

# PITY POOR GAZA

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The news-films show the devastation and the pain of grief. Homes explode into dust, and apartment buildings collapse as though imploding, carrying people's lifetimes—and the people themselves—to ruin. How can the heart not be torn by the savagery inflicted on the Gaza refugees?

And every time that the aggressor is Israel, the heart cries out in incredulity, "It is the Jews—the Jews!—who are inflicting such pain and loss of life on these destitute and trapped people. Who could imagine that a people who endured the inhuman horror and heartless slaughter of the *Shoah* at the hands of Nazi Germany would themselves so mercilessly rain down such terrifying violence on another poor and terrified people?"

I am not, and have never been, an anti-Semite. During my 7 years as a hospital chaplain, I visited several times an elderly patient who had the numbers tattooed on his forearm. He prayed in his shawl from an old, tattered book. And he spoke to me always with reservation and a sorrow in his eyes. He was a gentle man, with no apparent anger or hate, and liked and respected him. In our conversations, he once told me about the box car he rode in on his way to the camp, gasping for breath from a tiny opening between the slats of wood that made the walls of the packed car in which he was imprisoned. And on another occasion he confided that he had eaten human flesh—clearly an utter violation of everything good and right, in his mind. I sat mutely with him as he pondered this in silence. My heart is still with him to this day.

The leaders of Israel today are not of his character. They are vulturous criminals who belong to a different world than he.

This appalling inhumanity is the latest outcropping of the “Arab-Israeli war.” That conflict has been raging, more or less intensely, since the Zionist movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century sought to reclaim Palestine as the birthright homeland of the Jewish people, who had lived on that land for 1400 years, until the Romans exiled them from “Roman Syria” in 136 CE. This mass migration that ensued—of the Jewish people into Europe, particularly into Germany, is known as “the great Diaspora.”

At the time of the Zionist movement, Palestine had been settled for almost two thousand years by Arabs and was then a part of the vast, Islamic Ottoman Empire. As World War I progressed, it became clear that Kaiser Wilhelm and his German/Austro-Hungarian Empire was about to collapse, leaving the Ottoman Empire, which was allied to the Kaiser, as the spoils of war. Secret meetings between the two ignoble colonizers, England and France, along with Russia (soon to be Soviet Russia and then the Soviet Union) and Italy, resulted in the signing of the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916), which divided the area of the Ottoman Empire into “spheres of influence,” carving up the one vast territory into separate nations, with each of the four signatories taking its share of the land and the productivity of its mainly Muslim Arab population.

Of interest here, Palestine was left in the Agreement to be governed by an international commission. No consideration was given to the Arab peoples living there or to the Jewish Zionists. After the war, an agreement was signed between England and the Baron Rothschild, a Jewish banker who had financed a good part of the Allied victory. This “Balfour Agreement” was a letter which stipulated Great Britain’s intent to establish a Jewish national homeland in Palestine—what later became the State of Israel in 1949.

To accomplish this partition of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, the League of Nations (the short-lived forerunner of the United Nations) granted France the newly created states of Syria and Lebanon. Russia received access to the Black Sea through newly created Turkey, which was home not only to the Turks, but also to the newly unrepresented Kurds. England received newly created Iraq, part of Palestine, and newly-created Transjordan (later called Jordan), which protected its access to the Suez Canal and the route to its colony of India.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was created on the Arab Peninsula, as were Yemen and the countries of Oman, Qatar, and Bahrain.

The Zionist battle with the Arabs continued throughout this period until in 1949, the State of Israel was created. This act of the United Nations partitioned Palestine into the Jewish nation of Israel, the bi-national City of Jerusalem (now illegally annexed entirely by Israel), and two areas settled by the millions of Arabs displaced from their homes in what was now Israel: the larger West Bank, on the western side of the Jordan River, which was Israel's border with the Kingdom of Jordan, and the tiny 140-square-mile Gaza Strip, on the Mediterranean coast—the densely populated refuge for 1 million displaced Palestinian Arabs and another 800,000 members of successor generations, who were and are angry and impoverished, living their lives in overcrowded refugee camps, without hope and subject to torture and inhumane punishment by the Israeli government.

