

Exert 2

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Origins, History and Causes of the Conflict

Our content studies focus on TV news coverage of the second Palestinian intifada or uprising, following its outbreak in September 2000. We have already indicated in the history above that the events leading up to this are complex and contested by different parties. We can see this if we look at key issues such as the origins and history of the Palestinian refugees. These people were displaced from their land when the Israeli state was formed in 1948. The account of how they were displaced varies and for many years Israel claimed that they had simply fled the fighting in 1948 (when the nascent state of Israel fought with its Arab neighbours) or they had been told to leave by their leaders. More recently, the Israeli historian Avi Shlaim has given a carefully documented account which suggests that many were forced to leave and the military offensive on civilian areas began in the period before the official outbreak of hostilities on the 15th May 1948. He shows that the military forces of what was to become Israel had embarked on a new offensive strategy which involved destroying Arab villages and the forced removal of civilians. The intention was to clear the interior of the future Israeli state of what were seen as potentially hostile 'Arab elements'. As he writes:

The novelty and audacity of the plan lay in the orders to capture Arab villages and cities, something [they] had never attempted before... Palestinian society disintegrated under the impact of the Jewish military offensive that got underway in April, and the exodus of the Palestinians was set in motion...by ordering the capture of Arab cities and the destruction of villages, it both permitted and justified the forcible expulsion of Arab civilians. (Shlaim, 2000: 30)

He also notes how the displacement of the Palestinians and its consequences were clearly acknowledged by Moshe Dayan, one of the most prominent of Israel's military leaders and politicians. Speaking in 1955 at the funeral of an Israeli, killed by Arab insurgents, Dayan commented:

What cause have we to complain about their fierce hatred for us? For eight years now they sit in their refugee camps in Gaza, and before their eyes we turn into our homestead the land and villages in which they and their forefathers have lived. (quoted in Shlaim, 2000: 101)

The Palestinian view was indeed that they had been forced from their land and homes in 1948. They had then to live as refugees in countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and on the West Bank (of the Jordan River) and the Gaza Strip. There followed a series of conflicts and at times, outright war between Israel and its Arab neighbours. The most significant of these conflicts was perhaps the 1967 (Six Day) War. In this, Israel occupied the West Bank and East Jerusalem (which had been under the control of Jordan), the Gaza Strip (which had been under the control of Egypt) and the Golan Heights (which were Syrian). This occupation brought many Palestinian refugees under Israeli military control and was bitterly contested. Jerusalem as a religious centre for both Muslims and Jews became a major point of conflict. The Israelis also built settlements in the newly occupied areas of Gaza and the West Bank and they exploited natural resources, in particular taking control of the vital resource of water. To occupy and exploit land in this fashion is widely seen as a violation of international law and for this reason newspapers in Britain such as *The Guardian* routinely refer to the Israeli settlements as 'illegal'. This has also been the view of the British government. In 1997 the Conservative Foreign Secretary Malcolm Rifkind referred to the building of a large settlement in occupied East Jerusalem as follows: 'The start of construction can do nothing but harm the peace process...like all settlements this one will be illegal'. (quoted in Shlaim, 2000: 582) As Avi Shlaim suggests, these settlements were about much more than simply building houses and farms. They were part of a systematic policy of exerting strategic and military control which in this case involved, 'surrounding the huge Greater Jerusalem area with two concentric circles of settlements with access roads and military positions.' (2000: 582)

Within Israel there were divisions over the occupation and the settlement policies. Some argued that occupied land should be returned to the Palestinians in exchange for a final peace agreement. But many Israelis defended the occupation arguing that they had religious claims (from the time of the Bible) on the land and Jerusalem. It was also argued that Israel's security needs could only be met by

extending its borders, as for example when Israel expropriated a part of southern Lebanon in 1982/3 as a 'security zone'. This action had led to an extended conflict with Hezbollah guerrillas from Lebanon, and Israel eventually withdrew in 1999 after suffering serious losses. The conflict with the Palestinians in the occupied territories resulted in two major intifadas (or uprisings) in 1987 and 2000. In the period between these there were a series of American led peace efforts, notably the Oslo Agreements of 1993 and 1995, and the Wye Accords of 1998. These in practice gave the Palestinians some self-rule in parts of the West Bank and Gaza. But the Israeli army still controlled roads and access and could effectively seal off the Palestinian areas, thus exerting a strangle-hold on economic movement. They also continued to control and exploit water supplies as well as keeping a large army and undercover police presence.

