What Did We Do to Deserve This?

“...it is not asking for much – we just want to live like human beings. We want to be able to take our kids to school easily and not for it to take all day. We want to send our father and mother for medical treatment, not for them to die at checkpoints.”

This book exposes the realities of daily life for Palestinians in the West Bank in the twenty-first century. Based around photographs and interviews with ordinary Palestinian people, it looks at all aspects of daily life ranging from restrictions on movement and imprisonment to the effects of the occupation on business, the practising of religion and the development of democracy.

Finding a solution to what is frequently termed the “Israeli-Palestinian conflict” is now widely acknowledged as an important step in reversing the growing gap between mainstream Muslim society and the West. By providing the reader with a comprehensive understanding of how Israel’s policies in the West Bank affect the lives of real people, it cuts through the smokescreens and political correctness that pervade coverage of the issue and offers the reader a new platform from which to form his or her own opinions.

About the author

Mark Howell is a freelance photographer with a specific interest in the Middle East. He combines analytical skills derived from eight years experience as a qualified lawyer with photographic craft honed during a Masters Degree in Photojournalism and Documentary Photography, to produce balanced, comprehensive and accessible works.
What Did We Do to Deserve This?
What Did We Do to Deserve This?

Palestinian Life under Occupation in the West Bank

Mark Howell
With thanks to Boo
for sowing a seed,
Jocelyn for
encouraging its growth
and Morag for
helping it to flower

What Did We Do To Deserve This?

Published by
Garnet Publishing Limited
8 Southern Court, South Street
Reading RG1 4QS, UK
Tel: +44 (0) 118 959 7847
Fax: +44 (0) 118 959 7356
E-mail: enquiries@garnetpublishing.co.uk
Website: www.garnetpublishing.co.uk

Copyright © Mark Howell, 2007

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form
or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage
and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher,
except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review.

First edition

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data. A catalogue record
for this book is available from the British Library.

Credits
Editorial: Dan Nunn
Production: Nick Holroyd
Design: David Rose
Maps on page 17 used courtesy of GEOprojects (UK) Ltd.
Maps on pages 31 and 79 used courtesy of OCHA-oPt.
Printed and bound by International Press, Lebanon

While every care has been taken in the preparation of this book, neither
the author nor publishers can accept any liability for any consequence
arising from the use of information contained within.

Caption to previous page
Boy looking through security gate as his mother
waits for the green light to come on so they can
pass through Qalandia “border” crossing from
the West Bank to East Jerusalem, one integral
territory under international law
Contents

Author's note 6

Introduction 14

PART 1: CALIBRATING TO REALITY 24
1 The myth of a state 26
2 Transfer 40
3 Identity 52
4 Resistance and democracy 62

PART 2: LIFE 76
5 The conquest of Jerusalem 78
6 Restrictions on movement 96
7 The Israeli military machine 110
8 The great land grab 130
9 Business and agriculture 154
10 Unemployment, poverty and health 166
11 Childhood and education 180
12 The collapse of Christianity 196

PART 3: THE END GAME 208
13 Israel's great gamble 210
14 Palestinian responses 216
15 It doesn’t have to be this way 226

Bibliography 238
Information sources 239
Acknowledgements 240
Author’s note

This book shows the current reality of Palestinian life, day to day, in the West Bank. It also places it in context by explaining the origins of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the motivations behind Israel’s current policy. Finally, it looks to the future and assesses what options remain for the Palestinians and where events may lead. The conflict is usually portrayed as complex and insoluble. In reality, Israel’s policies in the West Bank have changed very little over the past 40 years and the issues at stake are readily understandable. This book is intended to leave the reader with a rounded understanding of these issues and the reasons why a solution seems so out of reach. Although it is focused very much on what is happening now, the first few chapters are inevitably historically-slanted, setting the context. No prior knowledge of the region is required and the book is designed to be easy to read. There are many important, more academic-orientated books available for those who wish to explore the situation further and I hope for some this work will serve as a stepping stone to them.

