



REUTERS
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STUDY of
JOURNALISM

Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper
University of Oxford

**British Press Coverage of the Palestinian Refugee
Crisis: 61 years of history**

by Firas Khatib

Hilary and Trinity Term 2009

Sponsor: Gerda Henkel

Acknowledgements

First and foremost my gratitude goes to Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism for this once in a life time opportunity; I gained considerable experience both personally and professionally. I am also indebted to the Gerda Henkel Foundation for without this funding I would not have been able to take up this valuable opportunity.

I wish to thank everyone in the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, especially David Levy for the continued valuable advice and assistance as well as hospitality. I am extremely grateful to James Painter for his guidance, encouragement and feedback. Thanks are also due to Rima Dapous and John Lloyd.

This paper could not have been written without David Hirsh who not only served as my supervisor but also encouraged and challenged me throughout my academic program. The meetings and discussion were always stimulating and motivating.

I am indebted to Daphna Baram for her kindness and willingness, and her book which was especially helpful in writing this thesis.

Thanks are also due to Kate Hanneford-Smith and Alex Reid from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Last but not least, I extend my deepest gratitude to my fellows for their comradeship and for making this experience a success on a personal and professional level. I thank them all.

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Introduction

The current research focuses on the British media's coverage (primarily *The Guardian* and *The Times*) of the events of the Arab-Israeli conflict of 1948. It especially concentrates on the impact of the conflict on the Palestinian refugee issue, which started in this year, and remains unresolved today. Indeed, the refugee crisis is widely considered one of the most intractable and thorny elements of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

The research materials are based on British newspaper archives, and focus on editorials and reports from correspondents that specifically deal with the Palestinian refugee issue, while taking into consideration the political context that prevailed in the Middle East region. The research accompanies the evolution of the issue in the media from 1948, through to the 1960s, and explores some of the shifts that occurred in the coverage of the refugee crisis by the two newspapers. It also examines press reports and the events that took place behind the scenes at the newspapers in the light of the more technical aspects of the newspaper business, in terms of structure, design and working methods.

In addition to the archives, the research draws on a large number of quotations from the many books that have been written about these events, as well as books on the history of the British media.

Historical Background

The position pre-1948

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict has now entered its 61st year. Of course, as conflicts gain in age, new facts impose themselves over the years, adding to their complexity. This is precisely what has occurred in the case of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which grows ever more intricate on a daily basis, to the point that many view it as the most “intractable” of conflicts.

The background to the conflict is long and convoluted, and dates back to the aftermath of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Britain and France ruled this region, and for 28 years (1920-1948) ‘Historic Palestine’, comprising the State of Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, was

subjected to the British Mandate. Indeed, the key features of the conflict had already taken shape before 1948, with the rising influence of the Zionist Movement, in particular, and growing Jewish immigration to Palestine, which the Zionist Movement considered as *Eretz Israel* (the Land of Israel). Tensions flared up in 1917, when British Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour sent a letter to Zionist leader Baron de Rothschild that contained a pledge to the Jews to establish "a national home in Palestine", something to which the Arabs in Palestine stood vehemently opposed. The letter was to become a historical document, officially known as 'The Balfour Declaration'; the Arabs, however, refer to it as the "ominous promise". However, a group of historians, most prominently the Israeli historian Tom Segev, have argued that Britain promised the same land to the Arabs and the Jews.

During the Second World War, the immigration of European Jews to Palestine continued to rise, and with the approach of 1947, they accounted for 33 percent of the population. The United Nations General Assembly, based on previously conducted research, decided that the solution lay in the end of the British Mandate and the division (partition) of Palestine between the Arabs and the Jews. On November 29th, 1947, the General Assembly adopted Resolution 181. 33 states voted for the resolution and 13 against it, while 10 states abstained and one remained absent. The partition plan awarded 56.5 percent of the land to the Jewish group (who originally owned 7 percent of the land and constituted 33 percent of the population), and 47.5 percent to the Arabs, who at that time made up 63 percent of the population. It should be noted that the Arab League opposed the partition plan, while it was welcomed by the Jewish Agency, although some on the political right were against it, first and foremost Menachem Begin (a member of the *Etsel* paramilitary organization who was wanted on charges of terrorism against Britain; in 1977 he became Prime Minister of Israel). Begin and his followers considered "the entire land of Palestine the eternal property of the Jews".¹

These diverging positions led to a worsening of the situation; tensions mounted and war broke out between the Arab and Zionist armies. The war was brought to an end in 1948 by the

¹ Israeli Daat Website(Hebrew), www.daat.ac.il

declaration of the 'State of Israel', this comprising over 70 percent of the land that was previously Palestine. Jerusalem and the West Bank were annexed to Jordan, and the Gaza Strip to Egypt. The war wreaked massive destruction. Arabs and Israelis were killed. Hundreds of Palestinian villages were destroyed by the Zionist armies (Jewish forces) in their entirety which led to the creation of one of the main issues of conflict in the region: the Palestinian refugee issue.

The position post the 1948-war

Although the War ended officially in 1948 with the proclamation of the "State of Israel", the conflict did not end at this point in time, but rather took on a different format and has in many senses underpinned all the subsequent conflicts in the region. The situation was further aggravated by the arrival of a "new player" (Israel) that was "unacceptable" to the other states of the region, and with this the Middle East was divided into two camps.

