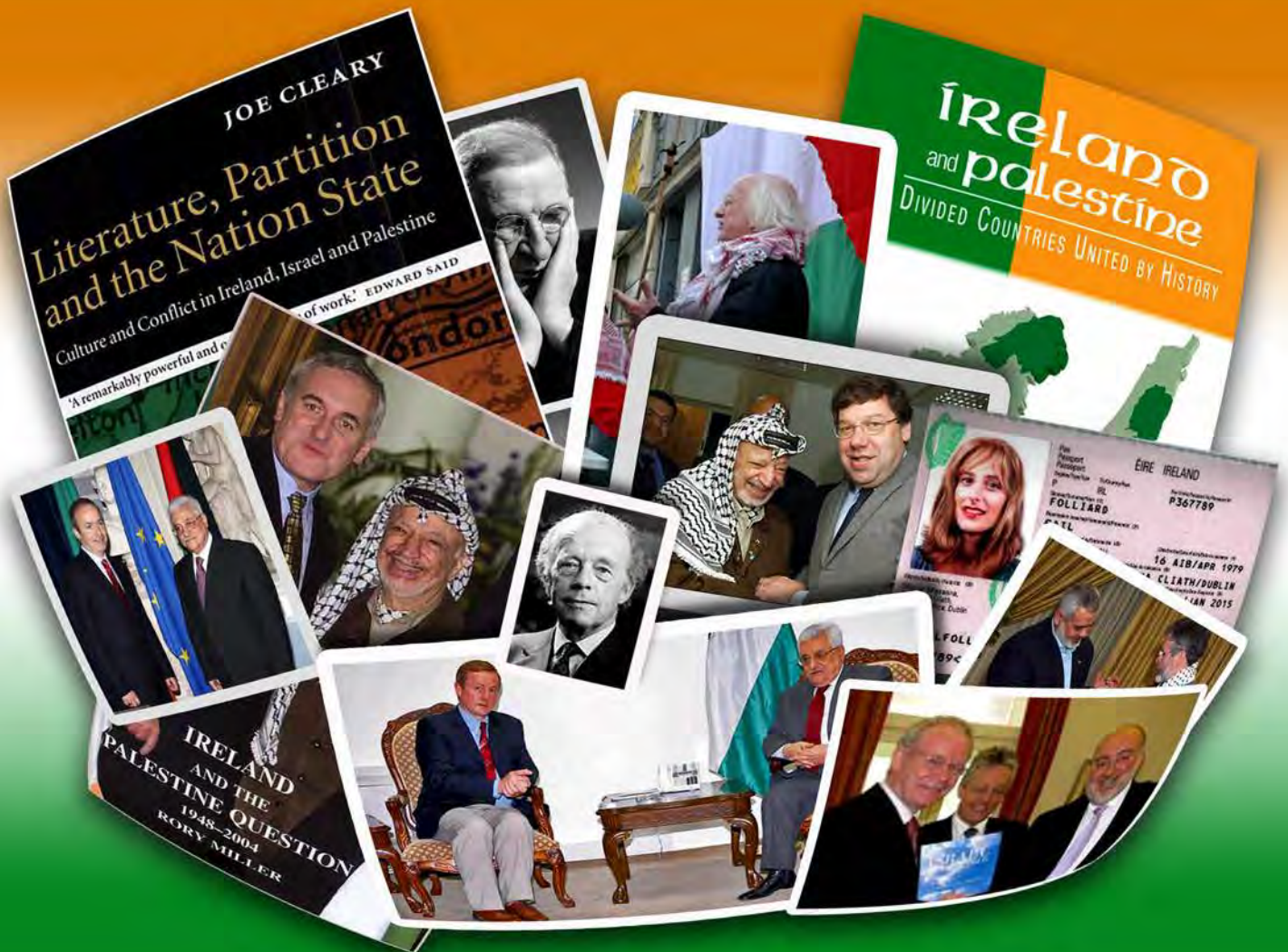


Palestine in Irish Politics - A History

Revised edition 2011



Compiled for Sadaka by Philip O'Connor

SADAKA PAPER 8

Palestine in Irish Politics

A History

The Irish State and the 'Question of Palestine'
1918-2011

Sadaka Paper No. 8

(Revised edition 2011)

Compiled by Philip O'Connor



July 2011

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Palestine in Irish Politics - A History

The Irish State and the 'Question of Palestine' 1918-2011

Introduction – A record that stands

Politics is about changing the world through action. As a small state, there are limits to Ireland's power to affect developments in the Middle East or elsewhere. However, it can influence the foreign policies of the great powers, primarily through the positions it adopts internationally and through intelligent use of its influence at the EU and UN. Brian Lenihan snr., when Minister of Foreign Affairs in the early 1980s, summed up the role Ireland could have in the world, following his "Bahrain Declaration" initiative on Palestine, in an interview with *The Irish Times*:

"I want to emphasise that this is Ireland's role, and the role that a small neutral country can take in matters of this kind, a positive role in trying to achieve peace in difficult areas. In times past Frank Aiken [former Minister for Foreign Affairs] took a similar role in regard to calling for debate on the admission of China to the UN."

Over the period from the 1930s and to the present, several initiatives by the Irish State – some mild and others more decisive - contributed importantly to shaping international and European attitudes and policy with regard to Palestine. These interventions have followed a consistent line of support for international law and, in that context, for the rights of the Palestinian people. It has been an extraordinarily consistent record.

As in all politics, the key issue is translating words into action and policy into effective strategy. This Ireland has succeeded in doing at several crucial junctures in the history of the Middle East. There have also, of course, been clear limits to the positions Ireland has been prepared to take and pressures on Israel it has been prepared to espouse. Nevertheless, the history of the Irish position on Palestine and Israel is a proud inheritance that forms the firm basis for a continued engagement with the issue.

That position of the Irish state is rooted in the history of how the Irish state itself came about, and a dramatic change in the position is only conceivable were the history of the state itself to be discarded.

The 'Irish Model' of anti-colonialism

The Irish independence movement was traditionally opposed to racial prejudice and supported anti-imperialist movements throughout the world. Daniel O'Connell was an ardent advocate of the abolition of slavery and later the Irish Parliamentary Party at Westminster opposed British imperial wars in Africa and Asia. As US President Obama reminded the great crowd that greeted him in Dublin on 23rd May 2011: "*Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave and our great abolitionist, forged an unlikely friendship right here in Dublin with your great liberator, Daniel O'Connell. His time here, Frederick Douglass said, defined him not as a colour but as a man. And it strengthened the non-violent campaign he would return home to wage.*" The Fenians, too, often lent direct support to liberation struggles in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and this tradition carried over to the Republican movement that grew from it as well as from the Irish parliamentary tradition.

The Irish achievement of independence inspired movements struggling for national freedom worldwide. Nehru and Bose in India and Aung San in Burma were among many who took the “*Irish example*” as a model. The Indian National Congress counted several Irish people among its leadership and closely followed the tactics of the Irish movement. On his tour of the US in 1919-20 de Valera addressed Indian rallies under banners declaring: “*President De Valera's Message to India: Our cause is a common cause.*” Irish nationalists also had close connections with the independence movement in Egypt. Richard Crossman, a British statesman (and Zionist), wrote that he first realized the importance of the “*Irish revolution model in modern history*” in the early 1950s when he met Nasser, who told him that writings from the Irish struggle provided the “*textbook of our Egyptian revolution.*” (*A Nation Reborn*, 1960, p.578).

These factors were to determine Irish attitudes to both Zionism and, later, the Palestinian struggle for freedom, following the formation of the Irish State.

The Irish Free State in the World

The Free State government that emerged from the Civil War sought to maximise Irish “dominion status” within the British Empire/Commonwealth set down in the Treaty. When Fianna Fáil came to power in 1932 under Éamon de Valera, it did so on a platform of resuming the republican agenda of the First Dáil of 1918-21. His foreign policy wound down Ireland’s role in the Empire, established a more fully sovereign state and, far from retreating to “isolationism” as some now contend, increased instead its international involvement through a forceful role at the League of Nations. Irish neutrality in the Second World War was supported by all parties, and from this point on the conflicts of the Treaty era were laid to rest as the sovereignty achieved became the standpoint of all parties, reflected in the declaration of the Republic by a Fine Gael led government in 1949.

De Valera’s election to President of the Assembly of the League of Nations in September 1932 caused an international sensation. In his inaugural address he championed the notion of international law in the interests of small nations. A front page editorial in the prestigious *Journal de Geneve* (25th September 1932), caught the flavour of the impact he made on the western mind:

“... Eamon de Valera, the outlaw and hero, is now at the head of all the nations of the world... [His Presidency] may become a sort of guiding light, a star in the heavens for all those oppressed peoples which are struggling for their independence – de Valera presiding over the sessions of the Council at which the Japanese will have to explain their attitude to China. Here is an astonishing occurrence, of which Ghandi and millions of Indians, Arabs, of yellow people and, perhaps, of black, will at once grasp the full import.”