The book has evolved from a photographic project which I initiated on my first visit to the West Bank in August 2005. I arrived without any fixed ideas but was keen to see for myself what was happening on the ground, having been acquainted with the situation from a distance, largely through the British media. However, it did not take me long to decide that there was only one project I should pursue. I was shocked by the great difference between media reporting and the reality on the ground. There was a story here to be told.

I ask you to suspend judgment of this book until the end. The desperate situation which is the individual reality of each Palestinian in the West Bank may be at odds with your current interpretation. However, this book is not intended to be a polemic. I have used skills developed while studying history and practising law, prior to becoming a photojournalist, to deliver what I believe is a fair interpretation of the current situation in the West Bank.

My primary resource for this book was the testimony of ordinary Palestinians whom I met whilst travelling around and I have included sections of my interviews with many of them in it. The interviewees include a dentist, lawyer and bank clerk, students, farmers and mothers. They are the substance of Palestinian society whose voice is rarely heard. Their aspirations are much the same as any other people around the world – to live in freedom and peace and to protect their families. They, however, face a desperate situation, not of their making. The stranglehold which Israel has over the West Bank is so tight and all encompassing that the issues raised in this book affect most Palestinian families. It is therefore inevitable that some interviews are relevant to several chapters. In most cases I have decided not to split them between such chapters, partly to emphasize this point.
I have decided to limit the scope of this book to the West Bank because it is here that any solution to the conflict will be found. Gaza is, of course, extremely important to the 1.5 million desperate Palestinians imprisoned within its walls but the West Bank makes up 94.2% of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and if the Palestinians lose the battle here, their dreams of a state will be gone forever. In the last few years Israel has found it convenient to focus the world’s attention on Gaza while quickly and efficiently manufacturing a new reality in the West Bank. This book seeks to redress the balance. Finally, I have also decided not to include interviews with Israeli settlers in this book. The approximate 450,000 Israeli settlers in East Jerusalem and the West Bank have been imported contrary to international law and as such they have no legal standing. To give them a voice would inevitably imply that their opinions and circumstances should carry equal weight.

Palestine and the media
One of my primary motivations for undertaking this project was to address the void between mainstream media coverage of the conflict and reality on the ground. For a number of reasons, elaborated on below, the media in the UK and more so in the US serves its public poorly in this area.

Some might point to Jewish ownership interests and managerial representation influencing the editorial line. This certainly occurs. The Jewish contribution to the arts, business and society in general in the West has been considerable but this success has resulted in their disproportionate representation at the higher levels of society. Western Jews often hold an overly romanticized view of Israel as a pioneer state, under constant threat, where intrepid Jews have made the desert bloom. Given Israel’s constant reinforcement of this image and its promotion of Israel as a refuge from a future Holocaust, and the Jewish community’s close cultural ties, it is not surprising that many Western Jews feel a need to defend Israel. Many others are as oblivious to the real facts as the next man or woman and in the absence of a powerful counterbalance take such statements as fact.

There are, however, much more obvious reasons why reporting tends to be skewed in Israel’s favour. Firstly, over the years the Israeli government has developed a formidable PR machine. After any incident it is able to offer spokesmen and women to present the Israeli position. As it initiates most military contacts, it can also plan in advance. The Palestinians do not have this level of organization and cannot react as quickly. Additionally, Israel’s unique position as a state of immigrants means that it is able to recruit Jewish spokespeople originating from the relevant news organizations’ target audiences. The average British viewer will subconsciously feel more of an affinity with a white Israeli with a British accent than with a Palestinian Arab.
The media in general is also, like politicians and most other people in public life, extremely reluctant to criticize Israel. There are a large number of very well organized Jewish pressure groups which react to any publicity that could be seen as critical of Israel or of benefit to the Palestinians. The weight of complaints and the potentially adverse publicity that they can generate has created an atmosphere of political correctness. Legitimate criticism of Israel is soon portrayed as anti-Israeli bias, which can then be linked to anti-semitism. Few organizations, governments and public figures are prepared to stand up and tell the truth when the subject is peripheral to their audience’s main interests and the backlash could be severe. Even an organization with as high journalistic standards as the BBC largely restricts itself to reporting the positions of both sides. It refrains from making any editorial assessment of the validity of such positions or highlighting injustices, something which it feels free to do with less politically sensitive areas like Zimbabwe.