As a result, a series of conflicts and wars ensued, further complicating the political picture. In 1956, Israel entered into an alliance with Britain and France against Egypt. The Six Days War broke out on June 4th, 1967, during which Israel successfully occupied the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Jerusalem and the Syrian Golan Heights. The War of October 1973 followed thereafter, during which Egypt, in cooperation with Syria, broke through the Bar-Lev Line and restored the Suez Canal, occupied by Israel in 1967, to Egyptian ownership. The conflict between Israel and the Palestinian factions intensified, and in 1982 the Lebanon War was prompted by the desire to expel the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) which was based in Lebanon at that time. Indeed, South Lebanon remained under Israeli occupation until the year 2000, when Israel implemented a unilateral withdrawal. The First Palestinian Intifada, or uprising, erupted in the Occupied Palestinian Territories in 1987, followed by the Second Intifada in 2000.

In 2002, Israel was subjected to a barrage of suicide attacks and strikes on civilian targets. The then Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, decided to launch Operation Defensive Shield, which was executed in 2002. In 2006, the Second Lebanon War broke out between the Israeli army and Hezbollah, and at the close of 2008, Israel launched Operation Cast Lead against the Gaza Strip.

These conflicts have kept the Middle East in the international press for decades, and despite the shifting roles, all of these wars arguably have an indirect connection to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and each has impacted in one way or another on the issue that continues to draw the world's attention today. In this context, it should be emphasized that the entry of each of these states into the conflict over the course of history has given political impetus to the Palestinian-Israeli issue, and made it into one of the most discussed issues in the world, particularly given that a resolution seems a remote prospect.

The Objectives of the Study

The focus of this study is on the beginnings of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which reached its height in 1948, and how it has been portrayed in the British print media. The decision to focus on the British press as a research subject was made for several reasons. First and foremost the importance of the British role in the Middle East, and the fact that 'Historic Palestine' was subject to the British Mandate, means that Britain has been a key player in the region. Secondly, the British press enjoys a prestigious status across the world and in the Middle East in particular. Additionally, the British press continues to dedicate articles and analysis to the conflict, which are cited in the Middle East and throughout the world.

There is a further, extremely important reason, for the focus of the current research, namely the ongoing debate on "the role of the British media" in the Middle East conflict. In past years, questions have been asked about the role of the British media in the region. Israeli journalist Daphna Baram has written a book that discusses the historical relationship between the British newspaper, *Disenchantment: The Guardian and Israel*. The book highlights the way in which the newspaper dealt with the founding of the State of Israel in the region. In addition, there is a debate between the two parties to the conflict over the position of the British media. This was revealed in the aftermath of Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, and the ensuing lengthy discussions that took place at seminars and intellectual gatherings, and again following the refusal of the BBC to broadcast an aid appeal for Gaza. The British media was at the heart of the Palestinian-

Israeli conflict, and the position adopted by the BBC sparked numerous debates among its supporters and opponents in the context of the war on Gaza.

This stance is expounded in a series of articles that focus on the leading role played by the British media in the Palestinian issue. This highlights the need to explore the past, and examine the stance of the media towards the refugee issue (which is also a political and humanitarian issue for the British print media), and review the positions taken by the media both at the time, and today, as the conflict enters its 61st year.

Delving into the midst of the British media and the way in which it portrays one of the world's most difficult and unresolved historical issues, is of crucial importance to viewing the conflict through "other eyes" that have grown more distant with the passage of the years. These newspapers have and continue to deploy correspondents to the Middle East, and political writers and analysts have written extensively about the region, and initiated a profound discussion on Britain's relation to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, of which Greg Philo and Mike Berry's book, *Bad News from Israel*, is a good case in point.

The investigation conducted into the role of the press does not only address the official position of newspapers, as expressed in editorials. A newspaper's identity and standpoint are not manifested only in their official stance, but also in the dynamics created by readers' letters, press reports, news articles and editorial opinions. The study considers two major British newspapers that have been, and continue to, follow the Middle East conflict closely: The Times and The Guardian (formerly The Manchester Guardian). Given that they follow the issues from different perspectives, the picture that emerges should be a more complete one.

The Palestinian Refugee Crisis

Today, the refugee question is one of the most complex issues of the entire Palestinian-Israeli conflict. All of the various Israeli governments that have come and gone over the past decades, right and left-wing alike, have categorically rejected the return of the Palestinian refugees to their towns and villages, despite UN General Assembly Resolution 194 of November 1948.

The issue of the Palestinian refugees is an integral part of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and its evolution over the course of sixty years. Therefore, if one is to formulate an opinion that is based on the historical facts that have characterised the region, it is first essential to understand fully the background to the issue and the way in which it has developed. For the refugee issue is not merely a detail, but lies at the very core of the Palestinian issue. It is a direct result of the conflict, and has accompanied all of its twists and turns.

Palestinian historians have chiefly preoccupied themselves with the refugee issue and the War of 1948, and not even Israeli historians from the political left and right deny the fact of its existence. However, they differ in their positions towards it. For instance, left-wing Israeli historian Ilan Pappé argues that what took place in Palestine amounted to ethnic cleansing, while another Israeli historian, Benny Morris, whose political stance has shifted to the right over the past nine years, states that while Palestinians were indeed displaced, this was unavoidable if there was to be a Jewish state.

The war that Palestine witnessed in 1948, the new reality it left in its wake, and the declaration of the State of Israel in the city of Tel Aviv on May 14th, 1948, directly resulted in the birth of the Palestinian refugee issue. The refugees have paid the highest price for the conflict. For while the world has grown accustomed to scenes of displaced persons and refugees returning to their towns and villages in conflict areas following the restoration of calm, this is not the situation with the Palestinian refugees. Even today, the Palestinian refugees have been banned from returning to those villages, which have become part of the State of Israel. In the meantime, their numbers have increased in the Diaspora, and their return 61 years later has become even more complicated. The popular Palestinian placards that portray the state of refugees frequently depict elderly men or women holding the key to a house that they locked, in the hope that they would one day return. However, in reality most of their houses, in more than 480 villages, have since been wiped out of existence.