The problem created by the partition of Palestine (and the rest of the Middle East) is intractable. The most offensive aspect of the problem is that the partitioning was done by the white European colonial predators, who for the three previous centuries had had their way with the less well battle-equipped and disease-tolerant indigenous peoples of the Americas, Africa, the Middle East, and the Indian subcontinent, and had become rich by plundering their wealth and labor. In their arrogance, these colonialists partitioned Palestine without consulting with the Palestinian Arabs, who became the victims of the partitioning, losing their ancestral homes and their jobs, their families separated and dispersed, without recourse. A million Arabs were herded into the re-settlement camps in Gaza, stripped of their ancestral heritage and left to be provided for by the mercy of their Muslim co-religionists in other nations.

Who can be surprised that rebellion against such inhumane and unjust treatment of a whole population by absentee landlords two thousand miles away should occur and continue to occur? The question of which party to the conflict, Palestinians or Israeli Jews, has just claim to the land itself is insoluble because each side's claim is meritorious. But the way in which the partitioning took place, and the lack of human consideration that it displayed, are reprehensible. And the consequences of it have been catastrophic to the subjugated Palestinians and insidiously malignant to the moral health of the Israelis.

Knowing the circumstances under which the Nation of Israel was created and the history of warfare between the Zionists and the Arabs in Israel, the Israelis understood that settling and protecting their new nation, under the cloud of Palestinian hatred and resentment, would be difficult and would require decisiveness and military superiority. With the assistance of donations, particularly from American and European Jewish organizations, and of substantial military foreign aid from the United States, whose politicians in both parties believed that they could not afford to lose the support of their Jewish patrons, especially after the Nazi horrors of World War II, Israel became an elite and effective military power, far superior to any of its hostile Arab neighboring states. It was, and it remains, the superpower of the Middle East.

However, Lord Chesterfield's dictum ("Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely") applies to the Israeli leaders, as it does to all holders of power. I've already referred to the cruel daily persecution of the Palestinians living in Jerusalem by the Israeli government, who have enacted internationally illegal laws restricting the basic human rights of these people and who, at will, torture, kill, and abduct Palestinian civilians, and demolish their family homes, as humiliating demonstrations to them of the superior might of their subjugators. For example, you may have noticed in the films of the latest outbreak of fighting—which was sparked by an illegal and unjustified eviction of a Palestinian family from their home in a majority Jewish neighborhood in Jerusalem—the pathetic ineffectiveness of the home-produced Palestinian rockets barraging Israel by the thousands. The Israeli defensive air-raid "dome," according to news reports, destroyed over 90% of the rockets as they approached their targets. Nighttime clips of the rockets coming toward Israel showed the rockets simply popping out of existence in the night sky.

Another favorite harassment technique of the Israeli government is the "land-grab" establishment of Israeli settlements in the Palestinian West Bank. Although illegal in toothless international law, these "Jewish settlements" are a constant irritation to the Arab citizens of the West Bank. They are also an attempt by the Israeli government to diminish the percentage of Arab residents in these areas and thus, to diminish the effectiveness of their voice in local government affairs.

The grand demonstration of the superiority of Israeli might occurred in the Six Day's War of 1967. Israel preemptively attacked Egyptian forces in the Sinai Peninsula and destroyed Egypt's air force in one day. Then the Israelis surged through the Gaza Strip and into the Sinai, conquering it and maintaining a military stance there. The Israelis simultaneously invaded and occupied the West Bank, defended by the Jordanians, and overtook the Golan Heights, which had belonged to Syria. The result is that five days later, the governments of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria capitulated to Israel in humiliation.

Israel withdrew voluntarily from the Sinai and from the Palestinian settlements, but it has never given up its occupation of the strategically crucial Golan Heights.

On the restive occupants of the Gaza Strip Israel has placed an "I can't breathe" stranglehold. Israel controls all the land routes into the Gaza Strip and has placed and effectively enforced a blockage against all shipping into the Gaza Strip seaports from the Mediterranean.

Thinking again about all these violations of human dignity has made me heartsick. I will stop writing soon. The Palestinians have done their share, of course, to retaliate against the iron resolve of the Israeli people, and they have killed and disrupted the lives of many, many Jewish residents there. But in my mind, the Palestinian resistance in the Gaza Strip, especially, is a passionate statement of Palestinian powerlessness and frustration over the inhumane treatment which they receive from the Israeli leaders.

We could speculate on possible modes of relief, but in view of Lord Chesterfield's dictum and of current Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's indictment on charges of governmental corruption *by his own government*, what could possibly be an effective outcome? Both sides will continue to fight and to die for such little purpose.

I'll stop now, and leave you, if you are so inclined, to ponder the cruel situation in Israel and Gaza, and to think up your rationalizations, if you wish, for Israel's ferocity.