Studies have shown a shift in terminology during the course of the occupation. The media has increasingly moved away from using the term “occupied” in favour of words like “disputed”, suggesting that Israel has some legal claim on West Bank land. Occupied East Jerusalem is represented simply as part of Jerusalem, giving the viewer the impression that it is part of Israel. Whilst in most cases this can be put down to uninformed or lazy journalism, it seriously impacts on the audience’s ability to comprehend an already confusing picture.

This confusion stems in part from the insidious nature of the conflict. The nature of modern media demands news events that can be portrayed well visually, and which can be understood quickly and easily. In the context of Palestine, this results in coverage of violence and its aftermath, demonstrations and funerals, and, occasionally, the Wall. Gaza has remained the dominant news item from the Occupied Territories since Israel’s evacuation of settlements there in 2005. In fact, as this book will show, this suits Israel as it takes the world’s eye off Israel’s policies of annexation, imprisonment and ethnic cleansing in the West Bank. The reality is that the effects of many of Israel’s policies in the West Bank are seen at an individual level – a family loses its land or decides it is time to emigrate, a business closes or a young man is put in prison. None of these events are in themselves newsworthy but together when repeated in large numbers they have a very real effect. Analysis of such effect is, however, impossible in a two-minute news item and therefore coverage does not reach the general public and is limited to the area of special interest news, where the target audience is those who often already have some level of consciousness of the situation.

Finally, I think too much trust is often given to journalistic reports. In the world of modern media, when deadlines are tight and budgets are strained, media organizations are in a weaker position to verify the accuracy of the reports they run. Some organizations retain very high standards whereas others take less care. As a small example, I spent
Busy commuter road in East Jerusalem. The tri-lingual sign belies the fact that the road is off-limits to the 90% of West Bank Palestinians who do not have Jerusalem residency status.
Christmas Eve 2006 in Bethlehem and was interested to see a piece on its desperate situation on a major American news network that evening. It stated that only one solitary tourist visited the Nativity Church grotto that day. This was news to me as I had to scrum down with a coach load of Filipinos to get in. I spoke to my hotel proprietor who was also featured and he said the TV crew had actually visited the previous week. The story was in essence true – I met more journalists than tourists there – but the TV crew had manipulated the facts to add drama to its story.

Anti-semitism and the Holocaust

Anti-semitism is a hatred of Jews as a race which in modern times has most horrifically found its expression in Europe, not the Middle East. There is, of course, a great deal of hostility towards Jews in the Arab world but this was triggered and fomented by the mass immigration of Jews into Palestine, the creation of Israel and Israel’s subsequent treatment of the Palestinians. Islam in fact has a far better record of tolerating other religions than Christianity. For centuries prior to 1900, Muslim and Christian Arabs, and Jews, lived side by side under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, often worshipping together at the same shrines. Unfortunately, the emigration to Israel of whole populations of Jews from Arab states in which they had lived for centuries helped to polarize Arabs and Jews. The exploitation of the Palestinian issue by leaders of Muslim states (most recently President Ahmadinejad of Iran) for their own ends has further widened this divide and encouraged a hatred of Jews amongst their people. In contrast however, Palestinians are among the most educated of Arab peoples, and most are careful to distinguish the actions of the Israeli government, the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) and settlers from ordinary Jewish Israelis. Any hatred they bear is born out of the regime which oppresses them.

One risks the accusation of pedantry if one points out that Arabs are semitic too. However, this is important, even though the term is linguistic and not racial in origin. Israel is pursuing a policy of separation and differentiation from the Palestinians on the basis that Jews and Arabs cannot live together. However, prior to the first intifada, a widescale and largely non-violent uprising against Israeli occupation between 1987 and 1991, huge numbers of Palestinians in the West Bank were employed in Israel. The infrastructure of Israel, including many settlements, was built with Palestinian labour. The relationship was the colonial model of master and servant but the peoples coexisted. Hebrew is very similar to Arabic and so many Palestinians are bilingual. Indeed, a Palestinian recently went so far as to say to me: “Arabs and Jews, we are the same.”