Palestinians were first displaced prior to 1948, during the British Mandate of Palestine. According to a study by the Badil Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee

Rights, 150,000 Palestinians became refugees during the Mandate, mainly during the Great Palestinian Revolt of 1936 and the six-month general strike launched in protest against the “bias of the British authorities” towards Jewish immigration to Palestine.

However, the majority of the refugees, approximately 750,000 Palestinians, were displaced between the end of 1947 and mid-1949. There remained approximately 150,000 Palestinians within the borders of the modern State of Israel. Today they account for approximately 20 percent of its total population. Other data issued by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) at that time estimate that 726,000 Palestinians became refugees, while the official Israeli spokesperson put the figure much lower at 520,000.

Today, data published by the Badil Resource Center estimate the number of Palestinian refugees at close to 7 million people, among whom 4.6 million are registered with UNRWA (i.e. receive services from the agency). UNRWA states that 1.3 million refugees (of the 4.6 million who receive its services) live in 58 refugee camps sponsored by UNRWA in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria.²

How did the Refugee Crisis Arise?

The War of 1948 was preceded by sharp tensions that culminated with the publication of the UN Partition Resolution, and the British announcement that the Mandate would come to an end in May 1948. At that time tensions were clearly apparent between Arabs and Jews living in Palestine, notably after a rise in Jewish immigration from Europe. Thus, for example, in 1931 around 4,000 Jewish immigrants arrived in Palestine, a number that had increased to 9,500 by the following year, and reached 30,000 in 1933.

In early 1948, despite the presence of the British Mandate, the Jewish Agency was in administrative and military control of Palestine. The army of the Haganah was 35,000 strong, in

² Badil Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights: *Palestinian Refugees*, <http://www.badil.org/Refugees/refugees.htm>

addition to 10,000 commando unit fighters (the Palmah). Shortly before their withdrawal from Palestine, the British sold arms to the Zionist military forces, as well as 24 aircrafts, to the value of £5 million.³

These factors further inflamed tensions, and hostilities broke out during which both Arab and Jewish communities were attacked. Tensions particularly arose in mixed areas, and escalated over time. Israeli historian Ilan Pappé has uncovered the fact that the first attempt to "expel the Palestinians" took place on February 15th, 1948. In a documentary film by Al-Jazeera, Pappé states, "What the Zionist forces did was to target five villages along the coast, to find out if it would succeed, and they expelled the inhabitants of these five villages under the eyes of the British soldiers."

At this point, the Arab armies (of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan) decided to intervene. However, their entry into the war in May 1948 came too late to have a significant impact, and their forces were trounced (particularly after Britain and France imposed an embargo on selling arms to them).

With every passing day of the war, the number of refugees swelled. They included people who had actually been displaced, and others who had fled prior to the occupation of their town or village from fear of the hostilities. In an interview given by Israeli historian Benny Morris to the *Haaretz* newspaper (published on January 9th, 2004, on the cover of the weekly supplement) following the printing of a new edition of his book, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugees Problem*, Morris states:

“The Jewish state would not have come into being without the uprooting of 700,000 Palestinians. It was necessary to cleanse the hinterland and cleanse the border areas and cleanse the main roads. It was necessary to cleanse the villages from which our convoys and our settlements were fired on”.

³ Al Jazeera (Arabic), سحق الثورة - الجزء الثاني - النكبة - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WuBKtzi2Cos>

On December 11th, 1948, following the establishment of the State of Israel, the United National General Assembly adopted Resolution 194, which orders the return of the refugees to their homes. Article 11 of the Resolution:

“Resolves that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible.”

It should be noted that 61 years have now passed, and yet no one has returned. Israel appears not to acknowledge the issue, and states it is an Arab problem. The Arab states, meanwhile, insist that the resolution of the Palestinian refugee issue be included in any peace agreement with Israel.

The British Media Approach to Middle Eastern Reporting and the Palestinian Issue

The British Media in the 1940s

In the aftermath of the Second World War, in the late 1940s conducting empirical research on the Palestinian refugee issue within the pages of British newspapers required considerable effort, since the media at the time were totally different from their counterparts today. It is therefore necessary to gain an understanding of the dynamics of the British press and the political situation in 1948, in order to fully understand press attitudes at the time. A further difficulty is that there are few living witnesses to this era, as most of the influential journalists of the time have since died; a fact that impedes the search for information.

61 years ago the British press constituted the primary source of news for the general population, as this was prior to the widespread appearance of television, or electronic media. The newspaper headlines set the tone of the media debate, and there were much fewer: there were a small number of pages (both *The Times* and *The Manchester Guardian* contained only eight pages).

However, these few pages contained a large amount of content as there were only a few photographs. Furthermore, newspapers followed a policy of squeezing the greatest possible number of words on to the smallest possible amount of paper. They used correspondents whose names generally did not appear alongside the news stories, except in the form of dispatches “from our correspondent”, while the editorial and readers’ letters commenting on it constituted a space for a debate within the paper.

Advertising was very primitive in terms of structure and design, compared to today’s situation. In the 1940s there were no full-page advertisements, but there were a number of small announcements, such as births and deaths and other services printed on pages one and two, with the news not beginning until page three. However, over time, and in particular with the advent of the 1960s, newspaper advertising evolved and became increasingly prominent. The first page became the main page of the newspaper, and carried the main headline.

