

One-Time Kingdom Resident heads UK Palestine Campaign

Noel Rogers speaks to Dr Francis Clark-Lowes who worked in Saudi Arabia from 1979 to 1989. He is now the Chair of the London-based Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC).

Rogers: Tell me a little about how you first became interested in the Palestine conflict.

Clark-Lowes: As you can imagine, I am often asked this question, and it's not so easy to answer. Does my interest go back to my schoolboy biology teacher, Peter Gladstone, grandson of the famous prime minister and ex-member of the Palestine Police, who spoke with first-hand knowledge about the injustice done to the Palestinians? Or was it Faizur Rasul, my West Bengali landlord when I was studying in Birmingham in the sixties who first aroused my concern? He was married to a Czech woman from a Jewish family, so he had another interesting perspective, but was equally critical as my teacher of Zionist policies. Perhaps these two had their influence, but come the '67 war I joined the overwhelming British consensus in welcoming Israel's victory.

Rogers: Yes, this is what interests me. How did you move from that position to being a supporter of the Palestinian cause?

Clark-Lowes: In 1973 I joined an Arabic class. One day, during the October war, our mild-mannered Coptic Egyptian teacher reacted fiercely to an ill-considered remark by one of our class members. *That* made me think. Soon afterwards a Lebanese colleague introduced me to a pro-Arab parliamentary lobby group, the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding. Now I began to hear strong arguments in favour of the Palestinians, but in typically 'liberal' fashion, I continued to sit on the fence. In 1977, like many young people in those days, I worked on a kibbutz for a couple of months and experienced Israeli indoctrination at first hand. To be honest, I was inclined to believe their rhetoric, but when I visited the West Bank and Gaza I heard a very different story.

The real turning point came for me in 1979 when I moved to the Kingdom and found myself working alongside well-educated Palestinians. In the first few weeks of my time in Saudi Arabia one of these, Said Hamdan, tore my wishy-washy attitude to shreds. If by chance you get to read this interview, Said, may I say a hearty 'thank you' after all these years? My sticking point had been believing that 'we', the British, could have been so unprincipled in 1917 (Balfour declaration) and thereafter (mandate Palestine). Said put me straight on all that, and as I read around, I found that the evidence nearly always supported his viewpoint. Two years later I recall being glued to the radio and television as reports came in about the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the terrible massacres at Sabra and Shatilla. After that there was no turning back.

Rogers: Yes, I think 1982 was a turning-point for many Westerners.

Clark-Lowes: Yes, including a significant number of Jews. A good German-Jewish friend of mine, who immigrated to Palestine with her parents in 1937, became first a Zionist, then a 'non-Zionist' and finally in 1982 an 'anti-Zionist'. She is now a fervent supporter of the Palestinian cause.

Rogers: You came back to Britain in 1989 to study for an MA in the Psychology of Psychotherapy. How did this connect up with your active involvement in the Palestinian cause?

Clark-Lowes: This is a complicated subject, but the simple answer is that my interest in psychotherapy stemmed largely from a desire to understand conflict, especially that in Israel-Palestine. While I was studying for my MA the first *intifada* was rumbling away in the background, and I considered, but decided against, doing some research with the Gaza psychiatrist, Eyad Al-Siraj, for a thesis on the effects on children of Israeli oppression.

Rogers: You went on to do a doctorate at the University of Sussex near Brighton on Wilhelm Stekel and the Early History of Psychoanalysis. This sounds a million miles away from Palestine.

Clark-Lowes: I thought the same at the time. However, my academic supervisor was then setting up a Centre for German-Jewish Studies, and wanted to include my research under this umbrella. Gradually I sensed that the Centre had an implicit Zionist agenda and that by accepting their money I was complicit in this. I tried unsuccessfully to argue the case for including a critical discussion of Zionism within the orbit of the Centre. I proposed, for example, a study of the post-war German attitudes to Zionism and the dynamics of what Finkelstein condemns as 'the exploitation of Jewish suffering'. I thus came under suspicion for being anti-Jewish and realising that I was getting nowhere, I decided to set up a local organisation which would counteract Zionist propaganda and champion the Palestinian cause. This is how the Brighton PSC branch came into being.

Rogers: But you completed your doctorate.

Clark-Lowes: Yes, I managed to finish my thesis independently, which was a struggle. And bizarre though it may sound, studying Freud's treatment of his pupil, Wilhelm Stekel, was very illuminating for an understanding of international conflict in general, and of the Palestine question in particular. Freud wanted to set up a psychoanalytical empire in just the same way that Zionists set up a Jewish state. He fell out with Stekel, and therefore banished him from the 'empire,' just as the Palestinians were banished from their country. I believe the motives in both cases were similar, that is irrational ideas about identity and security. But if you want to ask me to explain all this, you'll have to ask me along for another interview!

Rogers: When did you become Chair of the national Palestine Solidarity Campaign?

Clark-Lowes: In 1998.

Rogers: Tell me something about what PSC does.

Clark-Lowes: We engage in a number of campaigning projects. For example at the moment we are running a post-card campaign lobbying local Members of Parliament and the Secretaries of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Robin Cook) and for Trade and Industry (Stephen Byers) calling for an arms embargo against Israel. We publish a magazine containing information about our activities and also news which is not easily obtainable elsewhere. We hold an annual conference or seminar. We react to articles in the press and programmes on tv and radio and have recently had letters published in The Times, The Guardian and The Evening Standard. And we support other related campaigns such as Deir Yassin Remembered, the Palestine Return Centre, Sabeel, the Amos Trust and the new Jewish coalition, Just Peace UK.

Rogers: How is PSC organised?

Clark-Lowes: We have an Executive Committee which is elected each year at the AGM and we employ a part-time co-ordinator who deals with the day-to-day business in our office in London. We raise money through the membership fee and also by holding fund-raising events, but finance is always a problem. There are a number of local branches, including, of course, the one in Brighton of which I am Chair as well.

Rogers: Tell me a bit more about your local branch in Brighton?

Clark-Lowes: We have quite a high profile as a result of challenging the local Jewish community here, and others, to engage in discussion on the Palestine issue. For example, in 1998 we held a demonstration outside the Israel at Fifty exhibition which happened to be located in a local synagogue. We have succeeded in getting an anti-zionist Israeli film onto the Jewish Film Festival programme (causing a row which went as high as the Israeli Embassy), and I have continued to do gentle but persistent battle with the Centre for German-Jewish Studies. I was excluded from their latest meeting on xenophobia, anti-semitism and racism, but in the argument which followed they reluctantly agreed to invite the German-Jewish woman I mentioned to speak at a future seminar. Another way of raising public awareness locally has been the holding of Palestine Support Evenings. We raised a considerable sum for Medical Aid for Palestinians at such an event last month.

Rogers: I believe you went to Palestine last year. What were your impressions?

Clark-Lowes: Yes, I spent ten days touring round the whole country last March. If you have your eyes open, which I'm afraid most westerners don't, you can't fail to see the most bare-faced creeping dispossession of the Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. It makes you so angry when you hear people in Britain saying: 'Yes, but surely there's two sides in this conflict.' Actually it's true; there's a right side and there's a wrong one! How can you possibly justify the behaviour of the settlers in East Jerusalem, for example, who aggressively display their Israeli flags and defend themselves with every kind of weapon? Thankfully there are Israeli Jews who oppose this government-backed policy, but they are far too few.

Rogers: And where do you go from here?

Clark-Lowes: I want to do more writing, both on this subject and on others, which will probably mean handing over my organisational work to others.