The Palestinians’ desire for a state stems not from a deep sense of nationalism but a desire to control their own destiny. Arabs in general do not have a strong allegiance to their states. In part this is because the boundaries of these states were arbitrarily drawn
by the British and French governments and because their inhabitants have been denied democratic government. However, it is also because, for most Arabs, their God and their family are their primary sources of obligation. Of course, many Palestinian refugees would prefer it if Israel did not exist, as they could then return to the land on which they or their fathers were born. However, it does exist and most Palestinians accept its permanence. What they truly desire is to be treated fairly – for Jews and Arabs to be allowed the same access to land, to water, to life.

In contrast, Zionism, the philosophy behind the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, was, and Israel remains, heavily influenced by the philosophy of nationalism and racial purity prevalent in central and eastern Europe in the early twentieth century and which ultimately found horrific expression in Nazi Germany. Anti-Semitism was seen by some in the Zionist movement as a natural consequence of the mixing of races. The obvious solution was to create a national entity exclusively for Jews. It also offered an opportunity to maintain Jewish culture which was under threat from increasing secularization of Jews in western society. While the doctrine of racial purity was defeated in Europe intellectually and physically by the Allies in World War II (although it reappeared in the Balkans late in the century), it is perpetuated in Israel, “the Jewish state”. Palestinians with Israeli citizenship remain second-class citizens within Israel, tolerated in the absence of any other solution.

The Zionist mission to colonize Palestine was well under way before World War II, the first meeting of the World Zionist Organization taking place in 1897. However, following the creation of Israel the Holocaust became Zionism’s justification and a bulwark against criticism of its actions. The Holocaust has been described by some commentators as the state religion because of its all pervading effect on Israeli society. It is not uncommon, however, for Palestinians to deny the Holocaust took place or at least question the numbers killed. This reflects badly upon them. It should be remembered though that it was Europeans and not Arabs who committed the atrocities and many Palestinians feel that they are paying the price for Europe’s crime. The history of the Holocaust is embedded in Western society and reinforced by education, media and Hollywood. It is not therefore surprising that people living on a different continent without such influences, many of whom have access only to state-controlled media, should have a much lower level of consciousness. Also, it is perhaps understandable that there is a degree of suspicion and disbelief given Israel’s lack of concern in violating the very laws established to try to prevent atrocities of the type committed against the Jews by the Nazis. To Palestinians it seems manifestly unjust that their oppressor should be granted such a trump card, enabling it to influence western governments and silence criticism of its actions against them. As one Palestinian said to me, “You can’t expect someone who has had the shit kicked out of him to have sympathy for his attacker.”
Young Palestinian boy learning to walk, with the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa mosque in the background, East Jerusalem.

The 7th-century Al-Aqsa mosque is the third most holy mosque in the world. The first two are in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, making Jerusalem the second most important city for Muslims. The Dome and Al-Aqsa mosque are built on the Haram al-Sharif, known to Jews as Temple Mount because it is believed to be the site of the temple of Solomon, King of Israel and son of David. The Second (and last) Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD.
Introduction

Israel occupied the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip (as well as the Syrian Golan Heights and part of the Sinai peninsula) during the Six Day War between 5th and 10th June 1967. This event is known by Palestinians as the naksa. Forty years on, with the exception of the Sinai lands which were returned to Egypt under the 1978 Camp David Accords, Israel retains control of these territories. The occupation of the West Bank and Gaza (the “Occupied Territories”) was recognized as illegal by the United Nations in Security Council Resolution 242 in November 1967 and, over the years, the international community, led by the US, has sought to reach a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians. However, the latest “peace process” has long since stalled and a Palestinian state now looks further away than ever. Western politicians still stick to the mantra of a two-state solution incorporating a viable Palestinian state, but have events on the ground overtaken diplomacy? Has Israel won the war and ended any possibility of Palestinian nationhood?