Despite the difficulties entailed in accessing information in the 1940s and earlier, British newspapers managed to cover Middle Eastern issues, and their correspondents were often posted in the conflict region. As a result, the Middle East in general and Palestine in particular had a strong presence in the British print media.

Today, one can argue that the historic presence of the issue of Palestine in British newspapers was attributable to British interests in the Arab East, and the fact that Palestine was under the British Mandate at the outbreak of war. However, it should be said that the region remains important to the British media today. Most, if not all, of the major British newspapers have correspondents and analysts posted in the Middle East. In addition, the BBC World Service has an Arabic department that receives an annual budget of £40 million.

British newspapers covered many of the pivotal events during the era of the British Mandate of Palestine, from the Balfour Declaration of 1917 to the “Great Arab Revolt of 1936” against the British Mandate. The British press also followed the passage of the Partition Plan by the General Assembly in 1947, and the Arab-Israeli War of 1948 at which time the refugee issue was

emerging. However, with the end of the war, the issue was transformed from a regular, familiar news item into a core issue in its own right. When the Israeli government formed, following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, it refused to allow the return of the Palestinian refugees to their homes, as is the norm after conflicts, and imposed military rule on the Arabs who remained. This latter group are known as the “1948 Palestinians”, whom the modern British media have come to refer to as “the Arabs of Israel.”

A full exploration of the question of how the British media covered of the issue of the Palestinian refugees involves investigating two important issues. The first of these is political, and the second relates to how politics was represented in the media at that time. It calls for careful scrutiny behind the scenes, and reading between the lines, as the media in general consists of a series of positions that are open to debate, analysis and study. Therefore we must be aware that we cannot today grasp the entire picture simply by scrutinizing a single news story or editorial. The subject of the Palestinian conflict was a key part of these debates and disagreements, and has sparked a great deal of controversy.

In 1948, The Times newspaper was divided into seven main sections: advertisements, news, editorial and readers’ letters, photograph galleries, people, business, and press reports. Palestine and Israel appeared in hundreds of pieces (within all sections) during the year 1948, including major and minor news stories, editorials, readers’ letters and reports. Since the newspaper reported on the daily unfolding of events in Palestine, and as the refugees who were displaced during the fighting were a part of the discussion, they appeared in passing in approximately 80 pieces, but figured prominently in only 14 (six news stories, seven letters to the editor, and one editorial) during the whole of 1948. This coverage does not amount to a strong presence, particularly given that the pages of the newspapers were extremely crammed and the headlines were small, including those that discussed the subject of the refugees. Moreover, The Times (and The Manchester Guardian) did not initially deal with it as an “issue”, until it took shape as one in early 1949.

In early August 1948, a shift occurred in the portrayal of the refugee issue as an outcome of the war. The provisional Israeli government that was established after the declaration of the founding of the State of Israel announced that it was not responsible for what happened to the refugees, and instead charged the Arab states that had entered the war with full responsibility. This announcement came despite the fact that the displacement of the refugees had started prior to the entry of the Arab Salvation Army into the war in mid May. The British press published this position.

The refugees were then transformed from a marginal news item to an issue in its own right. They were dealt with from two angles: humanitarian and political. Despite the convergence between the viewpoints of *The Manchester Guardian* and *The Times* on the issue of the refugees from a humanitarian perspective, it received only marginal direct political consideration. This was the case even after the publication of UN Resolution 194 of November 2nd, 1948, which called for the return of the refugees to their homes.

On August 9th, 1948, i.e. several months after the birth of the refugee issue, *The Times*, in its first and only editorial devoted to the subject, likened the situation of the refugees to the aftermath of natural disasters that had struck Japan and San Francisco. The editorial opened as follows:

“A human disaster comparable to the San Francisco, or Japanese earthquake tidal waves, and flood is the grim description of the plight of 300,000 helpless people, given by Sir Rafel Clinto after his six-day tour for the United Nation of the Arab refugee camps. They are faced with food shortages, with a risk of epidemic or disease and with terrible uncertainty as to whether they will be admitted again to their old homes. The provisional Government of Israel has a heavy responsibility in the eyes of the world for its part in bringing this about and for not seeking with all speed to help in repairing it”.

It also addressed the need to deal with the solution from a humanitarian perspective:

“The stream of Arab men, women, and children fleeing in terror from their little farms, their small businesses, and their humble homes in Zionist-controlled territory was first set in motion by Jewish attacks upon Haifa and Jaffa. It was quickened after the frightful massacre of non-combatants at Deir-Yasin, and it swelled into a torrent when the armies of Israel, heartened by victory, went over to the offensive.

Many people then feared that the creation of a Jewish state might mean injustice to the Arab inhabitants of the territories assigned to the Jews. The reply to these forebodings was that the Jewish people, themselves helpless victims of undeserved oppression throughout the centuries, would show to the world new standards of justice and generosity in their treatment of those who looked to them for protection. Yet the provisional Government has, so far, refused Count Bernadottes’s plea that the refugees should be resettled in their homes, and the effect of this refusal is much lessened by Mr. Shertok’s later statement that selected individuals might perhaps be readmitted to Israel on compassionate grounds.”

Of course, this editorial elicited strong responses from The Times’ British readers. They included those who expressed solidarity with the issue of the Palestinian refugees (including British Jews), as well as those who held responsible the Arab countries which had entered the war to confront the Israeli military forces at the close of the British Mandate.

