

Written evidence submitted by Maggie Foyer (IPC0094)

Inquiry: Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

My name is Maggie Foyer. I am founder and vice-chair of The Olive Harvest Trust, (reg. charity 1165662) a charity that assist village schools mainly in the volatile area south of Nablus on the West Bank of the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). We had been supporting farmers on the olive harvest as a protective presence since 2004, enjoying the warm friendship and hospitality of the Palestinian families. Living in Area B and working in Area C for around three weeks each year over the last two decades has given me a keen insight into the restricted lives Palestinians and also into their hopes and fears.

I was born in Johannesburg in 1949, the year the system of Apartheid was introduced. As European colonials we already believed in white leadership and the National government simply refined it. Johannesburg also had a prominent Jewish population. The nascent Israeli State was just one year old, and our two countries worked closely together. I grew up on the film, *Exodus*, and the mellifluous voice of Andy William's singing, 'This land is mine, God gave this land to me!' I listened to the words of Golda Meir and wanted passionately to live on a Kibbutz. Israel seemed a socialist dream to me, living in fascist South Africa.

These two ideologies have absorbed much of my life. I know only too well how the propaganda permeates and helps you to believe your privilege is a God-given right and if the world criticises, you stand together, declare yourself the victim and say they don't understand the problem. There is a border between human and inhuman behaviour and all that needs to happen is to slip, quietly and imperceptibly over that line, where the oppressed person becomes the 'other', someone not quite as human as you. You can then live with the system, with a clear conscience because they're different. They are not as intelligent, they are a coarser breed and don't need good housing, food or schooling and, of course, they cannot be in government.

As I grew older and formed other ideas, I also experienced the problems of being considered a traitor, losing friends and family and finding political allies. I joined the Black Sash, a women's anti-Apartheid organisation and worked briefly as a paralegal at their Advice Office. This was a seminal experience. Helping Black South Africans circumvent the notorious pass laws I understood how almost impossible it was to stay on the right side of the law. I came to realise that there were two broad categories of prisoners: those guilty of crimes and those who are caught in a mess of unjust laws because of their ethnicity. The West Bank is similar with its system of 'enclave-based justice': military law for the indigenous inhabitants and civil law for the settlers.

Israeli Military Penal System

The centrality of prisons and hostages in the daily life of Palestine is difficult for people in a country like Britain to comprehend. For Palestinians living on the West Bank every aspect of daily life is prescribed by the military commander who is the sovereign with extensive search and detention powers. Statistics note that 40% of Palestinian males have experienced imprisonment. This figure will be higher post October 7, 2023.

No search warrant is required in order for the Israeli military to enter Palestinian homes and night raids are increasingly frequent. Living in the villages, we were aware of activity at night

when army jeeps and sometimes tanks came through the narrow streets at around 2am. These activities cause a high level of stress and fear. Often there are no arrests the purpose is simply to incite terror. Thousands are arrested each year on suspicion of 'security offences'. The categories are extensive and target civil society's political expression and curtail human rights. All court hearings are held in Hebrew and charge sheets are written in Hebrew. Interpreters are in very short supply. Over 95% of trials end in conviction.

Most pernicious is Military Order no. 1651, allowing 'administrative detention'. A Palestinian may be detained without a warrant, and charges do not need to be disclosed to the detainee but he or she may be held simply on the suspicion that they may be a security threat. The order is for six months and may be extended indefinitely. Without knowing the charges, the prisoner cannot build a defence and will remain incarcerated on the whim of the military commander. The other way out is a hostage deal and prisoner swap.

I have experienced the excitement in Palestine when the names of prisoners on a hostage swap are read out over the radio in shared taxis – the tension and the wild excitement is palpable. Just about every Palestinian family has a relative in jail. I had been working in Palestine for many years before I came across the gruesome business of the Israeli practice of withholding prisoners' bodies which contravenes both Israeli and international law. A friend was searching through pages of names and photos on his screen and told me he was searching to see if there was news of his brother's body.

It would help in negotiations for prisoner exchanges if Western governments understood more about the Israeli's corrupt and discriminatory penal system. I am sure other parties will bring up this matter. Until the rot in the military court system is cleared, the pursuit of hostages will continue unabated.

Israel as a colonial state.

It took me many years to realise how little I knew about the founding of the State of Israel but when I stood at the checkpoint at Huwarra on Christmas Day in 2002 as a volunteer with the International Women's Peace Service I fully realised the mendacity of the propaganda I had been fed. It was much like my first visit to Soweto to stay with black friends - a real eye-opener.

Jews and Muslims had lived together in many countries of the Middle East for centuries but the ill-starred alignment of the WW2 Allies vulnerability in 1917, The Balfour Declaration, Zionist ambitions and then decades later the catastrophe of the Holocaust shaped the birth of the State of Israel in 1948. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed in 1948, India had already declared independence from Britain in 1947 and African countries were lined up to shake off colonialism when it inextricably coincided with the recolonisation of Palestine cloaked by post-Holocaust guilt.

