

Palestine: Religion as a Tool of Colonial Domination

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As leaders from all around the world gathered to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the end of a war meant to end all wars, the aftermath of the bloody conflict nevertheless continue to resonate in many parts of the globe today.

Author and researcher Hanief Haider traces some of the trends and maneuvers from the pre-World War I era, such as Great Britain's use of religious fervor to influence affairs in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), which persist today.

In all of this, the Palestinian issue has been slowly marginalized from mainstream discourse by Western media while it pursued its neoliberal agenda in the MENA region.

There is a belief among some that the United States was using religious fundamentalism in partnership with Saudi Arabia only from the late 1970's to achieve its geopolitical objectives in the MENA region.

But this manipulation of the Abrahamic religions goes further back in history when the Irish revolution broke out in 1916.

Northern Ireland was predominantly Protestant but they were linked to English capital by acquiring dominance in vital industries like cotton, linen and shipbuilding towards the end of the 19th century.

Unwilling to lose this lucrative base of capital investment, the English Tories were prepared to condone and assist the open rebellion of Ulster Loyalists in order to prevent Irish independence.

Mainstream media even up till now portrays the 1919-1921 War of Independence as an anti-Protestant sectarian war, which was not the case. Protestants who found themselves in predominantly Catholic districts were not specifically targeted.

Even Protestants among the working class were in favor of independence.

In their 2013 book *Hidden History: The Secret Origins of the First World War*, historians Gerry and James McGregor say that age-old religious animosities were deliberately stirred in order to coerce the Protestant majority in the north into a state of potential conflict with the predominantly Catholic South.

Both were armed by the London elite with weapons purchased in Germany.

If civil war had broken out then Germany would have been blamed using the English press as the elite's bullhorn for propaganda.

Author and philosopher Raoul Martinez also sheds light on how the British government repealed press taxes in the latter half of the 19th century thus making the newspapers dependent on corporate advertisers.

Corporate advertisers favored papers that supported their interests as well as the foreign policy objectives of the government of the day.

It was none other than the *Manchester Guardian* (now *Guardian*) paper that opened the road for Zionist leaders like Chaim Weizmann to have access to high-ranking politicians in Britain.

These connections at the top of the British political and media hierarchy paved the way for the divisive Balfour Declaration of 1917.

Not only was the famed editor of the *Guardian* Charles Prestwich Scott and his staff motivated by the strategic importance of the Suez Canal but also impressed by Weizmann's anti-Russia tirade which opposed the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, says historian Norman Rose in his [1986 biography of the Jewish nationalist leader](#).

Another paper that was as equally committed to the Balfour Declaration as the *Guardian* was the *London Times*. Both their editors were opposed to the 1939 White paper that addressed Arab concern over immigration and landlessness among Palestinians, adds Rose.

Colonialism at war

On the eve of World War I, dominant colonial power in the Middle East Great Britain found itself under pressure from her colonies for self-rule, as was the case with the de facto Irish colony.

To stave off German influence and military power in the region, the Arabs were lulled into believing, in exchange for military assistance against Germany, independence would be granted.

Instead of independence Britain and France came up with the Sykes-Picot agreement seen by many as the spoils of the war.

As the geo-political writer FW Engdahl puts it:

“Sykes Picot placed the most educated and most developed areas of the Arab world which were hungry for independence into the grips of the European colonial powers thus sowing a mistrust and hate towards the West that lasted until the 21st century”.

Great Britain was given Palestine (declared a homeland for foreign Jews); Iraq (oil); Kuwait (oil); Western Iran (oil); Sudan (oil); and Egypt (Suez Canal). France in turn got Lebanon and Syria.

Rule over the Arabian Peninsula before discovery of oil was given to the Arab family of Bin Saud which followed a strict puritanical form of Islam called Wahhabism that dates back to the mid-18th century, which spread forcibly in Shia regions of Oman, into Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain, and much later Yemen.

Arm of influence

To ensure continued control over lucrative trade channels like the Suez Canal and valuable natural resources like crude oil, the British directly chose and installed in power corrupt and ruthless despots dependent on British financial and military backing.

They were handpicked despots who used the most reactionary form of the Islamic religion as their legitimacy to suppress any and all dissent coming from secular, national forces and international communism.

In Palestine, the British installed the corrupt Hajj Amin al-Hussaini – an anti-Semite – to the post of Grand Mufti of Jerusalem despite his lack of knowledge on Islam.

It was rather for his role in the anti-Jewish riots that followed after the Balfour declaration of 1917, argues Robert Dreyfuss in *Devil's Game – How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam*.

These riots were investigated by numerous British-led commissions and they concluded the reaction by the indigenous population was due to economic and political grievances against the British mandate coupled with unchecked Jewish immigration and land purchases.

Parallel to the rise of al-Hussaini was the nurturing of David Ben Gurion by the British. Although Ben Gurion rose through the ranks of Labor Zionism his ideological outlook was not far from the revisionist Zionists.

