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Reports

Beyond Trump's "Deal of the Century"

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Ivanka Jerusalem [Getty]

Abstract

In an interview with the Wall Street Journal, published on November 11, 2016, a few weeks before his inauguration, President Donald Trump said that he wanted to help resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He described the conflict as “the war that never ends”; and what he had in mind was “the ultimate deal”. As he bragged about his deal making skills, he added, “I'd like to do the deal that can't be made. And do it for humanity's sake”. (1) He went on to repeat this commitment to reaching a “deal” on a number of occasions saying that he was optimistic that he could get this done. He met Palestinian Authority President Abbas on May 3, 2017 in Washington and visited Israel and the Palestinian Authority a little later in the month, in the course of his first visit abroad, always expressing optimism; but, never giving a hint of what he was proposing. Some analysts argued that he might even deliver what he calls “the deal of the century” because he is such an unconventional politician. (2) Mr. Abbas met President Trump again in the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly meeting on September 20, 2017 and thanked him for his support. “If this is proof of anything.... it's a test of the seriousness of your Excellency, Mr. President, to achieve the “deal of the century” in the Middle East during this year or in the coming months, God willing” Abbas said through an interpreter. (3) Trump said his team of advisors was working very hard on the issue, as were Israel, Saudi Arabia and other nations. “I think we have a very good chance, and I certainly will devote everything within my heart and within my soul to get the deal made” (4).

The 'Deal' Goes Sour

By November 2017, it was reported that Trump's peace plan would support the establishment of a Palestinian state, on unspecified territory, without Jerusalem as its capital and with all the settlements remaining. The report, based on the testimony of senior Israeli officials on Israel's negotiating team, also indicated that Trump's plan would ignore the Palestinian right of return and give control of the Jordan Valley to Israel. (6) Trump had promised, during his election campaign, that he would - as promised so many times previously by the United States - move the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Previous presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama had deferred the move on the grounds of national Security. Trump deferred the decision twice and then on 6th December he announced that the embassy would move. The early optimism began to evaporate. This led Abbas to brand Trump's peace efforts as "the slap of the century", and say the United States could no longer play any role in the Middle East peace process following the move. (7)

On March 16, 2018, the Middle East Eye reported that the Saudis had delivered a copy of the "deal of the century" to Abbas, which he refused to open. However, the Palestinian Authority knew that, under the proposal, the Palestinian state would be based on Gaza and half of the West Bank without Jerusalem; and there would be a humanitarian solution to the Refugee problem. The Plan included building a new 'Jerusalem' for Palestine from surrounding villages. Palestinian security and borders would remain in Israeli hands, and the settlements and final borders, would be left to future negotiations.

A route would be provided to enable Palestinians to pray at Al Aqsa and the church of the Holy sepulchre. The same article reported that the Saudi King Salman phoned President Abbas and asked him to send his intelligence chief Majid Faraj to Riyadh. Faraj was received by the Saudi intelligence chief who handed him the US proposal. The article also commented that Saudi Arabia had raised aid to the Palestinian Authority in the last couple of months from \$7.5 million per month to \$20 million; and suggested that this was seen as a "bribe to accept the deal".

The report added that there was a meeting in February of the European Union representatives in Jerusalem. The US envoy for the Middle East, Jason Greenblatt, said that the US plan was designed to benefit the region as a whole, and did not require the consent of

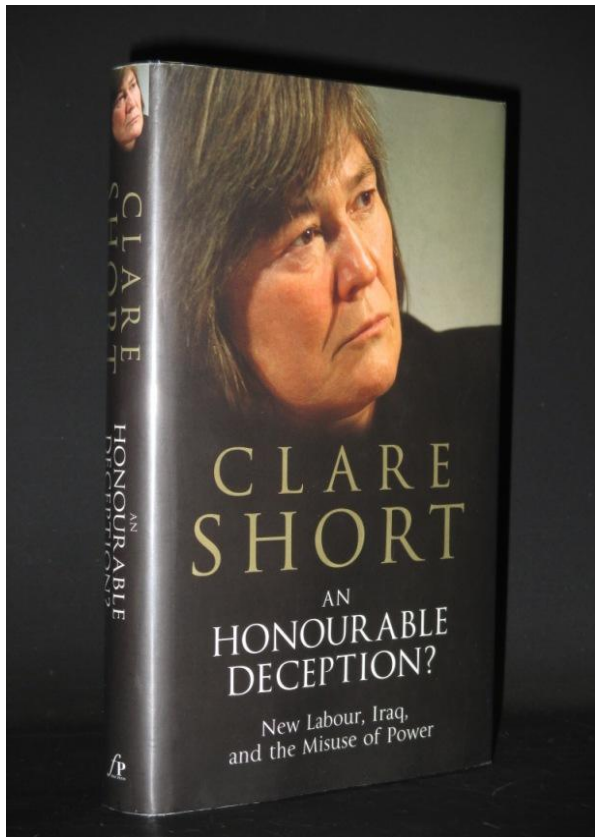
the Palestinians. He said the US “deal of the century” was a regional plan designed to end the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and create an Arab- Israeli Coalition to counter Iran and terrorism. (8)