Most of the many Jewish immigrants from Europe would have preferred to go to New York but it suited Westerners, still tainted with anti-Semitism, to go along with the Zionist project and colonise Palestine. In my years in Palestine I found every Palestinian knew about the duplicity of the Balfour Declaration while hardly any in the UK do.

Arthur Balfour in 1917 saw no reason to listen to the 'desires ... of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land'. Nor could he understand why any 'Power should object to our

telling the Muslim what he ought to think'. This thinking was integral to European colonialism, and it is shameful that it is still in evidence today. The sense of Islam as 'the infidel' has persisted since the Crusades. However, so many farmers – mostly older men – say: 'How can we hate the Jews? We are also people of the Book.' While I hear Muslims refer to their faith as 'of the Book', I have never heard this from Jews. The mood among Palestinians is anger at the injustice they suffer and incomprehension that countries, like the UK which they see as having some responsibility for the loss of their land, do so little to help them. However, there is very seldom the ideological hatred as I have witnessed from young settler men fired up with religious fervour. There is still a groundswell of people willing to negotiate but I would imagine this is shrinking post October 7, 2023.

The lesson to be learnt from the dismantling of Britain's colonies is that you have to negotiate with the oppressed. Colonists are notorious for refusing to accept leaders rising from the ranks of the colonised. In fact, anyone who fights for freedom is at risk of being called a terrorist. I grew up on stories of the horrors of Mau-Mau terrorism and only found out about the terror on the other side much later. At present Palestinians have no forum to discuss or present their legitimate complaints. Israeli settlers can vote for representatives that rule the territory as the occupying power, the indigenous people of the territory cannot elect government representatives to govern their affairs. Until Palestinians have a legitimate voice there can be no peace.

I was not surprised by the results of the free and fair elections in Palestine in 2006. Most people I knew would have voted Hamas but a large proportion of those were as a protest vote against Fatah which has little legitimacy and is notoriously corrupt. The UK, together with most Western governments then took the outrageous step of boycotting Hamas. Former PM Tony Blair had the decency to admit in 2017: 'We were wrong to yield to Israeli pressure to impose an immediate boycott of Hamas after the Islamic faction won the Palestinian elections.' Hamas had a landslide victory but agreed to power share with Fatah. This was a golden opportunity wasted and Britain along with other governments should be shamed for giving in to Israeli pressure.

Chris Hani, General-Secretary of the SA communist Party, was assassinated in 1993 by a white far-right supporter. He was a popular figure, especially among young blacks and this had sparked race riots. F.W. de Klerk condemned the action outright, noting that although Hani was right at the opposite of the political spectrum to himself, you achieve nothing by eliminating your opponents. You have to sit down and negotiate with them.

The killing of Ismail Haniyeh, the head of Hamas's political bureau and chief negotiator in Tehran was a clear anti-diplomatic provocation from Israel and should have led to condemnation by the West but again there was no reaction.

The change over to a democratic South Africa seemed a pipe dream in the 1980s, then amazingly, Apartheid dismantled over the next decade. There is a great deal to be learnt from the process. Nelson Mandela's prison letters between about 1985 -1990 reveal the painful and protracted process to set up peace talks between the ANC and the white minority government. Mandela flatly rejected the government's position that the ANC must first lay down its weapons. Mandela countered: 'No serious political organisation will ever talk peace when an aggressive war is being waged against it.' (From Mandela's long memorandum, December 1989 to State President de Klerk.) He argued that there must be a level playing

field between the two parties, not a master/ slave relationship, or the deal could not hold. The ANC must have the means to defend itself, it was not only the whites who had the right of self-defence.

The right of Israel to self-defence is constantly invoked but what about Palestinians? The West Bank villagers have absolutely no defence against increasingly well-armed gangs of settlers supported by the Israeli police and the army, who storm the villages and burn cars and houses. You need to be standing in an olive grove when faced by young men wielding crowbars and baseball bats (and the armed guards behind as backup) to fully appreciate the total vulnerability of the farming community.

Despite declaring the settlement project illegal, the UK government has taken no action to halt its expansion. I picked one day when across the valley a truck was unloading gravel onto the far side of the farmer's land to expand the settlement of Kedumin. Every fifteen minutes the truck backed up and dumped another load while the farmer watched his land being taken. It was heartbreaking, these farmers have tended the trees when their fathers and grandfathers had the land and now have to watch incomers from Europe or the USA take their land to build houses on stolen land. There has been no move by our government to hold perpetrators of this violence and theft accountable or to ensure the protection of civilians. Sanctions would be an appropriate first step.

These may seem small steps but until we allow Palestinians a voice, and that must include Hamas supporters and not necessarily the armed wing, the endless cycle will continue. Britain must look back on its history with the region and see that there is another way. Edwin Montague, the only Jewish member of the British cabinet in 1917 called Zionism 'a mischievous political creed' and the Board of Deputies of the time said that giving Jews special rights in Palestine would provoke 'the most bitter of feuds with their Arab neighbours'. Please can we learn from history.

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