Palestine is a geographical area incorporating Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, bounded by the River Jordan to the east, the Mediterranean Sea to the west, Sinai to the south and, less distinctly, Syria and Lebanon to the north. I use the word “Palestine” in this book when referring to the area which comprises Israel and the West Bank, which should not be confused with the areas of the West Bank for which the Palestinian Authority currently has responsibility. The name Palestine was first applied to the general area by the Romans but more specifically to the territory described above by the Arab rulers in the seventh century. It was recognized as a distinct political unit by the League of Nations in 1923 following Great Britain’s appointment as mandatory power (the governing authority). In 1947 the United Nations voted to divide Palestine into Jewish and Arab states, with Jerusalem to be placed under international stewardship. On the cessation of the British mandate in May 1948, the Jewish leader, David Ben Gurion, declared independence and Israel was born. During the fighting which followed, known as the 1948 War, Israel annexed territory allocated to the Arab state and West Jerusalem, increasing its share of Palestine from 56% to 78%. The remaining 22%, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, fell under the control of Jordan and Egypt respectively, depriving the Palestinians of an independent state. However, despite this division and the forced flight of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in 1948 from their lands, and Israel’s separation of the two peoples by its system of walls and other barriers, Palestine remains economically and geographically a distinct unit. Over a million Palestinians remain within Israeli borders and hold Israeli citizenship while Israel’s policies in the West Bank since
occupation have served to integrate much of its land (but not its 2.5 million people) within the state of Israel. In Palestinian hearts, Palestine is indivisible. Similarly, most Jewish Israelis consider the West Bank to be an integral part of the state of Israel.

Much has been made of Israel’s 2005 “withdrawal” from the Gaza Strip. This has been a masterpiece of public relations work by the Israeli government, which has made full use of the media to publicize its “concessions”. Reality is somewhat different. Gaza is a barren place with little water and a population of 1.4 million Palestinians, 75% of whom are refugees. It makes up only 5.8% of the total land mass of the Occupied Territories, the remainder being the West Bank. It was a headache for the Israeli government. The number of soldiers getting killed in attacks by Palestinians in defending only 8,000 settlers presented a political problem. By withdrawing behind the walls it has erected around Gaza it can claim it is no longer in occupation while still controlling Gaza’s borders and attacking targets in Gaza from within its own borders and from the air. Meanwhile, Israel has increased the pace of settlement building in the West Bank and has taken the opportunity to complete the Wall while western politicians’ and the media’s attention has been distracted. Between January and September 2005, around 11,000 new settlers arrived in the West Bank and in July 2005 alone, Israel seized more land in the West Bank than it surrendered in Gaza. Indeed, Ariel Sharon justified the withdrawal to his people on the basis that the world would permit Israel to retain its settlements in the West Bank if it removed those in Gaza.

Although the West Bank remains the real battlefield in the Palestinian struggle for a state, this is only in a figurative sense. The relationship between Israel and the Palestinians is often described as a “conflict”, a term I too use from time to time for want of a more accurate one. However, this is misleading as it implies two distinct entities with the means to sustain armed action. The correct legal relationship is one of occupation. In practice, it has been colonial while increasingly it is becoming one of apartheid. In physical terms, Israel is holding down an unwilling population that, by various methods, violent and non-violent, and with massively inferior resources, has resisted such subjugation from within the de facto borders of Israel.

The most recent national manifestation of Palestinian resistance, the second intifada, is now over. West Bank Palestinians are tired and the vast majority just wish to be left alone to live their lives in peace. The armed struggle has ended, or is at least in abeyance, awaiting a new generation of resistance. The grip that Israel has over the West Bank is total and unrelenting. The Wall, which has greedily devoured Palestinian land and isolated Palestinian communities, is the most obvious manifestation of this power but Israel’s hold extends to every aspect of life – movement, religious worship, land use, business, the environment, health, education and marriage. The daily humiliations and
degrading treatment seem calculated to drive Palestinians out of the West Bank, deprive them of their identity and remove any possibility of a Palestinian state. The tragedy is that this policy is succeeding.