The opening of the US Embassy in Jerusalem and slaughter in Gaza

On May 14, 2018, the US Embassy was opened in a ceremony where Ivanka Trump, Mr Trump's daughter, represented her father. At the same time, residents of Gaza were demonstrating peacefully to demand the right to return to their lands, a right to which they are entitled under international law. By June 8, the Israeli army killed 129 Gazans and wounded more 600, some very severely with life disabling injuries. (9)

Then, the news got even worse. In an interview with Reuters published May 24th, Israeli intelligence Minister, Yisrael Katz, described endorsement of Israel's hold on the Golan as the proposal now topping the agenda in talks with the US. (10) Lawyer and advisor to the Palestinian negotiating team, John V. Whitbeck, commented that if the United States were to follow up its recognition of Israel's claim over East Jerusalem by recognising its claim on the occupied Golan, then it could not continue to argue that Russia's reintegration of Crimea into Russia, breached international law and was deserving of sanctions.

Both East Jerusalem and the Golan were conquered in a war initiated by Israel. Their continued occupation 50 years later, violates the UN charter. Thus, on top of the injustice suffered in the Middle East, we are seeing an act of continuing undermining of the rules based on international order and a reversion to “might is right”. At a time when we need greater international cooperation to deal with the enormous challenge of climate change and the need for humanity to shift to a sustainable way of living, the existing order is being drastically undermined. It is a painful irony that the lead in this destruction is being taken by the strongest power in the world. After the Second World War, the same power played the leading role in establishing the rules-based international order that was supposed to forever ban the acquisition of territory by force.



"An Honourable Deception?: New Labour, Iraq, and the Misuse of Power" by Clare Short, published by Free Press, 2004

Divide and Rule

We should ask ourselves, why this is happening now? Despite the extraordinary character of President Trump, it would be a mistake to attribute it entirely to him. The United States has been moving in this direction for a considerable time. The European Union, which declares respect for human rights and international norms as part of its founding principles, has done little to resist Israel's constant and continuing breaches of international law. (11) Uri Avnery, a long-standing Israeli peace activist and strong supporter of a two-state solution, gets to the nub of the explanation in his comment of May 26, 2018. His blog is worth quoting at some length, "The Arab world has always been disunited. But in the past it was a hidden disunity. The lack of coordination between Egypt, Jordan and Syria enabled us to win the 1948 war. Now the disunity has become open and extreme. Something is happening that in the past was but a dream: Saudi Arabia almost openly cooperates with Netanyahu in the fight against Iran, and so does Egypt." (12)

On Black Monday, unarmed Palestinians in Gaza were slaughtered wholesale. Yet not in a single Arab country did stormy demonstrations break out. Not even in the West Bank. Nor in East Jerusalem. Only a tiny Arab demonstration in Haifa, in which a policeman broke the leg

of a shackled demonstrator after his arrest. The entire world witnessed the hideous connection: the victory celebration of Netanyahu at the new US embassy in Jerusalem, while thousands were wounded or killed on the Gaza border. Just a few hours later, the mass outbreak of joy in Tel Aviv's central square over the victory of an Israeli songstress at the Eurovision contest.

The world saw and remained silent. The international reaction to the massacre in Gaza was even less than the usual hypocritical minimum prescribed for such occasions. The only serious reaction came from the Turkish ruler and was buried under a heap of derision in Israel. The Arab World and the wider Middle East are more divided than they have been since the establishment of Israel. The policy of "divide and rule" is a long-standing strategy to weaken and control occupied lands. According to a simple Wikipedia definition, it is "in politics and sociology.... gaining and maintaining power by breaking up large concentrations of power into pieces that individually have less power than the one implementing the strategy". The maxim has been attributed to Philip II of Macedonia (382-336 BC), was utilised by the Romans under Julius Caesar (100 BC-44AD) and by Napoleon (1769-1821). There are many, many historical examples. It was employed by the Imperial powers in Africa and in the Indian subcontinent. Sykes-Picot is another example. After so many lessons from history, old and new, it is sad to see the Middle East fall ever more deeply into this trap.