While the success of the Independence movement in the 1919-21 struggle caught the attention of the world, it was what de Valera built in the 1930s, and the way in which Ireland was extracting itself peacefully from the Empire, that most attracted leaders of movements in India, Burma and Egypt. In 1938, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sharara Pasha proposed to a leading Irish official that a group of former colonies should work together to “*change the Commonwealth’s character and give us an opportunity of sliding quietly out of the King’s orbit*” (*Documents on Irish Foreign Policy*, Vol. 5, p. 309). Close relations with India developed on a similar basis, with the Indian revolutionary Subhas Chandra Bose twice meeting with de Valera in the 1930s much to the chagrin of the British government.

The 1937 Constitution set down the principles of Ireland’s “*International Relations*” (Art. 29), committing the state to “*international justice*”, the “*peaceful settlement of international*

disputes”, and an overriding role for the “*generally recognised principles of international law.*” Article 28 declared that “*the State shall not participate in any war save with the assent of Dáil Éireann*”, i.e. the automatic commitment to support Britain at war inherent in the 1921 Treaty and 1922 Constitution was annulled. At the League of Nations, de Valera was twice elected President of the Assembly, addressing many of the key conflict issues of the day.

The British Empire and the Zionist project

Zionism arose at the end of the 19th century, its main proponent, Theodor Herzl, declaring in his book *The Jewish State* (1896) that Jews should cease their integration into European societies as they were a separate race and should found a state of their own outside Europe as a colony under the protection of a great power. He did not specifically propose Palestine.

Zionism was a fringe phenomenon among European Jews at the time, most of whom considered themselves members of the societies in which they lived. This was dramatically reflected in the Dreyfus Affair in France, when anti-Semites who, like the Zionists, argued that Jews were a separate race, and should not be tolerated in the French officer corps. Liberal opinion, articulated in Emile Zola’s famous article “*J’accuse*”, rejected this racist idea and demanded that French Jews be treated with the same rights and duties as any other French people. The great majority of European Jews rejected Zionism and embraced assimilation and this was reflected in the fervent patriotism to their countries of Jews in France, Germany, Britain, Austria and Italy in the First World War. Indeed, the Central Powers (Germany, Austria and Turkey) were then regarded as the countries most friendly to the Jews, while Britain’s ally Russia was regarded as their greatest and most feared enemy.

The Zionist movement achieved a great boost when the British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour, met with members of the World Zionist Organisation and undertook to establish a “Jewish Homeland” under British protection in territory it was wresting from the Ottoman Empire in Palestine. At this time the war was going very badly for Britain, and it desperately wanted to bring the US in on its side. This was the purpose of the ‘Balfour Declaration’ and Chaim Weizmann, the British Zionist leader, undertook to win powerful Jewish support in America in favour of US entry to the war.

The Ottoman Empire was a large multi-national, multi-ethnic state stretching throughout today’s Middle East. Britain long had designs on it, particularly as it had been modernising in alliance with Germany. In 1916 Britain and France concluded a secret agreement – the Sykes-Picot Pact – dividing the area between them, Britain to gain Palestine and Iraq, and France Syria and Lebanon. But Britain also secretly promised the Arabs the creation of an Arab State which included the same territory if they rose against Ottoman rule. The populated, fertile area of Palestine stretched no more than a few dozen miles inland from the Mediterranean before running up against a large desert east of Damascus and Amman. Most of today’s problems in the region can be traced back to these events.

In 1922 Britain had the League of Nations adopt Palestine as a “Mandate Territory” with Britain holding the mandate to implement the Balfour Declaration. In the late 1930s, Oxford Professor James Parkes issued a pamphlet pointing out some of the demographic realities (*Palestine*. Oxford Pamphlets on World Affairs, 1940). In 1914 there had been no more than about 20,000 native Jews and 10,000 Zionist settlers in Palestine, and at the time of the Balfour Declaration 93% of the population (664,000) was still Arab. But under the ‘British Mandate’, Jewish settlement was aided and assisted, reaching 150,000 in 1929 and nearly 500,000 by 1939. The promised “Arab State” of course was never founded.

In British ruling circles there was a convergence between anti-Semitism and Zionism. In 1920 Winston Churchill set out the full British case for the Zionist project ('Zionism versus Bolshevism. Struggle for the Soul of the Jewish people,' *Illustrated Sunday Herald*, 18th February 1920). Describing the Jews as "*the most formidable and the most remarkable race*", he differentiated between "*Good and Bad Jews*".

"The conflict between good and evil which proceeds unceasingly in the breast of man nowhere reaches such an intensity as in the Jewish race... It may well be that this same astounding race may at the present time be in the actual process of producing another system of morals and philosophy, as malevolent as Christianity was benevolent, which, if not arrested, would shatter irretrievably all that Christianity has rendered possible..."

This malevolent Jewish philosophy was Bolshevism, "*a worldwide conspiracy for the overthrow of civilization.*" He differentiated between "*National Jews*" and "*International Jewry.*" The latter was a disruptive force in the world, while only Zionism offered the prospect of the Jews being grounded in a nationalism of their own, "*the Jew*" becoming a nationality rather than a disruptive internationalist, while also fulfilling an imperial function by creating a white British colony beside the Suez Canal defending the land bridge to British India:

"But, if, as may well happen, there should be created in our lifetime by the banks of the Jordan, a Jewish State under the protection of the British Crown, which might comprise three or four million of Jews, an event ... in the history of the world which would, from every point of view, be beneficial, and would be especially in harmony with the truest interests of the British Empire."

The Governor of Palestine in the 1920s, Sir Andrew Storrs, summarised the British concept thus: a colony gradually built up in Palestine would evolve for Britain into "*a loyal little Jewish Ulster in a sea of hostile Arabism*" (Storr, *Orientalisms*, 1937, p. 358).

De Valera and the Palestine question

De Valera, while a close friend of the Irish Jewish community, distrusted British designs in Palestine and was a supporter of Arab independence movements in the British Empire.

In the mid-1930s Arab resistance rose against British rule and the colonisation project. Branded in Britain the "*Arab Revolt*", it was ruthlessly suppressed by a British force that included 'Black and Tans' fresh from the war in Ireland, working with Zionist auxiliaries. When the British military seized the headquarters of the Palestinian leaders, they discovered what a British intelligence report called "*Sinn Féin manuals*" from the War of Independence era in Arabic translation. In 1937 Britain's "Peel Commission" proposed the partition of Palestine as a "solution" to the growing chaos in Palestine. Arab opinion vociferously rejected the partition "solution" proposed by Peel, and this was reported and commented upon with great sympathy in Ireland, including in *The Irish Press*, which was the voice of the de Valera government. The *Irish Independent* also criticised Britain's plans, drawing comparisons between the British suppression of the Arab resistance and the situation in Ireland in 1919-22, and naturally also expressing Catholic concerns for the fate of sacred Christian sites in the area that had survived and prospered under centuries of Ottoman rule.

An *Irish Press* editorial on 10th July 1937 stated that while both the Jews and the Arabs had defensible cases to make, the disastrous conditions of conflict in Palestine were a direct result of the duplicity of British policy since the Balfour Declaration, which, with its aim of maintaining a strategic stronghold in the Middle East under the guise of a League

of Nations mandate, was now threatening the Arab population with being ruled by an immigrant Jewish majority. In another article, it commented that the partition proposals would see the Arabs “ousted from the coastal areas to the hills” while the proposed Jewish area would be too small to be defensible (‘Partition and Palestine: Arabs and Jews opposed to Commission Proposals’, *Irish Press*, 9th July 1937).

This hostility to British imperial policies in the Middle East, and a view of the Zionist project as part and parcel of it, had general currency. Owen Sheehy Skeffington, a leading liberal voice in Ireland and later a Labour Senator, wrote: “*The interesting fact which lurks behind this revolt is that the Arabs are fighting for their liberty against British Imperialism which is using the Zionist movement as a willing instrument,*” (‘A foreign commentary’, *Ireland Today*, October 1936). The *Catholic Bulletin*, which despite its title promoted a rigorously republican view of world affairs and was influential with the de Valera government, commented:

“What England has undertaken in the Holy Land may yet prove the destruction of her Eastern power. There seldom was a more flagrant piece of diplomatic hypocrisy than British tactics in Palestine display. During the Great War, the Arab nations were won over to the Allies by British pledges. England promised that, if the Arabs would cooperate in the overthrow of the Turkish Empire, she would establish and recognise a great free Arab State, raised on its ruin. When peace came, the promise was torn to shreds, the Arab world was split into a number of isolated kingdoms and protectorates, and a plantation of a quarter of a million Jews was made in Palestine... The promise [of an Arab State] was understood to include Palestine, but the English, seven years later, shuffled out of yielding Palestine ... In the interval the pledge to the Jews, which flatly contravened the pledge to the Arabs, had been fulfilled by the Jewish plantation, although the Jews, too, got a double deal, since their ‘National Home’ was declared to mean no more than a settlement ...”

