

# Another Catastrophe in the Middle East

*Professor John Chalcraft gives his analysis of the current conflict in the Middle East and the historical context surrounding it.*

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*(This article reflects the views and opinions of the author and does not represent the views or opinions of LSE Department of Government, nor the views and opinions of the London School of Economics and Political Science.)*

The UK has embarked on another catastrophic chapter in its deeply problematic involvement in the history of the peoples of the Middle East.

In announcing its absolute support of the State of Israel, in the wake of the Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023, our government has done its part in giving the green light for the daily mass slaughter of thousands of Palestinians trapped in Gaza, a population already crippled by decades of dispossession, occupation, apartheid, and siege.

Even for historians and social scientists cognizant of Britain's profoundly negative role in the history of the Palestinian people, the appalling disregard of our ruling classes for the most fundamental precepts of international and humanitarian law, and the government's brazen efforts to suppress all but the most anodyne manifestations of domestic dissent – on the streets, in football stadiums, in associations, unions, and universities – have been nothing short of shocking.

The crisis we are now witnessing will have deeply negative consequences, on the domestic and international stage, for years to come.

The bankruptcy of political vision on the question of Palestine, and the abandonment of moral consistency on the deaths of innocents, are matched only by the historical amnesia represented by those who would start the clock on 7 October 2023.

We would do well, indeed, to do something other than scorn and censor those who point to the relevant historical background.

After crushing the anti-colonial, liberal-nationalist, and anti-Zionist Palestinian Great Revolt of 1936-39, at the expense of thousands of Palestinian lives, the British empire

ran down the flag on Mandate Palestine in May 1948, abandoning the Palestinian and Arab population to ethnic cleansing and dispossession. More than 700,000 Palestinians were driven by the State of Israel out of their homeland and into refugee camps, many of which exist to the present, in occupied Gaza and the West Bank, as in neighbouring Arab states.

The Oslo Process of the 1990s represented a once in a lifetime chance for a political, two-state solution, but Israel, backed by the United States and the British, did not allow a Palestinian national state to come into existence, even on a mere 22% of the territory of the former Mandate Palestine.

Hamas gathered strength amid the ruins of the two-state solution, and since the last meaningful negotiations collapsed at Taba in early 2001, Britain, has in practice connived with the occupying power in the ongoing siege of Gaza, and the colonisation of the occupied West Bank, and the imposition of a regime of apartheid on the Palestinian people.

The British government, indeed, has been busy over the last two decades, not in constructing and implementing a political solution, but falsely accusing nonviolent Palestinian resistance, such as efforts to boycott, divest from, or sanction Israel, of antisemitism, and passing legislation that erodes basic democratic rights and freedoms.

Historically, the turn to violent resistance, especially after the failure of nonviolent methods, is not new. The Palestinian armed struggle of 1937-39 followed the failure of a peaceful, six-month long general strike. The years of Palestinian guerrilla struggle (1965-1982) followed the catastrophic dispossession (*nakba*) of 1948. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon of 1982 killed upwards of 17,000 civilians, and even ousted the PLO, but Hizbullah arose to contest the subsequent Israeli occupation of the Lebanese South, and remains a major regional force today. The armed second intifada of 2000-2003 followed the failure of the nonviolent first intifada of 1987-1991. In recent weeks, with gruesome predictability, the pendulum has swung once again.

Even after more than a century, the British ruling classes, together with much of our media, appear to have learned nothing from this miserable past, which has claimed the lives of so many innocents, including in Israel.

There is no solution to this history without a political vision. Israel's Iron Wall, a policy

that relies on military supremacy in relation to the Palestinians, riveted together as it has long been with racist, colonial and Orientalist stereotypes, will not deliver a lasting peace. Not now, not then, and not in the future.

The global majority understands this. Millions of people, all over the world, have come out to demonstrate solidarity with Palestine in recent weeks. On 27 October 2023 the United Nations General Assembly voted for a 'humanitarian truce' by an overwhelming majority (120 votes for, 14 votes against). The goal of the resolution is to stop the bombing so that lifesaving humanitarian aid can be delivered. The United Kingdom abstained.

*Image credit: [Prachatai](#)*