

Shifting paradigms: how British politics has depicted Palestine



*To bring something new to discussions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not easy. It has been discussed from almost every angle imaginable and yet defies agreement. If anything, today the conflict arouses more passionate argumentation than ever and seemingly serves as a vehicle through which contemporary Britons choose to express their fears and aspirations about their own identity. Yet in this connection, **Rosemary Hollis** argues that it is worthwhile exploring further just what is meant by national or cultural identity, using British representations of the Palestinians as a case study.*

The way the British government has depicted the Palestinian issue has **evolved over time**, but at no point has independent statehood been a central or stand-alone objective of policy. Even when the government of today calls for a 'two-state solution' to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this is not a call for Palestinian statehood *per se*. Instead it is proposed as a formula for conflict resolution and made contingent upon Israeli agreement.

What this tells us is that there has only ever been a fragile connection between Palestinian claims and what others, including the British government, recognise as theirs by right. It also tells us that policymakers have a knack of defining problems in ways that fit with their preferred course of action or inaction.

Yet the process by which they do this is not necessarily the result of rational and deliberate scheming. It also has to do with conditioning and context. So the fate of the Palestinians has been determined not only by conquest and war but also by what the academics like to call 'ideational' factors; the norms, laws and paradigms that hold sway at different moments in history also affect what is deemed possible or desirable.

The Palestinians are certainly not alone in finding themselves disadvantaged by the received wisdom of the age. The Kurds also experienced marginalisation following the carve-up of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War. And whereas in the twentieth century both Iraq and Syria were accorded recognition as sovereign states, neither may survive as such in this century.

The problem 'in context'

By tracing successive shifts in the way the Palestinians have been represented in British political elite discourse we can see the role of ideational factors more clearly. Prevailing norms and international law have set the parameters within which 'the problem' of Palestine and the Palestinians have been framed.

When the British were accorded the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine, colonialism had not been outlawed. According to the terms of the Mandate, the British were supposed to prepare the local inhabitants for independence, which they claimed to be doing. They were also obliged to fulfil the promise made in the '**Balfour Declaration**' of 1917 to 'use their best endeavours' to establish in Palestine 'a national home for the Jewish people' provided they did nothing 'which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities' there.

By the 1930s, as Jewish migration to Palestine accelerated in response to Nazi persecution and then to the Holocaust, periodic Arab protests turned into a full scale revolt. The British response was exemplary of some of the worst practices of imperial policing. Partition was considered, but the government in London was against it and in 1947 the British referred the 'Palestine Problem' to the newly formed United Nations.

In **UN Resolution 181** the UN General Assembly pronounced in favour of two states—which was accepted by the Zionist leadership but rejected by the Arabs. Unable and unwilling to impose partition, the British withdrew in 1948 and as they did so, the Zionist leadership declared Israeli independence. In the ensuing Arab-Israeli war two thirds of the Palestinian Arab population of what became Israel either fled or were forced out, and so was born 'the Palestinian refugee problem'.

Following the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, when Israel captured the West Bank and Gaza Strip, inclusive of their Palestinian population and refugees, representations of the Palestinians focused on the inhabitants of these areas. With the rise of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), they were then depicted as a guerrilla movement seeking attention through acts of violence.

From the first Palestinian *Intifada* (uprising) that erupted in the Israeli occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip in December 1987, they were accorded a more sympathetic incarnation as a population denied their human rights and requiring humanitarian assistance. Only as of the launch of the US-managed Middle East Peace Process in 1993 were the Palestinians framed in British political elite discourse as a nationality seeking independence and the Occupied Territories identified as a state-in-the-making. Latterly, the designation of Hamas and others as terrorists has added another permutation to the frame.

Shifting paradigms

So what the Palestinians can hope to attain in terms of an end to occupation and/or sovereign statehood will depend on the extent to which they and their supporters can oblige status quo powers to revisit their default positions. Indeed, contemporary supporters of the Palestinians want to re-examine the past and question the logic by which some national communities gained independence and statehood and others did not.

The problem here is that the existing international order rests on an acceptance of borders forged in war and/or by imperialists; even though both imperialism and the acquisition of territory by force are now forbidden under international law. The 'ideational' context has changed in other ways too. Since the Second World War, the racism that once informed the actions of imperial powers has been renounced and governments are at pains to define national 'belonging' in terms of shared values, universal suffrage and tolerance of diversity. That said, of course, in the face of mass migration within and towards Europe from other parts of the world, xenophobia, if not racism, is making a comeback.

In this context, the question for the Palestinians is whether to seek separate statehood, or equal rights with Jewish residents of all the land controlled by the Israeli government and armed forces since the 1967 war. As things stand, their ability to decide is not helped by the contradictions and ambiguities that characterise the 'ideational' context.

Note: this blog draws on the **article**, 'Palestine and the Palestinians in British Political Elite Discourse: From "The Palestinian Problem" to "The Two-State Solution" in

International Relations.

About the Author



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