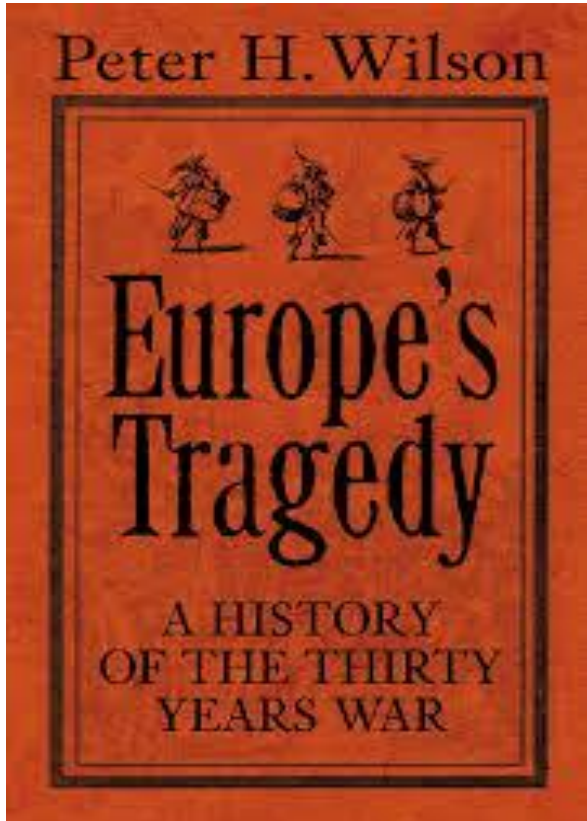
Video: Clare Short's address "On Palestine", Greenbelt Festival

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ptm8uAx-DT4>

The 30-Year War

The tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran is intensifying and increasingly dividing the region into competing blocks. This seems to have been triggered by one of the unintended consequences of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which inevitably strengthened Iran's ties with Iraq, given the religious affiliations of the population. Iran, in turn, as it feels under threat in the region and beyond, look for allies to strengthen its position, and the rift gets ever stronger. This division is inflamed by the Sunni/Shia division within Islam. It would be wise for thinkers in the region to study the effects of the 30-year war in Europe. It took place between 1618 and 1648 and was one of the longest and most destructive conflicts in human history. It resulted in 8 million fatalities not only from military engagement but also from

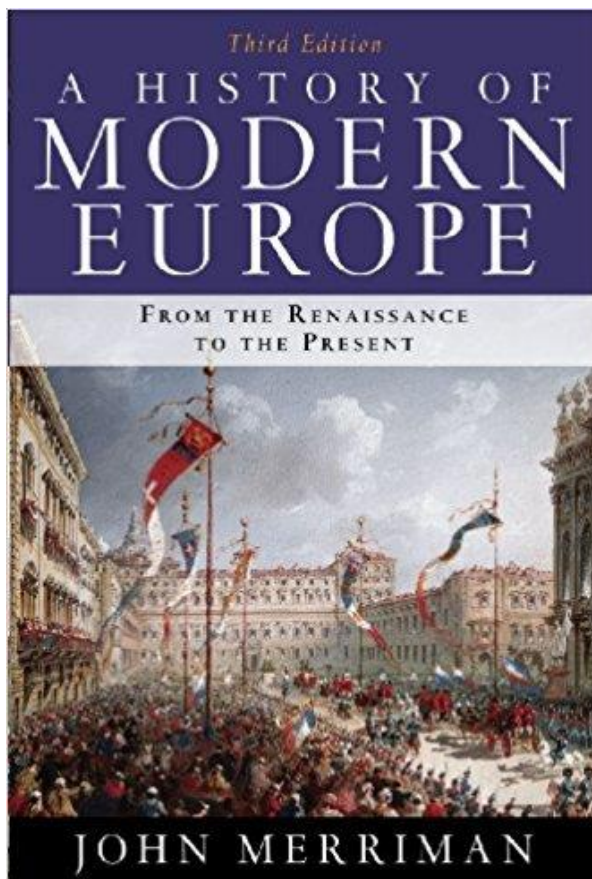
violence, famine and plague. The war devastated entire regions especially among the population of the German and Italian States. Both mercenaries and soldiers in fighting armies traditionally looted or extorted tribute to get operating funds, which imposed severe hardship on the inhabitants of occupied territories. The war also bankrupted most of the combatant powers. (13)



