

Pivotal events in the course of modern contemporary Palestinian history

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The First World War (1914-1918) saw a number of battles between Britain and the Ottoman (Turkish) State and represented the final stage of Turkish rule in Palestine. When the war drew to a close, Turkish rule, which had endured for just over four centuries, was to be replaced by British occupation in the form of a Mandate. The British Mandate lasted until 1948.

On November 2, 1917, prior to its mandate, Britain issued the Balfour Declaration. Directed to the Jewish Agency, this document pledged that Britain would do all in its power to assist the Zionist project in establishing a national homeland for the Jews in Palestine. The declaration made no mention of the political and historical rights of the indigenous people of the country, referring to them merely as non-Jewish communities.

Palestinians instigated a series of uprisings against Britain's policy of assisting the Zionist project. Most significant were the revolution in May 1920, which declared the Palestinian stance in opposition to the Zionist project, and the 1929 revolution, known as the Buraq Revolution, during which the Palestinians defended their holy sites against Jewish claims of the Western Wall of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.

The uprising spread to the rest of Palestine. The British authorities sentenced three Palestinian youths to death by hanging at the Akka (Acre) prison on June 17, 1930, in an incident that came to be known as Red Tuesday. Sheikh Izz al-Din al-Qassam promptly revolted against the discriminatory policies of the British. The Sheikh gathered a group of followers and proclaimed an armed struggle in the Ya'bad forest. The British encircled him, backed by the Zionist Haganah organization, and he was killed along with a group of his comrades.

This launched the Great Palestinian Revolution of 1936, which began with a general strike. It then escalated into violent confrontations and clashes between the Palestinian rebels and the British Mandate forces. These clashes occurred against the backdrop of the British authorities facilitating entry of Jewish immigrants into

Palestine, the sale of land and its transfer to Zionist organizations, and the appointment of Jews to senior positions within the administration. Under British pressure and with promises of British goodwill, Arab monarchs and heads of state asked the Palestinian leadership to bring the strike and the revolution to an end.

At the end of World War II, Britain turned its attention to its colonies, including Palestine. Britain announced that it had failed to reconcile the views of the Arabs and Jews and that it would hand the issue over to the United Nations (UN). The UN published its Partition Plan on November 29, 1947, which provided for the establishment of a Jewish state and an Arab state. The Arabs rejected the plan as unjust while the Jews applauded it because it granted international recognition to their rights in Palestine. To forcibly implement the resolution, the Zionist military organizations launched attacks against Arab villages and neighborhoods that were to fall within the borders of the Jewish state.

These attacks brought death and injury to thousands of Palestinians. They led to the displacement and expulsion of tens of thousands from their towns and villages, who became displaced persons and refugees without shelter or health care. When the British left Palestine on May 15, 1948 upon the end of the British Mandate, David Ben-Gurion (head of the Jewish Agency and leader of the Haganah) announced the establishment of the State of Israel. The Arab armies entered into a war with this state. It was lost because of corruption of arms, mismanagement of the fighting, and poor coordination between the various leaders. Israel was able to occupy more Palestinian land, displace close to 800,000 Palestinians, and to destroy hundreds of towns and villages. The war and its circumstances are known as the Nakba (catastrophe) of Palestine.

The Palestinian people were displaced in their own land, to Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt, and to other corners of the world. Most of the displaced persons went to live in camps set up by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). The number of Palestinian refugees registered with this agency in 2010 stood at approximately 4.5 million people, of a world-wide total of around 10 million Palestinians.

The Palestinian people did not succumb to what had befallen them but strove with all their will and power to reclaim their homeland. Fedayeen operations set out from Egypt and Jordan targeting settlements in Israel. As the political and intellectual situation developed, the Palestinian Liberation Army was officially declared in 1965, along with the Movement for the National Liberation of Palestine (Fatah). They were followed by the establishment of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), an umbrella organization which sought to steer the struggle towards a common goal.

The PLO launched several fedayeen operations – including hi-jacking airplanes and attacking Israeli military bases and settlements – in order to draw the world’s attention to the justice of the Palestinian case. These operations attracted dozens of international bodies and foreign governments to stand by their cause and support the Palestinian people.

However, the PLO was struck by a major disaster in 1970 in what would come to be known as Black September. Palestinian guerilla forces were expelled from Jordan following claims by the Jordanian regime that the Palestinian factions had become a burden on the people (or rather a threat to the regime itself). Hundreds of Palestinians lost their lives and the Palestinian leadership relocated to Lebanon. There the PLO attempted to rebuild the organization and to reorganize the lives of Palestinians in the refugee camps.

However, the successive Israeli invasions of 1978 and 1982 eliminated much of the Palestinian leadership. At the same time, the Palestinians were subjected to confrontations and assaults by Lebanese sectarian and party-based military organizations engaged in a civil war that led to the massacre of Sabra and Shatila in September 1982. This disaster claimed the lives of thousands of innocent Palestinians. Blame was placed on the Israeli army, which was stationed in the proximity of the two camps, and on the Phalangist militia that perpetrated the massacre under Israeli cover.

The PLO leadership was expelled to Tunisia where some of its leaders were assassinated (including Khalil al-Wazir). With the loss of momentum and the Palestinian leadership in exile, the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip took up the reins of the Palestinian cause. In 1978 began the First Intifada (uprising), known as the “Intifada of stones” because the Palestinians confronted the Israeli Occupation with stones. When negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, initiated following the Oslo Accords in 1993, broke down, the Palestinians proclaimed the Second Intifada in 2000.

In spite of successive uprisings by the Palestinian people, the Israeli Occupation remains in place. It constantly tightens its grip on the lives of the Palestinians; erecting checkpoints, constructing the racist Separation Wall, denying freedom of movement, confiscating land, detaining civilians, and other acts of oppression.

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