(‘How Britain betrayed the Arabs’, *Catholic Bulletin*, February 1938)

And these were the essentials of de Valera’s understanding, informing the position he put forward at the League of Nations in 1937, as he later told the Dáil:

“The General Assembly and its [Mandates] committee was largely taken up with two or three questions of very great importance to the maintenance of general peace in the world ... With regard to Palestine, our view that no solution involving the partition of that country should be sanctioned in any way by the League of Nations was duly put on record.” (Dáil Éireann, 13th July 1938)

De Valera’s opposition to the partition of Palestine was not “anti-partitionist” in the Zionist sense, i.e. the demand for an undivided Palestine/Jordan as the territory of the Jewish state, but rather an undivided territory for all of the people then actually living there. De Valera argued in his statement to the League: “*Partition was no solution. All the Christian world interested in the Holy places, the Jews and the Arabs had, so far as there had been any opinion expressed by them, opposed the solution of partition*” (*Irish Press*, 23.09.1938). At the League Mandates Committee meeting in September 1937, de Valera had sided with – and spoken in favour of - a motion proposed by France and others that rejected both the Zionist position favouring a mass transplantation of Jews to Palestine and the partition proposals of the Peel Commission.

The Irish stance at Geneva was warmly welcomed by Arab delegates (‘Partition Cruellest Wrong’, *Irish Press*, 23.09.38). But it infuriated the British, who complained to the Irish High Commissioner in London, John Dulanty, that Britain’s “*difficulties in this matter are*

increased by the line which the Irish Free State Government had taken.” (Documents on Irish Foreign Policy, vol. 5, p. 129)

De Valera’s position accorded with the Irish Constitution in terms of adherence to international law and, in this case, also with a strict reading of the League Mandate for Palestine of 1922, which set down (Article 2): *“The Mandatory shall be responsible for placing the country under such political, administrative and economic conditions as will secure the establishment of the Jewish national home ... and also for safeguarding the civil and religious rights of all the inhabitants of Palestine, irrespective of race and religion.”*

Ireland and its Jewish population in the fascist era

There were only very small numbers of Muslims and Jews in Ireland before 1900, in neither case much more than about 300. This changed with an influx of several thousand largely Orthodox Jewish immigrants from the Tsarist Russian Empire. Apart from disturbances in Limerick in 1904, provoked by the sermons of a Redemptorist missionary, and sustained by antipathy to Jews who had become involved in the money lending business in the city, political “anti-Semitism”, in the sense of a philosophical rejection of the Jews, while it certainly had adherents, had little political support. The ideology of the rising Republican and labour movements of the time opposed racial prejudice and when Michael Davitt, Frederick Ryan and others took a firm stand against some anti-Jewish articles penned by Arthur Griffith, the editor of *The United Irishman*, he quickly abandoned those positions. The movement that won the support of the Irish people at the general election of 1918 and fought the War of Independence was a movement that rejected racial prejudice and had a clear anti-imperialist understanding of itself.

The broad nature of the Independence movement was reflected in the participation of members of the Irish Jewish community in the War of Independence on the side of the Republic. Robert Briscoe, from a Dublin Jewish merchant family, became an officer in Collins’ intelligence service, organised arms supplies from Germany and later served nearly forty years as a Fianna Fáil TD. Other Irish Jews who participated actively included Dublin solicitor Michael Noyk, a close aide of Griffith during the War. The Chief Rabbi of Ireland, Dr. Isaac Herzog, was a close friend of Éamon de Valera, provided a safe house for him when he was on the run, and remained a confidant of his throughout his life.

The catastrophic conditions in continental Europe resulting from the ‘Great War’ and the Versailles Treaty of 1919 - including the impact of the Balfour Declaration which appeared to align the Jewish interest with the victor powers - were what gave the impulse for the rise of modern anti-Semitism and fascism. Fascist concepts gained some foothold in Ireland, where an intellectual anti-Jewish movement arose in clerical-corporatist circles associated with the “Blueshirt” movement. This was most virulently expressed in Fr. Denis Fahey’s widely distributed pamphlet, *The Mystical Body of Christ in the Modern World* (1936), which – much like Churchill in 1920 - warned of the threats to European Christian civilisation from *“international Jewish finance”* and *“Jewish Bolshevism”*. But fascism was seen off by the republican ideology shared across all the main political parties, and the Irish fascist movement withered on the vine. Unlike across much of Europe, the Irish democratic state was never seriously challenged by Irish fascism.

During this time the views of the Irish government were given very direct expression in the *Irish Press*, the pro-Fianna Fáil newspaper. It kept up a relentless negative coverage of the curbing of democracy and the restrictions on the rights of Jews and the Christian Churches in Nazi Germany, much to the chagrin of Charles Bewley, the pro-Nazi Free

State ambassador in Berlin, who was subsequently sacked by de Valera in 1939. De Valera regularly denounced racist policies in Europe and, apart from a few individualist TDs such as the Independent Paddy Belton and Fine Gael's Oliver J. Flanagan - seen at the time as what one diplomat called the "*lunatic wing*" of the Dáil - Nazi anti-Semitism had few takers in Irish parliamentary politics.

The new Constitution of Ireland adopted in 1937 (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*) recognised the Catholic Church as having a "*special position*" in the state, but it also recognised the main Protestant denominations as well as Judaism as official religions of the state. As Professor Joe Lee put it, this was "*a gesture not without dignity in the Europe of 1937*" (*Ireland 1922-1985*, 1985, p.203). A leading Zionist official, Rabbi M.L. Perlzweig, on a visit to Dublin during a break in negotiations in London over British plans for Palestine

"paid a high tribute to Ireland's treatment of the Jews, which, he said, had created among Jews all over the world a feeling of help and encouragement, and a knowledge that there still were powerful forces in the world working for liberty and justice... It was a matter of interest to Jewry all over the world, he said, that Ireland in the magnanimity of her spirit chose to speak specifically in her Constitution of the Jewish community as an integral element in the Commonwealth, and as a body of persons entitled by law to their place in the country's life," (*The Irish Times*, 24th March 1938)

The extent of the benevolence of the de Valera regime – and de Valera personally – towards the Jewish minority has been well documented (see especially Dermot Keogh, *Jews in Twentieth Century Ireland*, 1998).

De Valera and Zionism

Benevolence towards the Jewish community in Ireland and support for the Zionist project in Palestine were two very different things. Most Jews leaving Germany, Poland and Romania in the 1930s to escape increasing persecution were not Zionists and only a minority opted voluntarily for Palestine. The international Zionist movement, with its views of the Jews as a distinct "race" on the other hand, had been fiercely pro-British since the Balfour Declaration of 1917, and the creation of the Jewish colony in Palestine under the League of Nations mandate of 1922 was regarded in Ireland as essentially a British imperial project.

The Irish Jewish republican and Fianna Fáil TD, Robert Briscoe, on turning to Zionism in the 1930s became a supporter of its extreme "revisionist" wing led by Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky. Briscoe claimed that in Palestine the "*Arabs and Jews can reach agreement provided there is no outside interference or influence*" (*The Irish Times*, 3rd January 1939). But Jabotinsky foresaw the "re-settlement" of the Arab population of Palestine and Jordan to an Arab State in Iraq taking place to make way for the Jewish nation. In 1931 he defined the aim of Zionism as "*the conversion of the entire mandate territory in Eretz Israel on both sides of the Jordan into a Jewish State, in other words a commonwealth with a Jewish majority*" (Yaacov Shavit, *Jabotinsky and the Revisionist Movement 1925-48*, 1988).

Given the conditions in Europe at the time, de Valera allowed Briscoe a free hand in trying to organise Jewish emigration. Briscoe travelled with de Valera's blessing to the US and South Africa to raise money for the Jewish National Fund, which was funding Jewish migration to and settlement in Palestine. With de Valera's support, Briscoe even visited Poland in January 1939, then in the grip of a military government hostile to the Jews, to

promote Jabotinsky's plan to solve what Briscoe called the Poles' "*Jewish Problem*" by creating a Colony in Palestine with the transfer there of 1m of what he called their "*unwanted Jews*."