The Zionism that leaders such as Theodore Herzl and Chaim Weizmann espoused was relatively liberal where the Jewish state would be secular and democratic and the Jews would not have special privileges.

In *The Fate of the Jews – A People Torn Between Israeli Power and Jewish Ethics*, historian Roberta Strauss Feuerlicht says that to the right of Herzl and Weizmann were the more conservative Revisionists that celebrated the wars and conquest of ancient Israel as well as the barbarities and inequities that went with it led by the Russian journalist Zev Jabotinsky.

The Revisionists wanted the entire ancient Israel from the Nile to the Euphrates.

End of Britain's Mandate

The distinction between Ben Gurion and the Revisionists was not that he was a territorial minimalist while Revisionists were territorial maximalists but rather that he pursued a gradualist strategy while they adhered to an all or nothing approach, says Israeli historian [Avi Shlaim](#).

The 'liberal' faction of Zionism waned slowly after World War Two. Their disappearance was hastened by Britain's decision to reverse its decision to partition Palestine as part of the [Peel Commission's 1937 recommendations](#).

[The 1939 White Paper](#) also curtailed Jewish immigration which were viewed as appeasing the Arab states and Muslim world, seen as vital allies in the conflict with the Axis powers of Germany and Italy at the time.

These developments were catastrophic for both the indigenous Arabs and the British

Mandate. It was catastrophic as it strengthened the Revisionists' hand and some became radicalized to the point of attacking British institutions in Palestine.

Among these Jewish fighters, labeled terrorists by the British, were two members that would eventually lead their country – namely Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir – in later years underscoring the drift of the Zionist political movement to the extreme right which exacerbate the struggle for Palestinian nationhood in later years.

Dreyfuss argues that this 'betrayal' by Britain – reneging on promises made to various Zionist leaders – did not stop it and France from using the new state of Israel as a stalking horse to topple the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1956 over his move to nationalize the Suez Canal Company after the USA and Britain withdrew financial aid for the Aswan High Dam power project.

Not only did Britain and France find an ally in a right-wing Israeli government to protect its interests but in the background the Muslim Brotherhood was nurtured. The Muslim Brotherhood was founded by an Egyptian Hassan al-Banna in 1928 with a grant from the same Suez Canal Company Nasser nationalized later.

The message of the Muslim Brotherhood soon spread to other countries where the secular nationalist forces together with international communism became a threat to British interests and the pliant authoritarian leaders and monarchs it installed.

The Muslim Brotherhood

Nasser's actions against British and French interests made him a hero in the eyes of oppressed people everywhere in the Middle East. It split the nascent Palestinian movement between the Islamists based in Gaza, who Nasser tried to crush in Cairo, and the nationalists who allied with Nasser's vision of Arab nationalism.

Support for the Muslim Brotherhood started declining as the secular, nationalist and communist forces started gaining strength in numbers.

But the Muslim Brotherhood received a massive boost when Israel captured both the West Bank and Gaza in the Six Day War of 1967.

Hamas founder Sheikh Yassin was imprisoned by Nasser but later freed by the Israelis. [Under Israel's watchful eyes](#), the Muslim Brotherhood began to lay down their infrastructure with mosques and charity organizations in the occupied territories.

Israel's formal support for the Islamists occurred after 1977 when the far-right parties came to power in Israel. Menachem Begin who revolted violently against the British over the 1939 White paper became Israel's prime minister.

Israel's support for the Muslim Brotherhood extended to other countries like Syria. Animosities intensified after 1973 when President Hafez al-Assad proclaimed a secular constitution for Syria that described the country as democratic, popular and socialist.

Violent Islamist demonstrations soon followed.

When Lebanon's civil war erupted in 1975- due to Israel's maneuvers against the ethnically plural state – it drew in Syria which sent troops into Lebanon to protect Christians against

predominantly Muslim Palestinians which were better armed and trained, says Patrick Seale in his 1990 book *Assad: The Struggle for the Middle East*.

This did not go well with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood which carried out assassinations, bomb attacks and other violent actions across Syria until it was [violently put down in Hama in February 1982](#).

The Brotherhood implodes

It is often debated that for a movement to carry out such sophisticated operations against a state known for its security apparatus, the Muslim Brotherhood must have depended on support from both Jordan and Israel.

But beginning in 1981, the Muslim Brotherhood began to self-destruct. It attacked countries which were once its sponsors or sympathizers by first assassinating President Anwar Sadat of Egypt – a one-time supporter.

According to Stratfor Worldview Assessment, it threatened the Saudi monarchy from within demanding popular elections and accountability after the fallout of the 1991 Gulf War.

It is worthy to mention that it was the Saudi Kingdom which used the *Ikhwan* as a bulwark against Nasserist pan-Arab socialist ideas decades earlier.

Lastly, the Muslim Brotherhood turned against Israel when the first *Intifada* broke out in 1987 through its armed wing Hamas attacking civilian targets like buses and markets with suicide bombers.

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