the Palestinians expected eventually to be in control of the West Bank and Gaza and to set up a state in this area. Just like any other state this one would protect its citizens against its enemies, in this case not only the Israelis, but also the Arab states. Three weeks earlier Nur had spoken to Hisham Sharabi in Washington DC and found him implacably opposed to a bi-national solution. What was needed was a state with an army. But in reality such a development is very unlikely and we therefore need to think seriously about the bi-national idea. This solution, however long-term it may be, accepts the existence of two national ideologies and avoids the fragmentation and Israeliisation of the Palestinians which would follow the setting up of a mini-Palestinian state. It also offers some hope, unlike current thinking, to the Palestinian refugees. There is a need to start thinking in terms of the next ten to fifteen years and to prepare for them. An important strategy should be to show the equivalence of the Israeli situation to apartheid South Africa. Even liberals in Israel are in favour of separation and see the Palestinians as a demographic threat. A poll last September showed that 65% of Israelis wanted to expel the Palestinians if they could get away with it.

It is easy to understand the Israeli position. Why should they give up their privileges? The task of Palestine solidarity over the next ten years will be to mobilise people against apartheid and make its cost to the Israelis high. But Palestinians also find it hard to imagine living alongside the victimisers. For the last three decades they have been speaking of ending the occupation and most Palestinians believe in the *national* struggle, not just in a struggle for *civil rights*. It is felt that a Palestinian state is 'the only game in town'. But among the

Israeli Palestinians enthusiasm for bi-nationalism is, not surprisingly, greater, for under present conditions the 20% of the population which they comprise will never be equal.

Palestinians need to recreate the Palestinian nation by linking its three components, the West Bank and Gaza, the Israeli Palestinians and the refugees. The linking of the first two of these will bring about a real revolution in the longer term. While the Israelis have no hesitation in incorporating Palestinian areas into Israel, Palestinians hesitate to expand, for example, in Galilee. There is a need to learn from the Zionists, and particularly from the way the Jewish Agency functioned. In the longer term the Israelis will not be able to stop the Palestinians doing this. There is a need to get rid of the paternalistic system typical of other Arab states. And it must be said that the CIA offices in Ramallah should be removed. In other words, Palestine civil society needs to be mobilised in order to confront the unchecked Israeli colonisation. A promising possibility here is to work with Israeli democratic groups.

Although Israel is supposed to be a 'Jewish state' it is in reality increasingly bi-national. It is a society with many inner-contradictions, and there the Palestinians should work with the liberal section. There is nothing essentialist about the Jews; like the Australians and the Americans in relation to their indigenous peoples, the Israelis can change. The Palestinians should not repeat the crimes of Zionism by attempting to 'transfer' the Jewish population; this is a completely unacceptable solution. What is needed is equality, reciprocity and symmetry. The advantage of the bi-national approach is that it does not merely emphasise civil rights; it recognises national aspirations.

Afif Safieh, General Palestinian Delegate to the United Kingdom and the Holy See, acknowledged that the Palestine Authority could be improved and that there was a need for a better organised opposition. But, Nur's idea of a bi-national state was a reserving of an old dish. In the 1960s it was called the 'bi-cultural' concept because bi-nationalism would have recognised the Israeli state and the dream of military victory had still not been extinguished. Afif agreed that there is certainly a need to break the cycle of victim-victimiser.

The turning point in strategic thinking on the future of the Palestinians came in 1973, after which the two-state solution became the main objective. In Britain we can help to achieve this objective by intensifying our lobbying of churches, universities, the trade union movement and MPs. Afif went on to talk about the disappointing results flowing from the Oslo accords. The Palestinians side had been 'unreasonably reasonable' by accepting an initial 13% pullout by the Israelis, and even the Americans had become annoyed with Israeli intransigence, recognising the risks this posed to their regional interests. The failure of the economic summit meeting in Qatar, the attendance of 'moderate' Arab leaders at the Islamic Summit in Tehran, and decline of the grand alliance against Iraq all indicate negative fallout from American sponsorship of hard-line Israel. Netanyahu had recently gone so far as to claim: 'If they pressure me I'll set Washington on fire', a remark reported in the Israeli press but not elsewhere.

Afif made the following points in favour of the Oslo process. If implemented expansion of the area under Palestinian control would not be strategically insignificant, including as it would an airport, crossing points and a harbour employing 5000 workers. The talks between Netanyahu and Clinton have revealed the rift between them, an important factor in Palestinians favour. Netanyahu finds himself in a position where he may have to distance himself from settlers and Jewish fundamentalists. Israelis of the left, right and centre

all want an agreement which reflects all their advantages, and there is therefore a need to work on all factions to make them realise that they are mistaken in this policy. Their inflexibility is based on assumptions that American alignment on Israeli preferences will remain unchanged, the Russians will continue to decline, the Palestinians will resign themselves to their fate, the Europeans will continue to abdicate their responsibility and the Arabs will remain impotent. It is unrealistic to think that all of these factors will remain unchanged. For example, the majority of Americans are in favour of Palestinian statehood.