But the revisionists were on a collision course with Britain, and started preparing for a guerrilla war against them. Jabotinsky founded the Irgun Zvai Leumi and came to Ireland to meet Briscoe, a former IRA officer, to discuss military options. The Irgun, led by Menachim Begin, would go on to launch a terrorist war against Britain and the Palestinians, and, during the foundation of the Israeli state, to play a leading role in the expulsion of the Palestinian population. Hannah Arendt, a philosopher of German Jewish background, described at the time the New Zionists (as the revisionists called themselves), and particularly Irgun, as the "*fascist*" wing of Zionism (Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, New York, 2007).

Through Briscoe, Jabotinsky met with de Valera, who questioned him at length, particularly about the future the Zionists saw for the Arab population. According to Shulamit Eliash, a senior academic at the Israeli Jakobinsky Institute, the Zionist leadership regarded de Valera's stance at the meeting – and at other meetings with Zionist representatives - as sympathetic to the Jewish cause but non-supportive of Zionism. In particular he repeatedly referred to the rights of the indigenous population not to be overwhelmed by Jewish settlers. Eliash declares that de Valera saw the Middle East from the perspective of Irish history, viewing "*the Arabs in Palestine as the equivalent of the Irish Catholics*" (*The Harp and the Shield: Ireland, Zionism and the State of Israel*, 2007, p. 39).

De Valera was to remain ambiguous on the question of Jewish settlement in Palestine per se, never, given conditions in Europe, opposing it publicly. But he unambiguously opposed the displacement of the indigenous population it was causing in the 1920s-30s, and rejected Britain's pre-war proposals for partitioning Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state.

Post-war Ireland and the State of Israel

In 1950, five years after the end of World War Two, and of the Nazi massacres, and just a year after the violent conditions in which the State of Israel had come into being, de Valera travelled to Jerusalem in the company of Briscoe. He met Israeli leader Ben Gurion and some of his ministers in the home of Isaac Herzog, who had emigrated from Ireland in 1937 to take up the post of Chief Rabbi of Palestine. It was a courtesy call and, according to Briscoe's account in his memoirs (*For the Life of Me*, 1958, p. 305), a discussion of politics was strenuously avoided. In Israel de Valera avoided making any public statements of policy, let alone publicly endorsing the Israeli state. This contrasts dramatically with the very public positions he took on his visit to India two years before in support of the new Indian State, where he spoke publicly of the common struggle for independence and the identity of interests between India and Ireland.

After the meeting with Ben Gurion, and against the advice of his Israeli hosts, de Valera insisted also on crossing the armistice line to Ramallah, then under Jordanian rule as, according to Briscoe (*For the Life of Me*, p. 307), he "*sympathised with the Arab people in their hope of independence and prosperity*." Here, where he met with King Abdullah, he was deeply shocked by the wretched conditions of the Palestinian refugee camps.

Ireland, as with all other western countries, had not opened its doors to a mass immigration of European refugees in the 1930s. This should be judged against a

background of the Irish emigration problem and a total “alien” population in Ireland from all nations of little over 2,000 in 1939. While anti-Jewish measures, particularly legal disenfranchisement, expropriation and pressure to emigrate, were increasing in European countries in the 1930s – notably in Germany, Austria, Romania and Poland – there was at the time no intimation of the Nazi massacres that were to come when the war of 1939-40 between Germany and the Anglo-French alliance escalated into a continent-wide conflagration from 1941. De Valera managed with great difficulty to uphold Irish neutrality throughout the conflict. As news first reached him in late 1942 of the implementation of the “Final Solution”, he mobilised the Irish diplomatic corps in Italy, Vichy France, the Vatican and even in the German Reich, to intervene repeatedly in any way possible to rescue threatened victims of the extermination programme. While this – like the efforts of other states - brought little success, the attempt was determined and noble (see Keogh, *Jews of Ireland in the Twentieth Century*).

Despite persistent petitioning by the new Israeli state, and the publicly expressed admiration of Israel by Foreign Minister, Seán MacBride, Ireland’s first post-war Inter-Party Government decided in June 1948 not to recognize Israel officially. In February 1949 it granted it instead “de facto” recognition. This meant the recognition of Israel as a fact, as the state established in war exceeded by far the territory allocated to it by the United Nations. In a similar way, Ireland had initially granted Franco’s insurgent government only “de facto” recognition after it had finally captured Barcelona at the end of the Spanish Civil War in 1939.

While there was considerable public discussion in Ireland of Zionist achievements, and much praise in particular for the successful restoration of Hebrew as a national language, Ireland did not formally recognise the State of Israel until 1963. The ‘Vatican Factor’ is often given as an overriding explanation for Irish attitudes to the “Palestine Question” and to the recognition of the Israeli State. The Vatican had also opposed the partition of the “Holy Land”, raised concerns about the treatment of the Arab population and, in particular, was vociferous in insisting on the “internationalisation” of Jerusalem. It also withheld de jure recognition of the Jewish state. But de Valera and his colleagues had defied the hierarchy in 1922 in refusing to accept the Treaty, and had faced excommunication during the Civil War. As was popularly said at the time, they “took their religion from Rome but their politics from home.” De Valera, who had annoyed many Church leaders by facilitating the accession of the Soviet Union to the League of Nations and by including Judaism as a state religion in his 1937 Constitution, had a world view developed from the Sinn Féin perspective on the world, which was independent minded in its anti-imperialism while working in the context of a Catholic culture. The reporting in de Valera’s *Irish Press* on Palestine in the 1930s was a model of objectivity, focusing on the political issues and rarely referring to the Catholic interest as a factor. His position on the partition of Palestine in the late 1930s was based on international law and concern for the legitimate interests of the indigenous population not to be “overwhelmed” by a white colonising enterprise.

Following the establishment of the Israeli state and the expulsion of 750,000 of its Arab Palestinian population, Irish commentators challenged the Zionist version of events. Erskine Childers – himself a strong champion of action against European persecution of the Jews in the 1930s - exposed the Zionist myth of a voluntary Palestinian flight incited by Arab leaders (‘The Other Exodus’, *The Spectator*, May 1961). Immediately following the establishment of the Israeli state, J.J.W. Murphy reviewed the history of the Zionist colonialist project in *Studies*, the leading (Jesuit) intellectual journal of Catholic Ireland, concluding:

“Very few Arabs are left in Israel. Some 500,000, or about five-sixths of those Arabs who lived there, fled in terror of the Jewish extremists to the neighbouring Arab states or to the part of Palestine still held by Arab armies, where their condition is pitiable. A few have been allowed to return, but the Jews have taken their lands and homes for the new Jewish immigrants who are pouring into Israel; so there is little left for them to go back to,” (‘Background and Progress of Political Zionism’, *Studies*, September 1950, pp. 289-300).

The same writer, in another prominent Catholic journal, commented that “*the traditional picture of Cromwell’s ‘Hell or Connaught’ policy in Ireland gives a fair idea of what happened in Palestine during 1948 to Arabs whose homes then were in what is now Jewish territory*” (‘Britain and Palestine’, *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, August 1950, pp. 116-126).

De Valera shared the outrage. When Edwin Samuel, son of the first British High Commissioner of Palestine, met de Valera, again Taoiseach, in April 1952, he found him implacably hostile to de jure recognition of Israel, blaming it for the catastrophic Palestinian refugee problem and holding that the Arab Christians fared better under Arab rule than under that of Israel, where they were subject, as Arabs, to ruthless military repression (Eliash, *Harp and the Shield of David*, pp. 118 ff.).

Eliahu Elath, the Israeli ambassador to Britain, also met with de Valera and other Irish politicians the following January, after which he reported that de Valera was the main opponent of upgrading the Irish diplomatic relationship with Israel due to the issues of Jerusalem, the Palestinian refugees and the treatment of Arab Christians (ibid., p. 128).

The UN: Frank Aiken’s “3-Point Plan for the Middle East”

Ireland was itself only finally admitted to the UN in December 1955 at a time when, because of Cold War stalemate on the Security Council, the General Assembly played a much more prominent role in world affairs than it does today. One of the first items on the agenda following Ireland’s accession was the Anglo-French attack on Egypt following Nasser’s nationalisation of the Suez Canal in 1956, and Israel’s invasion of the Sinai. The Inter-Party Minister for External Affairs, Liam Cosgrave of Fine Gael, denounced it immediately: “*Whatever the provocation may have been, it is clearly Israel that is the aggressor; it is Israel, not Egypt, that ought to be restrained and it is the United Nations, not England and France, that ought to do the restraining*” (*The Irish Times*, 2nd November 1956). He repeated this position in his address to the UN General Assembly at the end of November 1956, where he “*deplored and condemned ... the Anglo-French attack*” on a “*traditionally friendly and anti-imperialist country.*” But, he added, while he could understand the opposition of the Arab world to the establishment of Israel, they “*must be ready to accept as a fact the existence of Israel and must renounce their projects for the destruction of that country,*” (*The Irish Times*, 1st December 1956).

