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ISRAEL

Rarely in history has such a small piece of territory generated so much political tension as Israel has done. The main amount of area in dispute is basically the equivalent of the strip of land between Sydney and Newcastle, out to the Blue Mountains.

The state of Israel has rarely known a day of peace since its creation in 1948. There has been a constant struggle for survival. It is not simply an argument over where the national boundaries should be drawn. Many Arab governments even deny that Israel has a right to exist as a country. The president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has recently called for Israel to be wiped off the map and there are concerns about a secret Iranian nuclear weapon programme.

Britain took over the territory from the Turkish (Ottoman) empire at the end of World War I. Palestine became a mandate under the League of Nations, with Britain preparing the country for eventual independence.

Some Jews had managed to live in the territory over the thousands of years since the Romans destroyed the Great Temple in AD 70 and put down a Jewish rebellion. They survived all sorts of persecution by Christians and Muslims.

In the 1930s, with Hitler coming to power in Germany and persecuting Jews, Jews from central Europe wished to flee to the British mandate. But the Arabs in the mandate opposed their entry and there was some violence. There were attacks on Jewish communities in Palestine (and Baghdad, Cairo, Tunis and Casablanca) during 1936-9.

The British Government established a commission of inquiry to try to find a way forward in the mandate. The 1937 Peel Commission considered the creation of two states, Arab and Jewish, side by side.

The 1937 idea has cast a long shadow over the region. President Bush (2001-9) spoke about his "roadmap for peace" and President Clinton in the 1990s endorsed the "Oslo peace process". The United Nations in the late 1940s created its own peace plan. All of these efforts are basically a variation on the 1937 Peel Commission idea of two states.

It is depressing that so little progress has been made since 1937. The politicians in Israel, the UN, US and elsewhere are still re-inventing the Peel wheel.

Two themes have remained constant over the decades. One is that the Jews were willing to accept the 1937 idea of two states. The territory was less than some had hoped for but the Jewish Agency (the unofficial “government” of the pre-Israel Jewish community) were willing to accept it. Most still support it.

Some Israeli extremists have talked about the control of all biblical Eretz Yisrael Hashlita (the Complete Land of Israel), whose borders would probably run from the Mediterranean across into parts of modern day Jordan and even Iraq. But they have represented a minority of the population.

Second, the Arabs opposed the “two state solution”. The Palestinians who testified before the 1937 Peel Commission were willing to deny themselves a state if it meant that they could stop the Jews from having one as well.

After World War II, the British were tired of imperial burdens and just wanted to get out of them as quickly as possible. Palestine was no exception. There was international sympathy for the surviving European Jews who wanted to go to the mandate. Mediating between the Arabs and Jews seemed all too complicated for the British.

The British handed the problem over to the new United Nations and got out in 1947. UN mediators again revived the “two-state” format. The Jewish Agency accepted it and the Arabs rejected it.

20 years later, in 1967, when the UN Security Council proposed an exchange of land for peace and the diplomatic recognition of Israel, the Arab countries unanimously rejected the proposal.

Ironically, every time the Palestinians have rejected an offer of “two states”, they were offered less territory the next time around. Under the 1937 Peel Commission, the Palestinians would have received 80 per cent of the territory, under the 1947 UN plan the figure was 45 per cent and under President Clinton’s Camp David mediation it was 20 per cent.

An Israeli politician once commented that the Palestinians never lose an opportunity to lose an opportunity.

Ironically, the Arabs who stayed within the new Israeli state after 1948 did quite well compared with the Arabs in the adjoining countries. They have enjoyed more rights there than do people in the surrounding Arab countries.

Israel is a far more secular state than any Arab state – and probably even more secular than its great supporter the United States. There is freedom to worship (and to be an agnostic or atheist).

There are over a million Arabs who are full Israeli citizens – about 20 per cent of the population. They are represented in the Knesset (parliament) and on the Supreme Court. Arabic is an official Israeli language.

Israeli Arabs are better off – as measured by longevity, health care and legal rights - than other Arabs in the Middle East. Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East. It is the only country where crooked politicians are punished.

The new country had a difficult birth. Shortly after the 1948 establishment of Israel an independent state, the new government had to employ force to disarm Jewish militia groups. The groups had been active in the struggle driving the British out of the mandate and then defending the new state against the Arab neighbours who had attacked it.

The most dramatic confrontation took place off the coast of Tel Aviv, when Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion ordered Israel's army to sink a ship, the "Atalena", that was bringing arms to Menachem Begin's Etzel (or Irgun). This group had been designated by the British as a terrorist group. One of its main operations had been blowing up a wing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, which had been the headquarters for the British occupation.

Ben-Gurion's actions were very controversial – and remain so to this day. Some old Israelis recall with anger that his first action as prime minister was to kill Jews.

But it was the right decision. By disarming the paramilitary groups and demanding a civilian government's monopoly of arms, he assured that democratic principles and governmental accountability would govern the use of all military force.

This tough policy has been maintained. For example, the Kach Party, founded by the late Rabbi Meir Kahane, was banned from taking part in Knesset elections because it incited racism against Arabs.

There is a tragedy that if the 1937 "two states" solution were now in operation, the area could be thriving. Less money would be spent on weapons and war, and more on business and social welfare.

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