With the tacit approval of the US government, illegal settlement building, accelerated greatly since the mid 1990s, has populated the West Bank with approximately 450,000 Israelis, 180,000 of these in East Jerusalem. Through settlements, road networks and other confiscated and closed areas, Israel controls large areas of the West Bank and many Israeli politicians strive for much more. The enormous settlements of Ariel and Ma’ale Adumim stretch into the West Bank like great fingers dividing it into three. The Israeli road network which links settlements with each other and Israel splinters the land that remains, imprisoning the Palestinians within ever-shrinking enclaves. The word “prison” is used regularly in this book to describe the areas within which West Bank Palestinians are being confined. This is partly because it is accurate but also because it is the word Palestinians on the ground themselves use most frequently to describe their situation.

Israel has successfully manoeuvred the media into accepting that the Wall – which in places cuts 24 miles across the Green Line (the 1948 armistice line and Israel’s internationally accepted eastern border) into the West Bank – will constitute the new border between Israel and a Palestinian state. It is widely assumed that the great powers are simply waiting for Israel to complete the Wall before giving their blessing to a two-state solution dictated by its path, thereby permitting Israel to annex 10% of the West Bank including East Jerusalem. This is complacency in the extreme. Since 1967 Israeli governments have held a consistent policy towards the West Bank based on the Allon Plan of that year. The policy dictates that Israel must secure and maintain under its control large swathes of West Bank land. The reality is that the Israeli military and settler presence in the West Bank is deeply embedded. A new, invisible wall is rising in the Jordan Valley. It is clear that Israel intends to annex at an absolute minimum the 40% of the West Bank which it already directly controls while maintaining indirect control of the remainder.

The Israeli government believes that the US’s involvement in Iraq and its favourable administration have given it a window of opportunity in which it can ensure its annexation of these areas, and possibly enforce a “settlement” which the international community will endorse, and which will remove the Palestinian cause from the world agenda for the foreseeable future. The speed with which Israel is implementing its unilateral settlement is frightening. The Wall is all but complete. Palestinian land is being devoured and its population being cleansed as I write. International law is flouted at every turn. War crimes abound. Meanwhile, the world turns its back.
Destroying the Two-State Solution

**A** Pre-1948
100% of Historic Palestine

**B** 1947 UN Partition Plan
48% of Historic Palestine

**C** 1967 Pre-Occupation Border
22% of Historic Palestine

**D** The Wall (2004)
12% of Historic Palestine

- **Palestine**
- **Israel**
- **Proposed international zone incorporating Jerusalem and Bethlehem**
A problem of our making

Britain and the US are largely responsible for the situation which the Palestinians find themselves in. One cannot blame individual citizens of these countries for the mistakes and broken promises of their predecessors or perhaps even for the foreign policy decisions of the governments which they themselves elect. I believe they do, however, have a collective, moral responsibility to attempt to address the consequences of these actions and omissions where they are still being felt today. Although the two powers’ history in the Middle East is widely understood and resented in the Arab world, it is less well known in the West. I will therefore briefly set it out.

Prior to World War I, Arabia (including Palestine) was part of the ailing Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman government allied with Germany during the war, thus presenting a threat to Great Britain’s strategic interests in Suez and the Gulf. The British therefore approached Sharif Hussein, an Arab leader, to determine which side the Ottoman Empire’s Arab subjects would support. Several promises of support for the Arabs were made, culminating in a letter from the British High Commissioner in Egypt in October 1915 pledging British support for Arab independence. Several areas were excluded from this commitment but not Palestine. Consequently, the Arabs allied with the British and instigated the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans (1916–18). Britain, however, was also negotiating with France, resulting in the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 whereby the two countries secretly agreed to partition the Middle East between them, leaving only the area comprising present-day Saudi Arabia and North Yemen independent.