It was the outpouring of letters and reactions from readers on the subject that kept the issue alive. Large numbers of British Jews used the readers’ letters section, in which they found a space for expression not only in The Times, but also in The Manchester Guardian. It is noteworthy that a number of readers would send the same letter to more than one newspaper. The section encompassed debates and discussions on the editorial position, news stories and the remainder of the newspaper’s content. However, Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular were absent from the readers’ letters. Their absence is attributable to their geographical distance and difficulties in communication. Newspapers

primarily relied on the postal service for obtaining their material from geographically distant locations. In this regard it should be noted that sending letters to newspapers was not customary among Arabs at the time. The practice evolved only later, in the 1960s, and grew in popularity specifically in the past few years following the establishment of solidarity groups in Europe, which have sought to gain influence by sending letters. Generally speaking, however, Arabs have had only limited experience in writing letters to newspapers, and have not used them as a means of exerting pressure on the media.

The following are excerpts from letters that were sent on the subject of the refugees:

- “As a Jew I cannot be indifferent to the terrible plight of the 300,000 Arab refugees, innocent victims for the most fighting of Palestine. Will not the Chief Rabbi of the British Empire make a public appeal to the provisional government of Israel to allow these unfortunate men, women and children to return to their homes? There is a general agreement that that is the only immediately practical step that can bring relief and prevent future tragedies.”⁴
- Many Jews will have read Mr. Lipson’s letter with unqualified sympathy and approval. Others will agree with Mr. Shertok that, “...in a state of war humanitarian and political considerations cannot be divorced. Even those to whom the letter view repugnant would do well to remember that in the case of Germany almost everybody felt like that not only in 1939 to 1945, but longer after. But Jews without exception should understand better than anybody what it means to be refugee: and that they should remain passive in face of the tragedy you described so powerfully in your leading article last Monday ought to be unthinkable, whatever view they may hold about the degree of the Jewish responsibility for it.”⁵

⁴ Daniel L Lipson, The Times, Wednesday, 11 August 1948, Page 5

⁵ Victor Golancz, The Times, Friday, 13 August 1948

- On May 12, King Abdulla charged the Arab Higher Committee with bringing misery to Palestine: the Arab League completed what the committee had begun. This mass flight was encouraged by the Arab states; it was not the wish of the Israeli government.”⁶

In the same month (August 17th, 1948, Page 4), The Manchester Guardian wrote an editorial entitled “More Refugees,” in which it explored the political significance of the refugee issue. It described the situation of the refugees, but also included an understanding of Israel’s position to prevent their return:

“It is almost intolerable that the effort to set up a Jewish state that refugees may at last have a home should result in a new wave of refugees actually more than all the Jewish refugees in Europe. It is true that many of these Arabs, who are mostly poor and ignorant people, need not have fled at all, and those who stayed in Israel have been well treated. But the Jewish attack on Jaffa and Haifa and the vicious raid at Deir Yasin spread terror among a credulous peasantry.

One can understand without approving the reluctance of the Israeli government to take these refugees back except as a part of a final peace settlement. But this does not relieve other nations from responsibilities toward them.”

After 1948, even though the refugee issue began to escalate and the crisis took on a more international character, the British press and The Manchester Guardian, in particular, did not call for the refugees’ return notwithstanding UN Resolution 194 (Right of Return). During that period, The Manchester Guardian stressed the need to find a ‘solution’ for the refugees, and internationalised the crisis involving the rest of the world when it stated, “But this does not relieve other nations from responsibilities toward them.”

⁶ Wyndhem Deede, The Times, Saturday, 14 August, 1948, p. 5

From these statements, we can discern the way in which the issues were approached from both the humanitarian and political perspectives, and the lessons of the past also remind us of similar debates taking place today. Thus, for example, during the recent events in Gaza, the BBC declined to broadcast a humanitarian appeal for Gaza because if the BBC had made such an appeal it could have been seen as pro-Palestinian.

The Impact of the British Political Stance on the Middle East, on the British Media Landscape

Political reality virtually always imposes its presence on the media landscape. This reality is not limited to Britain, but applies to all corners of the globe, and has remained constant over time. The era that gave birth to the Palestinian crisis, also contained the Second World War, which was almost immediately followed by the end of the British Mandate of Palestine, and was therefore heavily charged with political events. At this time, both the global and regional Middle Eastern arenas were politically complex, and this complexity was clearly reflected in the press coverage of news from the Middle East.

In 1945, the British Conservatives lost power for the first time since 1931. The relationship between the Conservative opposition and the government now heavily influenced political views of the Middle East. The Conservative press was especially furious over events in Palestine, particularly the operations carried out by the ‘Stern Gang’ against the British in Palestine. This underground paramilitary Zionist group, also referred to as the National Military Organization in Israel, was involved in a number of atrocities including the assassination of Lord Moyne in Cairo, the execution of two British policemen, and the strike on the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, which caused the deaths of 28 British soldiers, 41 Arabs and 17 Jews and injured many other people.⁷ This fury was reflected in the way in which the Conservative press covered the course of events in Palestine, as the Conservative media (The Daily Mail, The Daily Express,

⁷ For further information about bombing King’s David Hotel see: Rapport, D.C., *The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism*, in Cronin, A. K. and Ludes, J. M. (eds.), *Attacking Terrorism: Elements of a Grand Strategy*, Georgetown University Press, 2004, Washington, DC., pp. 50-51

The Times and The Daily Telegraph) adopted the position of the Conservative Party, as described by Harry Defries:

“The conservative press like the party had become increasingly intolerant of the actions of the Jews, particularly when some resorted to violence. The failure of the Labour government to both suppress this violence and formulate a policy leading to withdrawal was criticised by the conservative papers. The mood of the press was increasingly anti Jewish.”⁸

Even before events in Palestine escalated , there were two camps within the Conservative Party, one of which was pro-Zionist (the then British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, was among the pro-Zionists) and the other anti-Zionist. One of the most prominent anti-Zionists was discussed in Harry Defries’ book:

“Another MP who opposed Jewish immigration into Palestine was Major E. A. Harry Legge-Bourke, who had been elected in July 1945 to represent the Isle of Ely. He considers the Jews should never have been allowed to settle in Palestine and Britain should never have accepted the Mandate. He admitted that his views were fairly extreme because he said ‘I believe that Zionism is a menace to world peace’.”

