

## Walls come tumbling down but not in Palestine

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FIFTEEN years ago in 1989, one of the world's most infamous wall was torn down. Brought about by a tidal wave of democracy sweeping throughout Germany, the borders between West and East Germany were forced opened, literally through the cracks in the Berlin Wall.

Erected on the night in August 1961, the barricade of barbed wires and cinder blocks was later replaced by a series of concrete walls of up to five metres high, guarded buy watchtowers, gun emplacements and mines.

In the 1980s, the system of walls, electrified fences, and fortifications divided not only the city of Berlin but extended a further 120km around West Berlin.

Access between the two countries was totally closed.

The Berlin Wall, in a sense, epitomised the metaphor "Iron Curtain", a term made prominent by Sir Winston Churchill, the then British Prime Minister in 1946, referring to the one-party rule in the communist bloc in Eastern Europe.

Post-1990 had marked the collapse of the Iron Curtain.

Today, there are still many other such metaphorical walls standing. They symbolise injustice, discrimination and occupation sponsored and sustained by great military might.

One such existing "wall" stands in Palestine, erected through the Balfour Declaration (named after the then British Foreign Secretary) of 1917, which promised a national home for the Zionists in the Middle East.

Although it specifically stipulated that "nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine", the declaration was in fact issued with disregard to the interests of the majority of the Arabs.

Effectively, the foundation of a wall was already laid down by colonial Britain, as documented by the British-based *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2004 (EB, 2004).

And one is amazed at the level of manipulation that has gone in erecting and sustaining this inhuman barrier until today.

Foremost, it was noted that the declaration did not come about through an act of generosity or stirrings of conscience over the bitter fate of the Jewish people.

It was a self-centred strategy meant, in part, to prompt American Jews to exercise their influence in moving the US Government to support British post-war policies.

At the same time, this encouraged Russian Jews to keep their nation fighting.

The British Government was actually interested in rallying Jewish opinion, especially in the US, to the side of the Allies and that of a pro-British Jewish population in Palestine to help protect the approaches to the Suez Canal in neighbouring Egypt.

Thus, even when there were protests from many quarters in Palestine rejecting the Balfour Declaration, it was endorsed by the principal Allied powers. This was included in the British mandate over Palestine, approved by the League of Nations on July 24, 1922.

Though the British in Palestine throughout the 1920s had apparently showed sympathy to the Palestinian Arabs, the British Government in London favoured the Zionists.

In fact, by July 1920, a civilian administration instituted under a Zionist as the first high commissioner, set a quota of 16,500 Jewish immigrants for the first year.

Indeed, between 1919 and 1921, more than 18,000 Jewish immigrants arrived and purchased land leading to the eviction of Arab peasants (fellahin). The rest is history.

In May 1939 the British Government altered its policy in a White Paper recommending a limit of 75,000 further immigrants and an end to immigration by 1944.

But this was ignored and the estimated number of Arabs displaced from their ancestral homes, villages, and neighbourhoods during the period from December 1947 to January 1949 alone was estimated to be between 520,000 and about 1,000,000 (EB, 2004).

In addition, some 276,000 moved to the West Bank; by 1949 more than half the pre-war Arab population of Palestine lived in the West Bank (from 400,000 in 1947 to more than 700,000). Between 160,000 and 190,000 fled to the Gaza Strip.

More than 20 per cent of Palestinian Arabs left Palestine, including about 100,000 who went to Lebanon, 100,000 to Jordan, between 75,000 and 90,000 to Syria, 7,000 to 10,000 to Egypt, and 4,000 to Iraq.

Meanwhile, the Zionist homeland continued to consolidate itself in terms of urban, agricultural, social, cultural, and industrial development.

Large amounts of land continued to be purchased from Arab owners, who often were absentee landlords.

Although the majority of the Jewish population was urban, the number of rural Zionist colonies continued to increase.

Between 1922 and 1940, for example, their landholdings had risen from about 60,100 to 155,200 hectares and constituted about one-seventh the cultivatable land.

The population, too, grew from 83,790 to 467,000, or nearly one-third of a total population of about 1,528,000.

Places such as Tel Aviv turned into an all-Jewish city of 150,000 inhabitants.

By the time the British forces left the area in May 1948, the existence of a Zionist State, called Israel, was declared in part of Palestine.

It is, therefore, not surprising that, of late, a physical wall is being erected by the Zionist, amidst world condemnation.

"The wall being constructed in the Palestinian occupied territories represents separation, leading to discrimination," argued a chief counsel for the Arab League on the final day of the hearings, at the International Court of Justice in The Hague.

The wall is yet another construction arising from the first mental barricade conceived under the Balfour Declaration of 1917.

In such a situation, peace in Middle East will remain stoned-walled for a long time to come.

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