In the bulletins which we transcribed from the 28th September until the 16th October 2000, there were over 3,000 lines of text in total. Just 17.5 lines referred to the history of the conflict

Most of the participants in this research had little idea of the history or origins of the conflict. In the large sample groups of British students, in 2001, 4 per cent wrote that the Palestinians had been forced from their homes on the formation of Israel. In 2002 the figure was 8 per cent (for the German and US students the figure was 26 per cent and 19 per cent respectively, see Appendices I and II). For the British students there were an additional 14 per cent in 2001 and 22 per cent in 2002 who suggested that the Palestinians had in some way lost their homes because of Israel, or who mentioned the occupation as a factor – they used words such as 'kicked out', 'deported', 'evicted' or 'excluded'. The majority simply did not know or made general references to the problems of refugees such as 'driven out by fear of war and hunger' or 'through armed conflict, bombing'. It was also clear from the focus groups that most people had very little detailed knowledge. The British students were studying social sciences, arts and history at university and the focus groups contained a strong representation of middle-class males/professionals who are high consumers of news. Even so, in the focus groups as a whole just 19 per cent mentioned the formation of Israel in relation to the Palestinian refugees and most could not name any wars in the region. The level of public knowledge as a whole is probably even lower than this.

The majority also had no knowledge of the link between the wars of 1948 and 1967 – that Palestinians who were displaced from what became Israel in 1948 moved to areas such as Gaza, the West Bank of the Jordan and East Jerusalem and were then subject to military occupation after 1967. In the focus groups, the moderator was sometimes asked by the participants about the origins of the conflict. In response they were given a very brief account of the events of 1948 and 1967, based on the work of the Israeli historian Avi Shlaim, which we quoted above, and sometimes helped by the comments of journalists who were present. Although the account given was extremely brief, it could have a very dramatic effect on the understanding of group members as this exchange indicates:

Moderator: Would it help you when you are watching the news, if you knew that history?

First speaker: Yes.

Second speaker: A lot more.

Third speaker: Absolutely.

Second speaker: If they did refer more to the history, the whole thing would mean a hell of a lot more for a lot of people.

First speaker: That's right we need to know more.

Third speaker: It's so fragmented and vague, I mean to try and explain it to my children, I found it difficult – I'm not the sharpest tool in the box anyway, but having said that, on what I was given by the media, a great deal of it was blank, and you just filled in the blanks that I didn't have a clue about – 1948? Was there a war in 1948? Well now I know there was.

(Low income male group, London).

Lindsey Hilsum from Channel Four News put the question directly to a group of middle-class women as to whether they would like more background information:

Lindsey Hilsum: I want to know whether you want to know more about it or not. Would you like there to be more background information on the Middle East or do you think there's plenty...

First speaker: Yeah I absolutely agree with that. I always think if only they'd give just us the quick potted history of what brought us to this point. Sometimes when the Israeli/Palestinian conflict kicks off again I become really interested and I follow it day by day to see what's going up, who's retaliating and what's happening with the suicide-bombers. But I think, God if anybody just turned on their television or their radio now, they wouldn't have a hope in hell of following what was happening.

Lindsey Hilsum: Yes

First Speaker: You want somebody to say, this is all because in 1948, that happened and that happened.

Lindsey Hilsum: A sort of new readers start here...

First speaker: Yes, yes something like that.

Tim Llewelyn, a former BBC Middle East correspondent, then goes on to describe how he has sometimes found it hard to follow news which is outside of his area of expertise:

Tim Llewellyn: I know a lot about the Middle East, but I was watching BBC World the other night, which is supposed to be better on foreign coverage...I was amazed to see, I remember one story

was about presidential elections in Brazil. Now I watched very closely on this, I don't know much about Brazil, I knew there were elections, but I haven't been following it in the newspaper – what the background is, who's running for office and why. I thought [the item] was dreadful. You were given no background information, it was extremely glib, it took a lot for granted, it took a lot of knowledge for granted on the part of the viewer.

First speaker: Yes that's right.

Moderator: Is that a feeling that you quite often have, that you don't feel you've got enough background knowledge to actually understand what's going on?

First speaker: Yes.