Conversely, The Observer welcomed the birth of the State of Israel with a very positive coverage. The Observer made the following statement at the beginning of a Sunday news story following the declaration of the State of Israel, and after the entry of the Arab Salvation Army from the Arab states:

“The new Jewish state of Israel is facing its struggle for existence after the invasion of Palestine as the Mandate ended.”⁹

In that edition, the newspaper dedicated most of its front page to the issue, including a large photograph of British forces withdrawing from Palestine. It also published a lengthy

⁸ Harry Defries, *Conservative Party Attitudes to Jews, 1900-1950*, p. 198

⁹ The Observer, May 16, 1948

profile of the first Israeli Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, on page three, next to a large photograph (a rare occurrence at the time). The Manchester Guardian continued its support for Israel and urged the British government to recognise it in its editorial of August 3rd, 1948, writing:

“Sooner or later it will be necessary for the British Government to recognise the state of Israel. There are good reasons why recognition should be made soon”.

Among the reasons that were given for the need for coverage was the following:

"The exodus of the Arab refugees from Haifa and Jaffa, has eased the racial problem: many of the Arabs who remain appear to have accepted the situation."¹⁰

When probing the history of The Manchester Guardian, one must study a number of personalities who worked for the paper and who supported the Israeli or Zionist position. They helped shape the opinions of many journalists, including William Crozier, who was born in 1879 and died in 1944. In 1932 he was appointed editor of the Manchester Guardian, and has been described as followed:

“Crozier saw himself and his paper as a part of the Zionist effort. He was involved in the most intimate workings of the movement including the personal rivalries and petty wars of prestige.”

One key question is whether it can be argued that the relationship between the editor of The Guardian, and also his successor, or the position of the Conservatives towards developments in Palestine, led to the sparse coverage of the refugee issue, or the failure to create a popular debate? It is impossible to prove such a conclusion, because the issue of the Palestinian refugees is far too complex to be dealt with in so simplistic a manner.

The British press continued to follow the refugee issue, and underscored the need to “offer humanitarian assistance”. After covering the crisis for a relatively short period of time, both The

¹⁰ The Manchester Guardian, 3 August, 1948

Times and The Manchester Guardian began to support the settlement of the Palestinian refugees in the Arab world. The Times thought the UN resolution ordering their return to the areas that had come under the control of modern-day Israel to be “impractical”. In an editorial published on May 1st, 1949, The Times emphasised the difficulties facing the large numbers of refugees. However, in relation to their political rights and especially the right to return to their homes, the newspaper stated that it was “unfeasible,” despite UN Resolution 194.

“About 800,000 members of the Palestine Arab community – that is to say two-thirds of the Arab population are now homeless, landless, penniless and without means of livelihood, voluntary or involuntary refugees from the part of Palestine which the Jews have taken over.”

Adding:

“Israel has an unmistakable obligation to do everything in her power to help to undo the harm brought by her advances, but it is outside the capacity of Israel and the Arab states even acting together to carry the burden. The grievous need will last. If the mass destitution threatening the Middle East is to be averted, projects long recognised as necessary irrigation schemes in Iraq, the development of the Jordan valley, the more intensive cultivation of rich lands in north eastern Syria must be urgently pressed forward now.”

Another editorial stated that:

“Many of the refugees were once persons of substance, but their resources remain frozen in Israel. In principle the United Nations still support the demands of the Arab League that all the refugees are entitled to return to Israel if they wish to do so. This is no longer practical politics because of the states of affairs inside Israel, but so long as the Arab states for Israel is unwilling to release the funds and property which she holds.”¹¹

¹¹ The Times, Friday November 23rd, 1951, Issue 52166, col D, p.5

The refugee crisis did not disappear from the pages of The Manchester Guardian in 1948 or 1949. The paper continued to report on news and publish editorials, and in March 1949 it even published a caricature of David Ben-Gurion and Moshe Shertok looking behind them at the tragic state of the refugees and saying, “There yesterday, were we.” However, though present, coverage of the refugee issue remained fairly modest as other events in the world rose to prominence in the British media including the conflict between East and West, Communism in China (and the Far East), and a multitude of other issues.

The British Media Coverage of the Palestinian issue from the 1960s

In the 1960s, the press underwent a period of intense growth and could be said to be flourishing. The sections of trade advertisements improved, and for the first time full-page advertisements began to appear. Newspaper design evolved and was refined in a more legible formula. In the case of The Manchester Guardian, a significant shift took place when the word ‘Manchester’ was removed from its title, and the paper relocated to London, thereby confounding expectations of a merger with The Times. This shift was one of many that have occurred on the political and media landscapes over the past 61 years, as the arenas of the media and politics vary over time.