On returning to power in 1957, one of the first initiatives of the new de Valera government at the UN was also in relation to the Middle East. De Valera’s foreign minister, Frank Aiken, as a former IRA Chief of Staff, enjoyed considerable prestige among the many newly independent states. Following agreement in Cabinet, Aiken held separate talks with Arab and Israeli delegations (including Golda Meir), to whom he suggested that Ireland might propose a solution whereby the Arab states would recognise Israel as a fact in return for Israel accepting its current borders as the final ones. But this was something Israel had no intention of doing, and the Irish diplomatic initiative was dropped.

Aiken, creating a considerable stir internationally, presented a “3-Point Peace Plan for the Middle East” to the UN General assembly:

- That Arab nations should have the right of self-determination to maintain a separate existence or to unite or federate;
- That the Assembly should declare that the whole region be developed as a neutral region;
- That the General Secretary of the UN should arrange the repatriation of refugees from Israel and for full compensation for those left behind.

(*The Irish Times*, 15th August 1958)

This position can be seen as a continuation in new circumstances of de Valera’s own position at the League of Nations in 1938. Aiken stated that all peoples in the region should “*determine their own futures freely, with no outside pressures of any kind.*” In a reference to the British imperial record, he said that the Suez invasion of 1956, the 1958 revolution in Iraq and British and American troop landings in Jordan and Lebanon were all events “*profoundly affected by decisions regarding Palestine more than ten years ago and by the fragmentation of the whole region 30 years ago*” (*Irish Times*, 15.08.1958). Aiken argued that the UN should take responsibility for the then already 1m Palestinian refugees, and advocated their right of return – something Israel vociferously rejected. He called on the UN to “*arrange for repatriation for the maximum possible number of those who would rather return than receive full compensation.*”

The extension of Irish “de jure” recognition to Israel in December 1963 occurred – on strict Cabinet instructions - without publicity and in the context of it having already been extended to Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon and other new states accepted into the UN. Indeed, on the day it was extended to Israel, it was also extended to forty other countries, mostly newly independent states, including Algeria and Libya. Aiken stated emphatically that in Israel’s case Irish recognition did not include Jerusalem and that he was not contemplating any exchange of diplomatic relations. Following Israeli incursions into Syria in March the previous year, the Irish UN ambassador, Frederick Boland, had rejected Israeli claims of “*self-defence*”. He denounced the Israeli action as a “*major violation of the UN Charter*” and voted for a draft UN Security Council resolution of 9th April 1962 that the Israeli attack “*constitutes a flagrant violation of the General Armistice Agreement between the two states.*”

Ireland and the 1967 War

Following the Israeli “6-day war” of 1967 that led to the further expansion of Israel, its occupation of extensive additional territories, and a further wave of population expulsions, the Irish state again denounced Israeli actions, raised the right of return or compensation of Palestinian refugees and was among the most vocal supporters of Resolution 242 at the UN, which called for Israeli evacuation of the territories seized in 1967, and the creation of stable agreed frontiers.

Aiken protested at the UN when Israel extended its jurisdiction over the Old City of Jerusalem. He called for the “internationalisation” of the city and for Israel to return to its pre-1967 “positions”. Stating that while Israel had a right to defend itself, “*it has no right whatsoever to annex the territory of [its] neighbours*” and if the UNSC did not insist on a restoration of the borders of 4th June, “*the very basis of the Charter would be destroyed.*” In December 1967 Aiken repeated his 1958 demands regarding the right of return of Palestinian refugees, and massively increased Ireland’s contribution to UNWRA, making it the country’s single largest foreign aid expenditure.

But the de Valera government was in stark decline at this time, and Aiken's stance was attacked by the opposition media. *The Irish Times* published an extraordinary editorial denouncing Aiken's views as "idealistic" and "unrealistic" and stating that Israel had engaged not in a "war of conquest" but one for "survival" (Editorial, *Irish Times*, 29.06.67). Nevertheless, contrary to the claim by Rory Miller - a Dublin born professor at the Royal College of London and co-editor of *Israel Affairs* - in his book (*Ireland and the Palestine Question 1948-2004*, 2005, p. 39), that "all the major national and local newspapers ... with surprising unity" opposed Aiken's stance, the government position was vigorously supported by the *Irish Press*, the popular pro-Fianna Fáil newspaper of the time with a far greater circulation and importance at that time than *The Irish Times*.

The Irish government position was never unconditionally hostile to Israel. Aiken in press interviews and before the Dáil stated that Israeli withdrawal should be "accompanied by other measures," in particular a comprehensive peace agreement guaranteed by the UN Security Council that would ensure Israel's security. In private, according to Miller (*Ireland and the Palestine Question*, p. 72-3), Aiken urged Israel to be pragmatic, telling its Foreign Minister, Ebba Eban, that demanding Arab recognition was "too much to expect of the Arabs" who were "terrified of Israeli expansionism" and that instead Israel should be seeking a treaty, which "would achieve the same result." He also stressed to the Israelis that they must retreat as final borders to the pre-1967 lines. Miller also points out that the Irish position pioneered at the UN after the 1967 war represented the start of the 'Land for Peace' approach to a negotiated settlement in the Middle East (Miller, p. 50).

Aiken publicly rejected the argument common in justifying European inactivity at the time that Ireland should support Israel because of the past sufferings of European Jews. In a speech on 27th June 1967 he stated:

"it would ... be altogether unacceptable that a restitution for European injustice and barbarous persecution should be at the expense of under-privileged Arab families who have been deprived of their homes and lands, and are living in miserable refugee camps."

In an echo of de Valera's misgivings about the Zionist project in the 1930s, Irish official Con Cremin wrote: "*the Arab grievance ... is not only, nor perhaps mainly, that the State of Israel has been established in Palestine, but that its establishment has involved the expulsion of the native inhabitants who are now refugees.*" (Miller, p. 63)

The EEC and Garret Fitzgerald's promotion of Palestinian rights

The European Economic Community (EEC) did not initially adopt a common position on the Middle East, and European responses to events there were generally muted. This began to change during the 1960s, as France sought to rebuild relations with its former Arab colonies after losing its Algerian war. Miller (p. 75) recounts that in 1967, at the instigation of Maurice Schumann, the 6-member EEC adopted an internal "working paper" proposing that the EEC publicly support UNSC Resolution 242, i.e. withdrawal to the positions of 4th June 1967, the internationalisation of Jerusalem, and the right of return of refugees to their former homes or compensation for their losses. But this was never adopted as an official position.

Following the 1973 Yom Kippur war, the EEC issued what it called its "first contribution" to the "search for a comprehensive solution". This advocated negotiations on the basis of Resolutions 242 and 338, Israel to "end territorial occupation" of land gained in 1967, and affirming the right of each state in the area to live in peace within secure and recognised

borders. A lasting peace would only be achieved when “*the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people*” were taken into account, though it did not clarify what it meant by this.

In October 1974 the UN General Assembly debated a Syrian motion that the PLO participate in the Assembly. Three EEC states – Ireland, France and Italy – voted in favour of the draft resolution, leading Israel to condemn the Irish position as lending support “*to an organisation of murderers*”. (See Millar, pp. 79-80). Ireland had joined the EEC the same year and, in 1975, chaired the EEC Council. In this context, the Fine Gael-Labour coalition led by Garret Fitzgerald greatly expanded the country’s foreign service, including opening diplomatic relations with several Arab states, the USSR, and, in 1975, with Israel, through the Israeli embassy in London (a resident Israeli embassy was not opened in Dublin until 1993, with the PLO being offered a residential office in Dublin on the same day). Ireland thus became the last EEC member state to open diplomatic relations with Israel.

While chaired by Fitzgerald, and to much protest from the Arab League, the EEC signed a far reaching trade agreement with Israel in 1975 while stalling on similar arrangements with the Maghreb states. In his memoirs, *All in a Life* (1991), Fitzgerald recounts that he undertook a tour of Arab states to allay their anger, and issued a written clarification – hotly contested by Britain’s Roy Hattersley - that it was his conviction that the new agreement with Israel did not apply to the territories occupied since 1967.

