

# Israel simply has no right to exist

Peace might have a real chance without Israelis' biblical claims

## Special report: Israel and the Middle East

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- Faisal Bodi

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Several years ago, I suggested in my students' union newspaper that Israel shouldn't exist. I also said the sympathy evoked by the Holocaust was a very handy cover for Israeli atrocities. Overnight I became public enemy number one. I was a Muslim fundamentalist, a Jew-hater, somebody who trivialised the memory of the most abominable act in history. My denouncers followed me, photographed me, and even put telephone calls through to my family telling them to expect a call from the grim reaper. Thankfully, my notoriety in Jewish circles has since waned to the extent that recently I gave an inter-faith lecture sponsored by the Leo Baeck College, even though my views have remained the same. Israel has no right to exist. I know it's a hugely unfashionable thing to say and one which, given the current parlous state of the peace process, some will also find irresponsible. But it's a fact that I have always considered central to any genuine peace formula.

Certainly there is no moral case for the existence of Israel. Israel stands as the realisation of a biblical statement. Its *raison d'être* was famously delineated by former prime minister Golda Meir. "This country exists as the accomplishment of a promise made by God Himself. It would be absurd to call its legitimacy into account."

That biblical promise is Israel's only claim to legitimacy. But whatever God meant when he promised Abraham that "unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the Euphrates," it is doubtful that he intended it to be used as an excuse to take by force and chicanery a land lawfully inhabited and owned by others.

It does no good to anyone to brush this fact, uncomfortable as it might be, under the table. But that has been the failing with Oslo. When it signed the agreement, the PLO made the cardinal error of assuming that you could

bury the hatchet by rewriting history. It accepted as a starting point that Israel had a right to exist. The trouble with this was that it also meant, by extension, an acceptance that the way Israel came into being was legitimate. As the latest troubles have shown, ordinary Palestinians are not prepared to follow their leaders in this feat of intellectual amnesia.

Israel's other potential claim to legitimacy, international recognition, is just as dubious. The two pacts which sealed Palestine's future were both concluded by Britain. First we signed the Sykes-Picot agreement with France, pledging to divvy up Ottoman spoils in the Levant. A year later, in 1917, the Balfour Declaration promised a national home for the Jewish people. Under international law the declaration was null and void since Palestine did not belong to Britain - under the pact of the League of Nations it belonged to Turkey.

By the time the UN accepted a resolution on the partition of Palestine in 1947, Jews constituted 32% of the population and owned 5.6% of the land. By 1949, largely as a result of paramilitary organisations such as the Haganah, Irgun and Stern gang, Israel controlled 80% of Palestine and 770,000 non-Jews had been expelled from their country.

This then is the potted history of the iniquities surrounding its own birth that Israel must acknowledge in order for peace to have a chance. After years of war, peace comes from forgiving, not forgetting; people never forget but they have an extraordinary capacity to forgive. Just look at South Africa, which showed the world that a cathartic truth must precede reconciliation.

Far from being a force for liberation and safety after decades of suffering, the idea that Israel is some kind of religious birthright has only imprisoned Jews in a never-ending cycle of conflict. The "promise" breeds an arrogance which institutionalises the inferiority of other peoples and generates atrocities against them with alarming regularity. It allows soldiers to defy their consciences and blast unarmed schoolchildren. It gives rise to legislation seeking to prevent the acquisition of territory by non-Jews.

More crucially, the promise limits Israel's capacity to seek models of coexistence based on equality and the respect of human rights. A state based on so exclusivist a claim to legitimacy cannot but conceive of separation as a solution. But separation is not the same as lasting peace; it only pulls apart warring parties. It does not heal old wounds, let alone redress historical wrongs.

However, take away the biblical right and suddenly mutual coexistence, even a one-state solution, doesn't seem that far-fetched. What name that coexistence will take is less important than the fact that peoples have forgiven and that some measure of justice has been restored. Jews will continue to live in the Holy Land - as per the promise - as equals alongside its other rightful inhabitants.

If that kind of self-reproach is forthcoming, Israel can expect the Palestinians to be forgiving and magnanimous in return. The alternative is perpetual war.

Faisal Bodi is a Muslim journalist.

[comment@guardian.co.uk](mailto:comment@guardian.co.uk)