**[Past is prelude](https://www.dawn.com/news/1783549/past-is-prelude)**

[Mahir Ali](https://www.dawn.com/authors/322/mahir-ali) Published October 25, 2023 Updated 2 days ago

SOMEONE encountering the Middle East conflict for the first time in the current pages of the Western media could be excused for assuming that Palestinian-Israeli history began on Oct 7, 2023, with the spectacular Hamas breakout that led to unconscionable acts of violence in Kibbutzim adjacent to the Gaza Strip.

Some of the victims, murdered or abducted, were peace activists, with mentalities far removed from the belligerent attitudes of all too many illegal West Bank settlers. Primarily, though, they were human beings subjected to the kind of violence no one should have to endure. Much the same could be said about what Palestinians have been subjected to since 1948, with the effort redoubled in 1967.

But in reckoning with what became of Palestine, one should go back at least to the Balfour Declaration, 1917, wherein colonial Britain offered Zionists a homeland for European Jews, who suffered under outrageous anti-Semitism long before the Nazis emerged and adopted extermination as an exemplar of extreme misanthropy.

Before adopting the unspeakable concept of a ‘final solution’, however, the Nazis toyed with the idea of mass expulsion. Madagascar was once seen as a possible destination, and they weren’t entirely averse to Palestine as an alternative. This led to a degree of Nazi-Zionist collaboration, which has been anathematised as a wicked lie despite historical evidence.

The history of Israel and Palestine did not begin this month.

The campaign wasn’t successful, because most German and other European Jews preferred the idea of emigrating elsewhere, including the US and UK. A possibly apocryphal anecdote from the 19th century mentions a couple of emissaries to the ‘promised land’ who reported to the rabbis in Vienna: “The bride is beautiful, but she is already married to another man.”

In the early 20th century, Zionists who leaned towards communism and fantasised about establishing a country where they would resist the depredations of both Jewish and Arab capitalists by teaming up with the Palestinian proletariat were opposed by other Jewish groups represented at the first few Comintern congresses.

More broadly, though, the backing for the establishment of Israel by its initial advocates in many cases had less to do with belated empathy for the Jews than with the wish they would go away. At the same time, Stalinist Soviet Union and its supporters in the West, especially the US, were enthusiastic about the Israeli project at its inception. Some were able to look past their blind spots. Others, including the Anglo-Saxon Five Eyes nations and Germany and France, choose to let Israel get away with murder.

The collective punishment being inflicted on Gaza, supposedly with the aim of obliterating Hamas, has many antecedents. The Nazis were particularly enthusiastic — Lidice on the outskirts of Prague, in what is now the Czech Republic, and Oradour-sur-Glane stand out as particularly egregious revanchist massacres — but it carried on despite the ‘never again’ vows, with the US and its allies establishing landmarks from Korea and Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan. So it should come as no surprise that Israel’s emergence as an expert raises few hackles.

It does help to explain, though, why far-right groups and governments from the US and Europe to India and even the Middle East admire Israel’s ruthless pursuit of ethno-nationalist fantasies, even though it can involve murky moral compromises. The mainstream Western media, for instance, is unlikely to delve too deeply into Israel’s facilitation of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s as a counterweight to the Palestine Liber­a­tion Organisation. The success of this strategy led to Hamas, a Bro­ther­hood offshoot, winning the 2006 Palestinian elections — and then being denied the democratic right to rule via the Palestinian Authority.

It took over Gaza from Fatah after Israel vacated the tiny territory in 2005 without ceding control of its borders. Given that Gaza was abandoned precisely because Ariel Sharon wanted to abandon negotiations over the West Bank, everything went according to plan. As recently as four years ago, Benjamin Netanyahu told his Likud associates: “Those who want to thwart the possibility of a Palestinian state should support the strengthening of Hamas and the transfer of money to Hamas. This is part of our strategy.” That strategy came undone earlier this month and, unlike his military and intelligence chiefs, Netanyahu has not apologised to his compatriots for his government’s negligence. But when heads eventually roll for an unforgivable lack of foresight, the prime minister is unlikely to survive.

Meanwhile, it would be interesting to see the reaction if Hamas were to throw back at Israel an amended version of Golda Meir’s infamous words: “We can forgive the Arabs for killing our children. We cannot forgive them for forcing us to kill their children.”

[mahir.dawn@gmail.com](https://MAILTO:mahir.dawn@gmail.com)

*Published in Dawn, October 25th, 2023*