At the UN General Assembly Fitzgerald insisted that resolution of the conflict must take account of the “*legitimate rights of the Palestinians ... [who] have the right to be established within secure boundaries and the right to give effective expression in appropriate political form to their sense of their national identity.. this means they should have the right to decide for themselves whether to establish an independent entity on the territory vacated by Israel.*”

Brian Lenihan and the Irish “Bahrain Declaration”, February 1980

In 1978 the new Fianna Fáil government contributed a battalion of Irish troops to the UN peace-keeping force in Lebanon, UNIFIL. Charles Haughey, who became Taoiseach in 1979, pursued an active foreign policy and, with regard to the Middle East, took a stance in support of the Palestinian cause. Labelled by hostile media as an “*Arabist*”, he had toured Iraq in 1976 with the head of the Irish Arab Society, Rev. Dr. John Chisolm, and as Minister for Health had arranged for the training of medical students from several Arab countries in Ireland and negotiated extensive Irish involvement in the provision of healthcare in Iraq. He also oversaw the development of an extensive Irish export trade in beef to the Arab world.

On 20th November 1979 Minister Brian Lenihan told the Dáil – to a visible stir among diplomats present, according to *The Irish Times* - that the Government “*maintained contact with the PLO and other Palestinian organisations in connection with the provision of a permanent homeland for the Palestinian people*” and intended to move to recognise the PLO as their “*legitimate representative*”. As reported by *The Irish Times*, Foreign Minister O’Kennedy, as part of the EEC “*troika*”, stated that Ireland, working with France and Italy, had brought the Council of Ministers to recognise the PLO as “*one of the parties to the conflict*” and finally to support the Palestinian “*right of self-determination*”, adding “*though Ireland’s commitment goes further.*”

These statements culminated in a major initiative by the Government on 10th February 1980 when Minister Lenihan issued a joint statement while on a visit to Bahrain (the “*Bahrain Declaration*”) stating explicitly that the Palestinian people “*had a right to self-*

determination and to the establishment of an independent State in Palestine.” He called for the inclusion of the PLO in any negotiations and stated: *“Ireland recognises the role of the PLO in representing the Palestinian people.”* Ireland’s official recognition of the PLO – and of a “state” for the Palestinians - was the first such stance by any European state, and was followed by high level contacts with the PLO.

[\(Full text of the Bahrain Declaration is published below, Appendix I, pp.22-23\)](#)

When a story in *The Sunday Press* reported that the word “state” had been *“quietly inserted by Bahraini officials”*, Lenihan quickly issued an official statement that *“the word ‘State’ was in fact put forward as a considered proposal by the Irish side”* (*Sunday Press*, 2nd March 1980). The Arab world hailed the Declaration as *“Ireland’s definitive official commitment to an independent Palestine”* (Eurabia, *The Bahrain Declaration*, Dublin, 1980).

In the Dáil, some opposition leaders attacked the Government, objecting to the recognition of the PLO because of its armed struggle and questioning the wisdom of supporting statehood. Haughey was accused relentlessly of being motivated solely by *“private commercial interests close to Fianna Fáil.”* The Bahrain Declaration was denounced as serving only to *“heighten tensions in Lebanon”*, endangering the lives of Irish soldiers. This had followed quoted comments – which some saw as veiled threats - from Ireland’s Chief Rabbi, that the Declaration would lead to increased shelling of Irish UNIFIL positions by Christian militias, which were supported by Israel. In an interview on RTÉ radio on 27th February, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin upped the ante, declaring the Declaration *“a hostile act”* by Ireland against Israel and tantamount to acceptance of the PLO’s *“right to destroy the Jewish state.”* (*The Irish Times*, 28th February 1980)

The threat to Irish soldiers serving with UNIFIL in Lebanon became a self-fulfilling prophecy when on 7th April eight soldiers were kidnapped by the ‘South Lebanon Army’, an Israeli-backed Lebanese *“Christian militia”*, and one of them – Private Stephen Griffen from Galway – was shot and died of his wounds. A week later, on 17th April, three soldiers were ambushed and two of them - Privates Thomas Barrett and Derek Smallhorne – were executed (*“shot at close range”*). In response, the Haughey government called an emergency conference of UNIFIL contributing states and successfully pressed for a resolution by the European Council condemning Israeli attacks on UNIFIL forces.

Over 40,000 Irish soldiers served with UNIFIL over the years of Irish participation (1978-2000). In his vivid and thorough book, *Pity the Nation. Lebanon at War* (1990), Robert Fisk recorded the experiences of Irish soldiers facing the daily arrogance of the Israeli Army, and also their affinity with the Palestinian and Lebanese peoples. Former Fianna Fáil Senator, and current chair of Medical Aid to Palestine, Mick Lannigan, told the current writer last year that he believe it was the experiences of thousands of ordinary Irish soldiers in Lebanon that lay at the root of the widespread Irish popular sympathy for the Palestinians. The outspoken criticisms of Israeli behaviour by Irish UN officials such as Denis Halliday and John Ging had similar roots, both men having gained their first experience of the region as officers serving their country with Irish Battalion, UNIFIL. Of the 47 Irish soldiers killed on service in the Lebanon, the Irish government officially held Israel directly or indirectly responsible for at least 15.

In an interview in July 1980, Lenihan, responding to questions why the Bahrain Declaration did not include a *“denunciation of terrorism”*, nor mention Israel’s *“right to exist”*, responded:

“Paragraph 5 says the two sides agreed that the Palestinian people had the right to self-determination and to the establishment of an independent state in Palestine within the framework of a negotiated peace settlement which would include the principles of Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, and these resolutions contain the condemnation of terrorism or any violent means, and also emphatically recognise the right of the State of Israel to exist, in peace and security... [Any talks] would have as an essential prerequisite a recognition of the State of Israel, pre-1967... In effect, the purpose of the whole conference should be to bring back Israel to its pre-1967 frontiers and at the same time to guarantee that state its permanence... I am certain that in 10 years’ time I will be proved right when Palestine takes her place among the nations at the UN.” (*The Irish Times*, 29.07.1980)

The historian Rory Miller has stated: *“In February 1980, Ireland became the first EEC member to call publicly for the inclusion of the PLO in the political process at a time when Yasser Arafat’s group not only refused to recognize Israel’s right to exist, but was engaged in a relentless campaign of terror against Israeli and Jewish targets across the globe.”* (*Jerusalem Post*, 9th June 2006)

The EEC “Venice Declaration” 1980

Following from the Bahrain Declaration, throughout 1980 the Irish Government lobbied the US Carter Administration (unsuccessfully) to recognise the PLO. At the EEC Council of Ministers, Haughey urged recognition of the PLO and Palestinian statehood, to be negotiated in a deal that would also ensure the integrity of Israel’s pre-1967 borders, something which the Israeli state has never accepted.

The Bahrain Declaration led to a number of far reaching statements by other EEC member states, notably France and Austria, supporting the Palestinian position. French President Valerie Giscard d’Estaing, in his own “Kuwait Declaration” of 3rd March 1980, a month after the Irish statement, expressed France’s first official endorsement of Palestinian self-determination and promoting the inclusion of the PLO in negotiations.

In the event, the EEC adopted the Venice Declaration on 13th June 1980, which has remained the basis of EU policy to this day. This included the following statements of principle:

4. ... the time has come to promote the recognition and implementation of the two principles universally accepted by the international community: the right to existence and to security of all the states in the region, including Israel, and justice for all the peoples, which implies the recognition of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people.
- ...
6. A just solution must finally be found to the Palestinian problem, which is not simply one of refugees. The Palestinian people, which is conscious of existing as such, must be placed in a position, by an appropriate process defined within the framework of the comprehensive peace settlement, to exercise fully its right to self-determination.
7. ...These principles apply to all the parties concerned, and thus to the Palestinian people, and to the PLO, which will have to be associated with the negotiations.
8. The nine [EEC Member States] recognize the special importance of the role played by the question of Jerusalem for all the parties concerned. The nine stress that they will not accept any unilateral initiative designed to change the status of Jerusalem and

that any agreement on the city's status should guarantee freedom of access for everyone to the holy places.

9. The nine stress the need for Israel to put an end to the territorial occupation which it has maintained since the conflict of 1967, as it has done for part of Sinai. They are deeply convinced that the Israeli settlements constitute a serious obstacle to the peace process in the Middle East. The nine consider that these settlements, as well as modifications in population and property in the occupied Arab territories, illegal under international law.

[\(Full text of the Venice Declaration below, Appendix II, pp. 23-24\).](#)

The Israeli government of Menachim Begin reacted with unprecedented ferocity to the change in the EEC position. In a statement on 15th June 1980, his Cabinet accused the EEC of demanding the inclusion in the peace process of that “*organization of murderers*”, “*the Arab SS known as ‘The Palestine Liberation Organization’*” whose charter it said sought the liquidation of Israel in words not heard since Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*. It continued:

“The initiators of the Venice Document and its authors even tried to interfere with the status of Jerusalem, our eternal capital, which is not to be divided again, and with our right to settle and live in Eretz Israel, a right which is also an inseparable part of our defence system in the face of enemies and attackers.”