Compounding this betrayal, in 1917 the British foreign secretary issued a letter, the Balfour Declaration, to a leading British Zionist Jew stating that his government viewed “with favour the establishment in Palestine of a National Home for the Jewish people, and [would] use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object”. This was despite the presence of a massive Arab majority in Palestine. In 1922 the British census revealed there were only 84,000 Jews in Palestine compared with 670,000 Palestinians. However, the members of the British government saw a strategic interest in a Jewish Palestine annexed to the British Empire and were also sympathetic to the Zionist cause. Herbert Samuel, a Jew, first proposed it but many of the non-Jews in the government saw the return of the Jews to Zion as a romantic fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. They also wanted the support of world Jewry and believed that the Zionist project would help to maintain US interest in World War I. Jews were also viewed as part of western civilization whereas the Arabs were seen as a subject race. While the Balfour Declaration is a footnote in British history, it set in motion a chain of events resulting in the creation of Israel, Palestinian dispossession, exile and subjugation, and the Israeli-Palestinian troubles.

A further declaration in November 1918 stated that the British and French
governments were committed to establishing essentially democratic, self-governing nations in the Middle East even though they had no intention of honouring this. In March 1920 the General Syrian Congress, an elected body, proclaimed the independence of Syria and Palestine. Britain and France then rushed to convene the League of Nations, which rejected the declaration and divided the area into mandates including a British-controlled Palestinian mandate which carried with it an obligation to enforce the Balfour Declaration. Britain had not only broken its repeated promises of independence to the Arabs but committed to the Palestinians’ ultimate subjugation to Jewish rule.

While running the mandate, British policy towards Jewish immigration varied from time to time. However, by its cessation in 1948 Britain had allowed the Jewish population in Palestine to increase to roughly 600,000. Britain permitted the Jews to build the mechanisms of a state within the mandate including an elected body raising taxes, and an underground army. They also engaged Jewish forces in putting down the Arab Revolt of 1936 to 1938. In a white paper in 1938, to pacify the Palestinians during World War II, the British government promised to limit Jewish immigration and move towards the establishment of a Palestinian state within ten years. However, by the end of the war Britain had lost control of events and the creation of Israel had become inevitable.

This did not, however, absolve them from all responsibility for the mandate. Britain had announced, in September 1947, its intention to give up the mandate on 15 May 1948. In the month and a half before withdrawal, Britain took no responsibility for enforcement of law and order. While perhaps reasonable in the context of a withdrawal, the fact that British forces failed to intervene to stop Jewish forces committing acts of ethnic cleansing is shameful. Infamously, the British commander in Haifa withdrew his forces from a buffer zone between the two communities and allowed the Jewish Carmeli Brigade to put to flight most of its 55,000 remaining Palestinian inhabitants. In some instances they provided positive assistance to Jewish forces, giving them valuable documents, and in one case even disarmed Palestinians, promising to protect them, and then failed to do so.

As a fledgling state, surrounded by hostile Arab countries and engaged in frequent wars against them, Israel’s survival was perhaps not always certain. However, with support from the US, it has now developed its military capabilities to the point where it is the fifth mightiest military power in the world. Aided by the US, Britain and France it has developed nuclear weapons and is today the fourth largest nuclear power. It also benefits from secure peace treaties with two of its former enemies, Egypt and Jordan. The fact is that Israel is now secure and has been since the 1970s.

Israel still, however, plays the vulnerability card. It encourages the view that Arabs wish to see it driven into the sea to help it garner support in the West and justify its actions against Palestinians. Since the 1970s the US has responded wholeheartedly and
supported Israel unwaveringly. Since 1982, it has vetoed 32 UN Security Council Resolutions critical of Israel, more than the total number of vetoes cast by all the other Security Council members put together. Meanwhile the US gives between US$3 and US$5 billion in “aid” to Israel every year, more than it gives to all of sub-Saharan Africa. Much of it is in the form of state-of-the-art weapons, for example, Apache helicopters, which are used against the Palestinians. The US has also failed to operate as an honest broker in negotiations with the Palestinians, consistently aligning itself with Israel.