Second speaker: Definitely, with home news and American news you're very conscious and you do know, but even with European news you don't get that much – in the Bosnia war there wasn't a great lot of background.

(Middle-class female group, London)

One BBC journalist actually told us that he had been instructed not to do 'explainers' by his own editor. As he put it: 'It's all bang bang stuff'. In another focus group, one participant specifically raised the issue of how the news is dominated by images of atrocity and horror to the exclusion of material on background and origins:

First speaker: One of the problems with most of the news is that you get the atrocity, the horror but it's the background that is the key bit. *Newsnight* does go some way to filling one in a bit on that but I'm pretty ignorant of it really and that's the more important,

more interesting, important stuff, the background, the origins rather than the latest [action].

Second Speaker: I'm drawn to background and overview articles rather than the latest bus being blown up.

Moderator: Is that a general feeling that there is too much emphasis on immediate action and image?

Third Speaker: I think that characterises all news coverage.

Moderator: That is your view?

Third Speaker: Yes, absolutely.

(Middle-class male group, London)

Yet as the first speaker also pointed out, there is clearly an important role for powerful images since they may have a strong emotional influence and can affect the commitment to watch a particular story:

First speaker: When that boy and his dad were shot by Israeli soldiers, unfortunately the British TV cut the pictures, but even so it's still fairly shocking and that re-energised, re-awakened my interest. Just because that brought it home to me as a parent. If I was in that situation with my son...that did make me realise just what it must be like.

There were some other reservations expressed in this and other groups as to how much historical detail could be included in news and whether longer historical accounts should be shown in dedicated current affairs programmes. A small number of people indicated that they were not interested in the subject or were just too busy, 'it goes in one ear and out the other', as one participant said. Another questioned

whether audiences would want more in-depth accounts (Middle-class males, London), but overall there was a strong feeling in the groups that it was difficult to understand the present without some knowledge of the past. As a young male from Glasgow put it:

I've not heard any historical context from the news at all. They don't tell us that – they don't say – they leave it on the short scale. "This fighting was due to yesterday's fighting, which was due to the day before". But they don't go back to all that, I don't know anything about that [history]. The reporter will say "The Israelis fired into a Palestinian refugee camp today in response to a Palestinian suicide bomber yesterday" but they won't say why the Palestinians are fighting or why the Israelis are fighting – it doesn't go back any length of time.

(Student group, Glasgow)

The lack of historical knowledge made it very difficult for people to understand key elements of the conflict. For example, some had written that 'land' was an issue but there was a great deal of confusion over what this meant. Another participant described how his understanding included no sense of the Palestinian case that land had been taken from them:

The impression I got was that the Palestinians had lived around that area and now they were trying to come back and get some more land for themselves – I didn't realise they had been actually driven out, I just thought they didn't want to live as part of Israel and that the places they were living in, they decided they wanted to make self-governed – I didn't realise they had been driven out of places in wars previously.

(Student group, Glasgow)

Some people saw the conflict as a dispute between two countries or peoples, who had a strip of land between them that they both wanted, as in this exchange:

Moderator: How did this land conflict come about?

Male speaker: They are right next to each other and they are trying to get a bit more off each other.

Moderator: Do you see it as two countries, two groups and two countries and they are both fighting over this bit of contested land?

Male speaker: That is it, yes.

Moderator: So something in the middle of it all?

Male speaker: It is like the border and they are trying to take a bit off each other.

(Low income group, Glasgow)

The same point is made in another group:

I didn't realise – I didn't know all the geography of Palestine being occupied. I thought there was Palestine, then there was Israel and then there was the border in between that they were fighting over.

(Office workers, female, Glasgow)

Another sees the conflict as a 'nice piece of land' that they are both fighting over, without any sense that land has been taken:

Female speaker: I just thought it was disputed land, I wasn't under the impression that the Israeli borders had changed or that they had taken land from other people. I just had the impression that it was a nice piece of land that both, to put it simplistically, that they were fighting over and I thought, it was more a Palestinian aggression than it was Israeli aggression

Moderator: Did anyone else see it this way?

Answers: Yes, yes (five out of ten people in this group assented).
(Student group, Glasgow)

There were similar problems in understanding terms such as 'occupied territories'. Because many in the groups did not understand that Palestinians had been subject to military occupation after 1967, there was some confusion over what the word 'occupied' meant.