But despite this invective from the former commander of the Irgun, the EEC position established in 1980 with courageous input by the Irish state has endured as the solid basis of European policy since. As Garret Fitzgerald told the Dáil in 1987, the Venice Declaration represented a “*major shift in European foreign policy,*” with the countries of the EEC “*shift[ing] towards the position we then held.*” Sixteen years after the Venice Declaration, Foreign Minister Dick Spring described it as “*a cornerstone of the [European] Union’s policy*” (*White Paper on Foreign Policy*, 1996, p. 262). More recently, on the thirtieth anniversary of the Declaration, the *New York Times* published an opinion editorial by two Israeli academics, Yonatan Touval and Sharon Pardo, stating that the Declaration established the principles that “*continue to define the contours of the only plausible agreement possible between Israel and the Palestinians... [T]hree decades later the Venice declaration continues to stand out as the boldest Mideast peace initiative to come out of Europe.*” (‘When Europe Spoke Out on the Mideast’, *International Herald Tribune*, 8th June 2010)

Policy of the Fine Gael-Labour Government post-Venice

The Irish policy on Palestine has retained a consistency from De Valera’s intervention in the League Mandates Committee in 1938, through Frank Aiken’s “3-Point Plan” of 1958, to the Haughey Government’s “Bahrain Declaration” of 1980 and the upholding of that position by the Fitzgerald coalition government of the 1980s. The only major change since has been the gradual development of “*shared sovereignty*” with the EU and the alignment of Irish foreign policy with that of the EU through a series of treaties incorporated into the Irish Constitution.

The Fine Gael-Labour Coalition of 1983-7, though not formally recognising the PLO, maintained the established position. Foreign Minister Peter Barry set it out as follows:

“Ireland’s position on the Middle East conflict had been closely coordinated with our EEC partners and was based on the principles of: (1) recognition of the right of all peoples in the area to justice and security, including that of the Palestinian

people to self-determination with all that this implied, including, in Ireland's view, their right to a state if that was what they wished; and (2) recognition of the right of all states in the region to a secure and peaceful existence," (*Irish Times*, 18.0.1983)

The phenomenon of Israeli settlement building in the colonised territories further drew the wrath of the Irish Government, Barry telling the Dáil on 5th July 1983 that while it had the "*right [to a] secure and peaceful existence ... Israel's rights do not extend to the implantation of settler colonies in the West Bank and Gaza.*" Addressing the UN General Assembly on 3rd October 1983, he warned prophetically of "*a process is in train*" in the occupied territories

"which may very soon create a situation that cannot be reversed ... the West Bank and Gaza have not been annexed by Israel – at least not yet. But the infra-structural and demographic alterations being planned and rapidly put into effect there by the Israeli authorities cannot but lead to a de facto absorption by Israel of the territories ... the process is gradual and invidious. It may lack the dramatic impact of an invasion ... but is no less real for that ... Acquisition by Israel of the West Bank would make a mockery of the international commitment to the rights of the Palestinian people," [Department of Foreign Affairs, *Statements and Speeches*, No. 5, 1983]

Irish policy stays firm 1988-2010

In 1988, the leader of the new Fianna Fáil government, Charles Haughey, reiterated the Irish position in a statement that the Palestinians "*had been injured, were the victims of a great wrong and had the right to justice.*" Ireland had been "*the first [EC] member state to recognise the right to self-determination of the Palestinians and their right to an independent state...*" It was the Irish "*conviction that it was for the Palestinian people to decide, within the framework of Security Council resolutions, the way in which they wished to exercise their right to self-determination and whether to do so by means of an independent state*" (*The Irish Times*, 18th June 1988)

Since the 1990s Irish governments have lent considerable support to the Palestinian cause through the various "peace processes". While the coalition Foreign Minister, Labour's Dick Spring, was described by Simon Peres as a "*Friend of Israel*", in 1995 he nevertheless visited Orient House, the unofficial PLO headquarters in East Jerusalem, much to the chagrin of the Likud Government. Spring, who opened the Israeli Embassy in Dublin in 1993, was described by *The Irish Times* at the time as "*balance[ing] firm criticisms of Israeli failures to live up to their obligations, with a clear statement of understanding of their problems.*" Throughout this period, the Irish Ambassador to the UN, Noel Dorr, spoke repeatedly and memorably on the issue, urging strong measures by the UN to enforce the democratic rights of Palestinians (See Dorr, *Ireland at the United Nations*, Dublin, 2010).

The Workers Party, which had emerged from "Official Sinn Fein" and entered the Dáil with three deputies in 1983, was particularly close to the PLO. Following the outbreak of the First Intifada, Proinsias de Rossa demanded in the Dáil the introduction of "*diplomatic or economic sanctions to protest Israeli activity*", and the following day his colleagues Joe Sherlock and Tomás MacGiolla drew comparisons between Israel and South Africa and pointed to the government support for sanctions against the latter. Haughey however rejected sanctions, saying they were likely only "*to heighten tensions in the region and harm the goal of Palestinian self-determination*" (Dáil Éireann, 15.11.88).

The Irish government's unwillingness ever since to advocate sanctions to pressurise Israel to comply with international law is the major weakness in the Irish position, while Proinsias de Rossa for his part has remained equally consistent in demanding that their use be contemplated. The position was reiterated by Foreign Minister Micheál Martín at the recent historic ICTU Conference, organised to promote a policy of sanctions, on 16th April 2010:

“Minister Martin told the conference that the Government does not agree with or support any form of boycott of Israel as such an approach would be counterproductive to efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He did, however, note that he has consistently argued against any move to upgrade EU-Israel relations ‘until such time as the level of political progress on the ground warrants it.”(*The Irish Times*, 17th April 2010)

This contrasts with Ireland's readiness to go along with economic sanctions, however reluctantly, when directed at other states in the Middle East which have incurred the displeasure of the West. In the case of Iraq, Brian Cowen when Foreign Minister endorsed the role of sanctions in forcing that country to comply with UN arms inspectors, telling the Dáil in January 2003 – just two months before the Anglo-American invasion that utterly destroyed that country:

“Membership of the [UN Security] council has also afforded us the opportunity to improve UN sanctions regimes. While there is no doubt that specifically targeted sanctions play an important role where flagrant breaches of international law occur or there is a threat to international peace, there is a strong balancing objective to ensure that the civilian population of the country against whose government the sanctions are imposed does not suffer,” (Johnny Fallon, *Brian Cowen in his own words*, Mercier, 2009, p. 213)

Nevertheless, Ireland's support for the Palestinian cause has remained notably forceful for a western state. Brian Cowen, as Ireland's foreign minister, was meeting Yasser Arafat in Ramallah when Al Quida attacked New York (9 /11). At this time Israel refused to meet with foreign dignitaries who met the Palestinian leader. With the world pointing the finger at the Palestinians as “*terrorist sympathizers*”, Cowen held a joint press conference with the PLO leader on 12th September 2001, stressing Arafat's condemnation of the New York attack and describing him as “*the symbol of the hope of self-determination of the Palestinian people*” and praising him for his “*outstanding work ... tenacity, and persistence.*” The basic consensus across the Irish political spectrum was reflected in a comment by former Fine Gael Taoiseach, Garret Fitzgerald, on television the following week when he condemned further Israeli killings of Palestinians and the occupation of the West Bank as “*a crime against humanity*” (*The Irish Times*, 18th September 2001).

Since 2006 the state has condemned the siege of Gaza, with Foreign Minister Dermot Ahern, in the first such statement by a European government, describing it in the Dáil on 10th March 2008 as “*collective punishment illegal under International Law.*” Following the Israeli onslaught on Gaza in December 2008-January 2009, Foreign Minister Martin sought its condemnation at European Council level and opposed the upgrading of EU trade relations with Israel. Ireland has also urged the inclusion of Hamas in talks and – within EU councils at least – sought an end to the EU-US boycott of them. A Dáil motion condemning the Israeli attack on the Free Gaza Flotilla in June 2010 was adopted unanimously by TDs.

Towards UN Recognition of the Palestinian State

The policy of the Irish state on the “Question of Palestine” has been astoundingly consistent since the 1930s, when it was first articulated at the League of Nations and extensively discussed in the press. At that time Irish opinion was almost unanimous in its criticisms of what it regarded as a British colonial undertaking, involving the plantation under British supervision of a white population in Arab territory and the displacement of the people living there to make way for them. At the League, Ireland opposed the proposed partition of Mandate Palestine and supported its treatment as a unitary territory to be ruled in accordance with the wishes of its population, whether Muslim, Jewish or Christian.