The Jewish lobby in the US is so sophisticated that it has succeeded in emasculating Congress with respect to Israeli-related issues. The American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) is acknowledged as one of the most effective lobbies in Washington, keeping records of all statements on the Middle East made by Congress members and prospective candidates. It counters fiercely any comments which could be seen as pro-Palestinian or anti-Israeli through its media contacts. There are hundreds of smaller pro-Israeli groups which mount letter-writing campaigns in response to such comments and contribute funds to candidates seeking election to seats held by Congress members who dare make such comments. The majority therefore keep quiet even though there is increasing understanding of the validity of the Palestinian cause. AIPAC’s influence extends into other areas of American life, particularly universities. It has worked to establish pro-Israeli groups which protest against tutors and speakers who it perceives as expressing pro-Palestinian views. Even American Jews are targeted. Zionism has become an article of faith and it is considered heresy to dissent. In essence, the lobby’s purpose is to make the expression of pro-Palestinian views in American society unacceptable and ease Israel’s interests by, for example, encouraging US aid.

This influence extended to the Oval Office even before Israel was created. President Truman was advised by his military and diplomatic aides to delay recognition of Israel in 1948 until the Arab states could be consulted but he rejected their advice, instead acting on the recommendation of a close pro-Zionist, Jewish friend, fearing a backlash from Jewish Americans. Jews and evangelical Christians (who support Zionism because they see the return of Jews to Israel biblically as a precursor of the Day of Judgement) make up only 20% of voters but they have a disproportionate effect in elections because of their high contribution and turnout levels. The Washington Post once estimated that democratic presidential candidates depend on Jewish supporters to supply as much as 60% of their campaign money. This influence was felt again in 1967 when President Johnson accepted Israel’s argument that it should be allowed to keep the West Bank as a bargaining chip. The extent of Israeli influence is shown by the lengths to which that administration went to in order to cover up Israel’s attack on the USS Liberty during the Six Day War.

In Britain, with restrictions on large donations and prohibition of foreign funding, the
relatively wealthy Jewish community is a valuable source of funding for political parties. The minister for the Middle East, Kim Howells, used to be the Chairman of Labour Friends of Israel. Lord Levy, formerly the Labour Party’s chief fundraiser and Middle East envoy, happens to be Jewish. At the 2006 Conservative Friends of Israel (CFI) fringe meeting at the Conservative Party Conference, both the leader, David Cameron, and the shadow defence secretary gave speeches thanking the group for its support. A director of CFI recently claimed that over 80% of the Conservative parliamentary party were members. Unfortunately short-term political expediency is always likely to win out over worthy long-term initiatives.

Up until the current suspension of aid, European governments have continually assuaged their guilt by pumping aid money into the West Bank to support Palestinians, but by doing so they have relieved Israel of its obligations to provide support to Palestinians under the Geneva Convention. At the same time they license the sale of arms to Israel which are used against Palestinians, and buy Israeli weapons. When Israel destroys the buildings they fund, no action is taken. The EU continues to allow the import of Israeli goods under a treaty which permits the imposition of sanctions against Israel in the event of human rights breaches. War crimes legislation positively obliges countries to seek out and prosecute perpetrators but these obligations are ignored.

Despite George W. Bush’s commitment to a Palestinian state made in June 2002, under his administration US foreign policy in the Middle East has more heavily than ever been influenced by Israel. Israel has implicitly been given the green light to implement its unilateral solution in the West Bank. Impossible preconditions to talks and aid are required of the Hamas government whereas Israel’s actions and omissions go unquestioned. By supplying weapons to Fatah groups and planning a package of support to that party worth US$86 million, the US government has been working to overthrow Hamas, subverting the democratic process and risking the outbreak of a Palestinian civil war. The International Court of Justice’s ruling against Israel’s routing of the Wall and continuing occupation, issued in July 2004, has been ignored. Meanwhile, George Bush has undermined international law and forty years of UN resolutions, negotiated agreements and international pressure regarding Israeli settlement of the West Bank by recognizing “new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli population centers”. The European Union, Russia and even the UN have continued to acquiesce to the US approach.

It is not surprising that Palestinians feel they have been consistently betrayed by the West.
Israeli checkpoint at Al-Khadr between East Jerusalem and Hebron