It might be thought that this was too long ago to hold any lessons for today, but it was distinctively a war triggered by religious difference within Christianity - Protestant and Catholic - and it gradually developed into a more general conflict involving most of the European great powers. There are worrying parallels between this and the growing division between two traditions within Islam in the Middle East. The geography will never change, and the division weakens the region and wastes resources. It is in the interests of all countries and their people to reach a modus vivendi. The division is hurting both sides; and now the United States is arguing that it can impose a humiliating deal on the Palestinians, which appears at the moment to have the backing of Saudi Arabia, and has been described by Mr. Greenblatt, the US Envoy to the Middle East as “the ‘deal of the century’”. This is surely a pure example of divide and rule, and the Palestinians, above all, are suffering the consequences.

Dignity and Freedom

The other reason for intensifier divisions in the Middle East is the aftermath of the Arab Spring of 2011 and the call of the young of the region for dignity and freedom. This clearly frightened authoritarian rulers and has increased repression and the search for scapegoats. The parallel in European history is surely the revolutions of 1848, interestingly known in some countries as the Spring of Nations or the People's Spring [see Merriman John's book "A History of Modern Europe"]. These were a series of political upheavals throughout Europe in 1848. It remains the most widespread revolutionary wave in European history. Great advances were made in democracy, freedom of speech and calls for social reform; but, almost everywhere the gains were reversed and great repression was imposed in the counter revolution [see Charles Breunig's "The Age of Revolution and Reaction"]. In some places reforms survived and the changes in thinking and pressure for progress recurred in the following decades. It is likely that there will be similar developments in the Arab World in the decades to come.



Conclusion:

We are living through a very gloomy time. The Middle East is more divided than ever; and, therefore, in a very weak state to look after its own interests. Some of the divisions, for example the intensified conflict with Iran, is a choice that overtime can be reversed and understandings reached. The quest for justice and dignity expressed in the Arab Spring will

almost certainly recur in different ways in different countries. The Gulf States will either move towards constitutional monarchy or division and repression will continue.

If we consider external influencers, the United States with its current slogan, “America First”, increasingly has its own oil from fracking and this alongside the long-term move to renewables will surely weaken US interest in the region. The growing tension between Europe and the United States might even lead Europe to an independent policy toward the Middle East based on respect for international law.

What remains clear is that Israeli oppression of the Palestinians is not just morally wrong and a constant breach of international law, it is also unsustainable. Already the numbers of Palestinians and Israeli Jews living in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories is about equal and the growth of the Palestinian population is likely to be considerably larger. Scholars and international lawyers have illustrated that the reality on the ground in Israel and the occupied territories amounts to the Crime of Apartheid. (14)

The Two-State solution, which has been backed for so long by so many, is unviable as settlements grow and spread and Gaza faces a humanitarian catastrophe. (15) (16) The support for the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement launched by the Palestinian civil society in July 2005, is growing and strengthening across the world, including in US Universities and Labour Unions. Only the unconditional backing of the United States and the European Union failure to uphold the conditions of its trade treaty with Israel, alongside division in the Middle East, are enabling Israel to continue on its present path. But demography and global civil society are on the move.

Sadly, Palestinian suffering will not end soon; but, in the longer term, it is inevitable that the present arrangements will tumble. Examples of long struggles against such oppression abound - the Irish struggle against UK colonisation lasted 700 years, the anti-colonial struggle in India and Africa many decades. More recently, opposition to the Vietnam War and apartheid South Africa were greatly strengthened by powerful civil society action that stretched across the world and enhanced local resistance. No one successfully predicted when these campaigns would succeed, but it was clear, as it is in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, that the status quo was unsustainable. It is highly likely that the worldwide support for BDS will continue to grow and thoughtful people in the Middle East will work to

overcome the divisions in the region. Such developments alongside Palestinian Sumud (resilience) will, in time, bring justice and dignity to the people of Palestine and progress to the people of the region.



Clare Short (middle), Mohammed Cherkaoui (left), and Ezzeddine Abdelmoula (right) while attending Aljazeera Forum in Doha, April 29, 2018

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