In the early 1960s, Palestinian solidarity organisations began to form in London and across Europe as a whole, and as a result the issue of the Palestinian refugees was raised more frequently in the British media. Humanitarian appeals were also published in British newspapers for aid to the Palestinian refugees, and naturally these organisations also strove to put the refugee issue on the agenda. During that period, and more specifically in 1964, over 16 years after the birth of the refugee crisis, Alistair Hetherington, the editor of The Guardian, wrote that Israel should aim to return the Palestinian refugees to their original homes. The article angered many of Israel’s supporters, in particular those among the paper’s own editors.

As a result Hetherington was described as follows:

“Alastair Hetherington was foreign editor and defense correspondent from 1953 to 1956 in the Manchester Guardian, and then became editor of The Guardian in 1956. His occasional diktats, particularly over Israel, caused disaffection and resignations.”¹²

Hetherington himself wrote:

“Return of the Jews in the Diaspora is a figurative term: they have not actually lived in Palestine before. But several hundred thousand Arabs also, like the Jews, refuse to forget what they consider to be their homeland. And for them it literally is their homeland: they were born and grew up there. “Return” of them, is no metaphor whatever caused them to leave the first place.”¹³

Adding that:

“The state of Israel was founded at their expense: if its population is to be enlarged they have the first claim to be admitted. Would not the inauguration of the Jordan waters scheme give the Israeli government the opportunity for a new approach: an expression of its willingness to do its best to comply with the resolution? This announcement could probably not be very specific at first but it would be an acknowledgement by Israel of its responsibility for the existence of the refugees and its duty to right its wrongs. Since those responsibilities that the Arab states may bear in addition- the offer would have to be unconditional too.”

Alistair Hetherington came under a serious attack after publishing these words, particularly for dealing with the humanitarian issue from a political perspective for the first time, and at a time when Israel did not recognize – and still does not recognize – its historical responsibility. Many Israeli leaders, politicians and intellectuals maintain that implementing the Right of Return of the Palestinian refugees implies “losing the Jewish majority in Israel.” However, the editor of The Guardian retracted his appeal shortly afterwards, and coverage of the Palestinian refugees’ issue

¹² Daphna Baram, *Disenchantment: The Guardian and Israel*, 2004, p. 262

¹³ Daphna Baram, *Disenchantment: The Guardian and Israel*, 2004, p.99

reverted to its former pattern. It was once again dealt with as a humanitarian issue, and the demand for their return to their homes was not reiterated.

In her book, *The Guardian and Israel*, Daphna Baram described the situation that prevailed following Hetherington's article, and how Terence Prittie¹⁴, a pro-Zionist member of The Guardian's editorial board, dealt with what had occurred:

“Prittie's solution was to distribute refugees among the Arab states. Hetherington himself backed off from his demand for the settlement of the Palestinian refugees in Israel, and actually adopted Prittie's ideas of settling them in Sinai or Jordan with Israeli and international help. Although the Guardian never again advocated the right of return, Prittie's obvious pro-Zionist bias was becoming a problem for Hetherington with letters of complaint about the writing of The Guardian correspondents especially when they had attributed to the Arabs any intention but the total extermination of Israel.”

The subject of the Palestinian conflict was a key part of debates and disagreements in the British print media, and has sparked a great deal of controversy, even within a newspaper group. Perhaps the best example of these disputes and sensitivities occurred in 1968, when the British journalist Michael Adams, who was stationed in the Middle East, proposed a series of documentary films for the BBC. He was to write four field reports on the Palestinian territories that were under Israeli occupation a year after the Six Day War of 1967 to be published in The Manchester Guardian. The dispute arose between Alastair Hetherington, the then editor of The Manchester Guardian and Adams. The first three reports were published; however, the problem emerged over the fourth report, in which Adams uncovered the fact that the residents of three Palestinian villages situated to the west of the city of Jerusalem had been evacuated in the weeks following the war. The story was broken by Amos Keinan, a writer who had served in the Israeli army but refused to take part in the operation. Adams sent the press report to The Guardian.

¹⁴ Terence Prittie, "Middle East Refugees," in Michael Curtis, et al., *The Palestinians: people, history, politics*, 1975, pp. 66–67

What then transpired was described by Daphna Baram in her book *Disenchantment: The Guardian and Israel*:

“The facts of the story were hardly controversial, but Adams wrote with biblical resonance and selected questions from the book of Jonah. Taylor, the foreign editor who acted as a buffer between editor and reporter, was away in Eastern Europe, and Hetherington, who dealt with the story himself, snapped. He had noisy row over the telephone with Adams, and eventually told him that he no longer felt complete trust in what he wrote. Hetherington said he did not doubt that the facts of the story were true, but accused Adams of concealing from the readers important facts, including that the destroyed villages were used as bases for attacks on Israel. It is not known (though not very hard to guess), where Hetherington derived these “facts” from, and Adams’s riposte that it was undisputed by Israeli officials that the villages were quiet throughout the war failed to convince the angry editor. He refused to print the story or to receive any more features or article from Adams”.¹⁵

The rift between the two deepened considerably, and the decision not to publish had two significant consequences: the first was the severing of relations between Adams and The Guardian, and the second was the sale of the press report to The Sunday Times. During that period, journalist Harold Jackson paid a visit to Israel during its celebrations of the first anniversary of the Six Day War, and wrote an article about the three villages. The Manchester Guardian published the story on June 5th, days before its publication in The Sunday Times. Jackson’s story (The Guardian) did not include “attacks from across the border or other contributory factors”.