There was no element of “anti-Semitism” in the Irish position. Jews had played prominent roles in the Irish independence movement, and de Valera himself was particularly close to them. The Republican philosophy of the time regarded the Jewish community as an integral part of the Irish nation, and this was given surprising expression in the 1937 Constitution. The colonial project in Palestine was viewed as something altogether different.

When the conflicts in Europe escalated to a world war of catastrophic proportions from 1941, consuming many millions of lives, and news of the terrible Nazi massacres of the Jews reached Ireland, the state sought to use any modest influence it possessed in efforts to rescue people threatened with murder. The experience of the war appeared to lend the Zionist project a justification it had not previously possessed. But when the Zionists began to use the methods of ethnic cleansing on a massive scale to clear Palestine for their state, Irish opinion again condemned it forcefully.

With renewed conflicts in the Middle East in the 1960s and 1970s, accompanied by further expansions of the Jewish state, and further expulsions of the Arab population, the Irish state pioneered proposals at the UN seeking settlement based on the pre-1967 borders, the return of ethnically cleansed refugees and the establishment of a secure homeland for Palestinians. In 1980 the Irish state, with the “Bahrain Declaration”, became the first state in the EU to champion the cause of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders. This position was subsequently endorsed by the EU and became its own position.

Attempts by Israeli propagandists or some of their Irish supporters to pin a history of anti-Semitism on Ireland have proven unsustainable, and popular Irish attitudes to the conflict in Palestine remain stubbornly hostile to the Israeli case. This state of affairs causes some bewilderment in Israel. But Rory Miller, a pro-Israeli Irish born historian, neatly summarised the answer: *“Ireland still views Israel as an occupier and a colonialist entity.”* (*Jerusalem Post*, 9th June 2006)

Appendix I

Irish Government's "Bahrain Declaration", February 1980

Joint communiqué of the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Ireland, Mr. Brian Lenihan, and the Foreign Minister of the State of Bahrain, His Excellency Shaikh Muhammad Bin Mubarak Al-Khalifa, issued on February 10, 1980, during the State Visit of the President of Ireland, Mr. Patrick Hillery, to Bahrain

1-3. General Relations

1. His Excellency Mr. Brian Lenihan, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ireland and His Excellency Shaikh Muhammad Bin Mubarak Al-Khalifa, Foreign Minister of Bahrain, exchanged views during their meeting at Manama on 10 February 1980. They reviewed a wide range of topics covering bilateral, regional and international affairs. The discussion was held in a most constructive atmosphere. The two sides expressed their desire to strengthen further the good relationships that exist between Ireland and Bahrain and especially to promote increased practical co-operation.
2. As regards their bi-lateral co-operation, it was agreed that scope for further such co-operation exists in the economic and technical fields. The areas of electricity generation, aviation, transport and export promotion were identified, as also the medical and educational areas, as those offering most immediate prospects. The two sides agreed to form a joint Technical Committee to study ways of promoting cooperation between the two States.
3. The two sides welcomed the ever closer links between Europe and the Arab world, which they believe to be of the greatest importance for the stability and prosperity of both regions.

4-7. Palestine

4. As regards the Middle East, it was agreed that a solution to the Palestinian problem was central to any peace settlement. The two sides stressed the urgent need to reach a negotiated solution which would be comprehensive, just and lasting.
5. The two sides agreed that the Palestinian people had the right to self-determination and to the establishment of an independent State in Palestine within the framework of a negotiated peace settlement which would include the principles of Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338.
6. The two sides stressed that all parties including the PLO should play a full role in the negotiation of a comprehensive peace settlement. In this regard, Ireland recognises the role of the PLO in representing the Palestinian people.
7. Both parties agreed that an essential aspect of a solution to the Palestinian problem was the withdrawal of Israel from all territory occupied since the 1967 conflict, including Jerusalem, in accordance with the relevant Security Council resolutions.

8-12. Other Issues

8. It was agreed that the Euro-Arab dialogue has the potential for substantial mutual benefit and that the dialogue should be resumed as soon as possible. The question of closer cooperation between the countries of the Gulf and the European Communities was discussed.

9. The two sides reviewed the situation in the Arabian Gulf and its strategic importance and affirmed that this region must remain a zone of peace and stability and should not be involved in the rivalry of the great powers.
10. Both parties condemned the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which they considered as a blatant interference in the affairs of a state that belongs to the Islamic world. They stated that the invasion was contrary to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations and constituted a threat to world peace and security.
11. Both sides expressed their faith in the principles of the United Nations. They affirmed their adherence to the principles of peaceful co-existence, non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, and respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states.
12. Foreign Minister Brian Lenihan briefed his colleague in detail on the present situation in Northern Ireland.

Appendix II

The Venice Declaration of the EEC, June 1980 Resolution of the heads of government and ministers of foreign affairs of the European Council (Venice Declaration), 13 June 1980

RESOLUTION

1. The heads of state and government and the ministers of foreign affairs held a comprehensive exchange of views on all aspects of the present situation in the Middle East, including the state of negotiations resulting from the agreements signed between Egypt and Israel in March 1979. They agreed that growing tensions affecting this region constitute a serious danger and render a comprehensive solution to the Israeli-Arab conflict more necessary and pressing than ever.
2. The nine member states of the European Community consider that the traditional ties and common interests which link Europe to the Middle East oblige them to play a special role and now require them to work in a more concrete way towards peace.
3. In this regard, the nine countries of the community base themselves on (U N) Security Council resolutions 242 and 338 and the positions which they have expressed on several occasions, notably in their declarations of 29 June 1977, 10 September 1970, 26 March and 18 June 1979, as well as in the speech made on their behalf on 25 September 1979 by the Irish minister of foreign affairs at the 34th UN General Assembly
4. On the bases thus set out, the time has come to promote the recognition and implementation of the two principles universally accepted by the international community: the right to existence and to security of all the states in the region, including Israel, and justice for all the peoples, which implies the recognition of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people.
5. All of the countries in the area are entitled to live in peace within secure, recognized and guaranteed borders. The necessary guarantees for a peace settlement should be provided by the UN by a decision of the Security Council

and, if necessary, on the basis of other mutually agreed procedures. The nine declare that they are prepared to participate within the framework of a comprehensive settlement in a system of concrete and binding international guarantees, including (guarantees) on the ground.

6. A just solution must finally be found to the Palestinian problem, which is not simply one of refugees. The Palestinian people, which is conscious of existing as such, must be placed in a position, by an appropriate process defined within the framework of the comprehensive peace settlement, to exercise fully its right to self-determination.
7. The achievement of these objectives requires the involvement and support of all the parties concerned in the peace settlement which the nine are endeavouring to promote in keeping with the principles formulated in the declaration referred to above. These principles apply to all the parties concerned, and thus to the Palestinian people, and to the PLO, which will have to be associated with the negotiations.
8. The nine recognize the special importance of the role played by the question of Jerusalem for all the parties concerned. The nine stress that they will not accept any unilateral initiative designed to change the status of Jerusalem and that any agreement on the city's status should guarantee freedom of access for everyone to the holy places.
9. The nine stress the need for Israel to put an end to the territorial occupation which it has maintained since the conflict of 1967, as it has done for part of Sinai. They are deeply convinced that the Israeli settlements constitute a serious obstacle to the peace process in the Middle East. The nine consider that these settlements, as well as modifications in population and property in the occupied Arab territories, are illegal under international law.
10. Concerned as they are to put an end to violence, the nine consider that only the renunciation of force or the threatened use of force by all the parties can create a climate of confidence in the area, and constitute a basic element for a comprehensive settlement of the conflict in the Middle East.
11. The nine have decided to make the necessary contacts with all the parties concerned. The objective of these contacts would be to ascertain the position of the various parties with respect to the principles set out in this declaration and in the light of the results of this consultation process to determine the form which such an initiative on their part could take.



Sadaka – an Arabic term for ‘friendship’ – is an Association established in Ireland in 2009 to maximise support in Ireland for the Palestinian people in their struggle for national, democratic and human rights. It aims to persuade those in government to champion the cause of justice for Palestine.

The Board of Sadaka consists of Marie Crawley (Chair), Noreen Byrne (Secretary), Adnan Shabab (Treasurer), Dr. David Morrison, Alan Lonergan, Dr. Des McGuinness, Hilary Minch, Philip O’Connor, Dr. Elaine Murtagh and Caitlin Ni Chonail.

If you would like to become a supporter of Sadaka or donate to our campaign, please contact us at:

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Sadaka supports a peaceful settlement in Israel/Palestine based on the principles of democracy and justice, be that in two states or in one state. We maintain an independent position on internal politics within Palestine, favouring neither Fatah, Hamas nor any other Palestinian political organisation.