The Palestinians and the Israeli government should accept the idea of reciprocity, that is 100% land for 100% peace. If Palestinians have committed violence they should be jailed; so should Israelis who do so. The problem with the peace process was that it was not audacious enough from the beginning and left all the big problems to the end. This has led to an explosive situation as the date for completion of the accords, 4th May, approaches. There is a need to keep social cohesion and to prepare the ground carefully. Help will be required in the upcoming battle, and in these circumstances the attitude of Western Europe will be important, a Europe which Britain is hopefully now at the heart of. In 1988 one hundred states recognised the state which was then proclaimed, and it would be a disaster if a state were again proclaimed on 4th May and it attracted less support than in 1988. In reality a Palestinian State already exists, for political science defines a state as 'an authority on a demography on a geography'. But the geography is discontinuous, a patchwork of 'bantustanettes'.

There are two points of view on whether to declare a state on 4th May. It could, on the one hand, be used as a threat to accelerate the process. On the other hand, not to declare at this stage would make it clear that statehood is not negotiable. If declaration went ahead, it would be for the entire West Bank and Gaza, leaving 60% of the land still considered as occupied. Afif urged us not to position ourselves on this issue according to our view of Arafat. There are promising signs on the international scene. Gingrich's fall from power is a major loss to Israel in the US; his wife was on the board of a company helping settlements. The peace-process should be de-Americanised. Hopefully the Russians will recover, and Europe and the non-aligned movement will also become more potent forces in the Middle East. The Palestinians have chosen to go down the road of diplomacy rather than military struggle; they will follow this way until it reaches a dead-end.

John Gee, a founder member of PSC, first became interested in the Arab world when he was at school. In 1986 he became Senior Information Officer at CAABU. John began by pointing out that history is interpreted in the light of the present. In 1948 the Palestinian people were fragmented very rapidly into more than three parts. But the rise of Palestinian nationalism in the 1960s showed that they were not prepared to accept their fate with resignation. John differed from Afif in that he believed the Palestinians were a very long way from a viable state. It is not stamps and a cabinet which matter, but rather having control of territory, an independent economy and the ability to come and go at will. No one took the Bantustans in South Africa seriously although the Transkei, for example, was much more credible as an independent country than, say, Gaza. There is a need for new ideas, something which the opposition is sadly lacking in. Hamas's bombing of civilians is not only morally reprehensible, but also counterproductive. Secularist ideas, such as the empty slogans of George Habash to step up the armed struggle, are also not encouraging. John did not wish to consider the clearly unbalanced Oslo accords in detail. He referred to the dismal situation under the PA, and to the unresolved refugee problem. But a new *intifada* is not on the cards

in the new post-Oslo situation; for one thing soldiers are no longer at the heart of the Palestinians areas. There is much scepticism among Palestinians about idle chatter.

In this new and difficult scenario there is a need within Israel itself to work with zionism and to accept help from those who offer it. It is incumbent upon the Palestinians to look carefully at the weaknesses of their own society which have helped zionism. The top-down approach to decision-making ignores the popular level. A strategic vision for the future is required. John had some sympathy with the idea of a bi-national state, and disagreed with Afif for suggesting that this solution was already being discussed in the sixties. There is a need to accept the Israeli Jews as a nation, a concept incompatible with a democratic, non-sectarian state. The old ideas rejected the idea of the Jews as a nationality. However the route to a bi-national state is a difficult one. The very existence of the PA is an obstacle. John concluded, therefore, that there was no alternative to the two-state stage; this has to be gone through. The ultimate aim of bi-nationalism would be to recognise the rights of two nationalities with devolved control, and equal funding and citizenship.

At present there are twenty-five segments to the Palestinian entity. All the settlements remain in place, and there are roads, under Israeli control, which are intended to isolate Palestinians communities. The hard questions have not been dealt with at all. The refugees are not going to sit idly by while their fate is ignored. What, then is to be done? One vital step is to rebuild a solidarity movement which supports the Palestinian people, not the PA which is inhibited in what it says and does by its involvement in the peace process and its undertaking not to engage in incitement or hostile propaganda.

During question time John was asked whether there were any moves to control the return of a further nine million Jews to Israel. He replied that it was important to work at winning Jewish opinion over, not at antagonising it. The emphasis should be on the right of Palestinians to live in Palestine/Israel. In reality there was unlikely to be much more Jewish immigration. It is as well to remember that while there are around 100,000 active zionists in the United States, the remainder of Jews resent them. Nur Masalha agreed that it was necessary to mobilise Jews against the zionists. John Gee spoke about the European Coordinating Committee on Palestine and warned that the general view of the European Union was that the declaration of a state at this stage would be ill-advised. For this reason he believed the PA would back off.