Adams stated in an interview that:

“Alastair was not the man to apologise but he rang me before Jackson’s story was published, and said “we are carrying a story by Harry that you might find

¹⁵Daphna Baram, *Disenchantment: The Guardian and Israel*, p.117

interesting.” When I asked what it was about he said “it’s about these villages of yours”. “

This incident took place in 1968, i.e. twenty years after the end of the Arab-Israeli War, and around one year after the end of the Six Days War. It clearly demonstrates that the Middle East and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict remained live and contentious issues for the British media, which maintained a presence in the region. It also shows the largely cautious British approach towards the Palestinian issue, and the refugee issue in particular, and the difficulties entailed in conveying accurate and independent information.

Media outlets undergo change over time. They sometimes take a stance only to retract it in response to political developments. One can recall numerous shifts in the position of a major newspaper such as The Times. These shifts are not limited to changes in editors or correspondents, and perhaps one of the more significant shifts in the history of The Times has been the transfer of its ownership to businessman Rupert Murdoch.

Murdoch has been described as follows:

“Rupert Murdoch has grown the giant mammoth of a media company “The News Corporation” into one of the largest and most influential media groups in the world from a small town newspaper in Australia. Murdoch wields considerable power with his global media company and is often wooed by politicians to persuade him to favourably cover their campaigns. His empire covers television, filmed entertainment, cable network programming, book publishing, direct broadcast satellite television, magazines and newspapers operating in the United States, Australia, Continental Europe, the United Kingdom, Asia and the Pacific Basin.”¹⁶

Murdoch’s acquisition of The Times constituted a turning-point for the newspaper, and it can be argued that this has been to the benefit of Israel. Many have written about the relationship

¹⁶ <http://www.financialexpress.com/news/guru-speak-rupert-murdoch/432180/>

between Murdoch and Israel. Perhaps the most significant material to have been produced on this relationship was published in the book *Rupert Murdoch*, by Jerome Tuccille.¹⁷

“To a great degree, Murdoch saw some parallels between Israel’s emergence as an economic and political presence in the world and Australia’s need to shed its image of an indolent colossus, a provincial backwater whose fate was largely determined by richer and more powerful nations. On a personal level he identifies with Jews as outsiders fighting for survival, and on geopolitical scale with Israel as an underdog nation that was clawing its way to a position of strength.”

Increasingly, Murdoch’s newspapers take on an unreservedly pro-Israel tone. His defence of Israel and his support of Jewish charities continue unabated to this day. In April 1982, he was honoured by the American Jewish Congress as “Communication Man of the year,” in recognition of his continuing support of Israel and Jewish interests in the United States.

Howard Squadron, Murdoch’s friend and attorney, told my research associate Geri Shapiro the Murdoch has “always been pro Israel. He admires Israeli’s fighting spirit in creating a new country.”

Conclusions

Today, the Israeli political reality has become more complex than in any period in the past, and particularly with regard to the refugee issue. There is an Israeli consensus over the non-recognition of the refugees’ crisis, that the “only solution” to the crisis should come from outside the borders of the State of Israel, and that the Arab states should be held responsible for the refugees. Conversely, the Palestinians demand that the Israelis acknowledge their responsibility for the refugee issue, and emphasise the Right of Return and the need to adhere to UN

¹⁷ Jerome Tuccille *Rupert Murdoch Creator of a Worldwide Media Empire*, 2003, Google Books Edition, p. 21

Resolution 194. Even those who are considered to be “moderates” continue to support the Right of Return of the refugees.

On June 14th 2009, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu stated during a political speech he gave at Bar-Ilan University, Tel Aviv, that:

“For this to have practical meaning, we need a clear agreement to solve the Palestinian refugee problem outside of the borders of the State of Israel.”

In 2004, former president of the Palestinian Authority, Yasser Arafat, stressed that:

“Palestinians would continue the fight until they achieve all their rights, including the Right of Return for the refugees.”

Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert stated in 2007 that:

“Israel would not allow a single Palestinian refugee to return to what is now Israel, and that the country bore no responsibility for the refugees because their plight resulted from an attack by Arab nations on Israel when it was a fledgling state.”

Meanwhile, current Palestinian Authority president, Mahmoud Abbas (who is a Palestinian refugee from the town of Safad, located in northern Israel), stated in 2008 that:

“Palestinian refugees must have the right to return to their homeland.”

The subject of Palestine, and in particular the refugee issue, has always been approached with extreme caution. The Manchester Guardian and The Times leant towards the position that the refugee issue must be resolved outside Israel, believing a solution inside Israel to be “impractical.” This position was made clear in 1949, when the crisis started to crystallise. The Manchester Guardian began to internationalise the issue, and considered that other nations, notably their Arab neighbours, were obliged to find a solution for it. However, these positions underwent numerous shifts over time, and especially with the appointment of new editors-in-chief. In 1964, sixteen years after the crisis first broke out, the editor of The Guardian wrote an editorial in which he demanded the return of the refugees to their original homes. The piece

attracted a great deal of criticism from readers and pro-Israeli journalists, including journalists working at The Guardian. This was to be the first editorial to make this demand.

As can be seen from this study the approach to the subject of Palestine, and the refugees in particular, has always been an extremely sensitive issue, and one that at times has created tensions and crises, between media editors and correspondents, owners and editors, and between the British Press and the British Government. This paper demonstrates how important, or not, the Palestinian refugees question is in the foreign press, especially in the British print. In 1948, the mandate and the role of Britain in the Middle East were the main new items covered by the British newspaper while there was little coverage on the refugee question; however, over the years this issue has gradually gained more prominence in the British press. It is worth noting that the press around the world discussed and continues to discuss the refugee issue as a humanitarian and not a political one. In the case of the Arab-Israeli conflict, during the last 61 years the refugee issue has become progressively more complicated and it is questionable whether there is any durable solution to the refugee problem; this is reflected in the British press coverage over this time.

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