

Israel's right to exist

By Rodney Brooks

There have been recent accusations in New Zealand that Israel has no right to exist — that it's founding was either illegal or immoral or both. Here are some facts, missing or overlooked in such accounts, that may lead you to decide that Israel's existence has a sounder basis than that of most nations.

Background. Many countries of today came into being when the native population was conquered by invading forces that came from outside. Examples are abundant in Europe and the Americas, and even New Zealand is no exception. In Israel, however, there was a Jewish presence in the land for millennia, dating back to Biblical times when it was a Jewish state. In 1948, when modern Israel was created, there were an estimated 650,000 Jews living there, along with 1.35 million Arabs. In Jerusalem, Jews outnumbered Arabs by almost two-to-one.

Partition. Some other countries were created by partitioning land among different peoples. For example, most Arab nations were created after WWI when the Ottoman Empire was divided up. On the other hand, attempts at unification, as in the case of Czechoslovakia, often do not succeed. Thus when the British government announced its intention of ending the Palestine mandate, it was not unexpected that the United Nations would decide to partition the land into two independent states, one for the Arabs and one for the Jews. The border between the two was based on the demographic distribution, with the area assigned to the Jewish state (3/4 of which was uncultivated desert) having a Jewish majority. Jerusalem was to be an international city under a governor appointed by the UN. The plan was approved by the General Assembly on Nov. 29, 1947, with 13 votes in favour, 10 opposed, and 10 abstentions (including, notably, the UK). Very few nations today can claim the authority of the United Nations as a basis for their existence.

While some Jews, and some Jewish leaders, would have preferred to have been given the whole land 'from the Jordan river to the Mediterranean sea', the partition was accepted by the new government of Israel. However the Palestinian leadership and the nations of the Arab League declared that they would not accept any compromise and intended 'to resist by force the implementation of these proposals, and to drown in blood any attempt to create a Zionist entity on a single inch of Palestinian soil.'

War. The novelist Amos Oz was a first-hand witness to the ensuing events and wrote about them in his memoir [A Tale of Love and Darkness](#): 'A few hours later [after the UN vote], at seven o'clock, while we and probably all our neighbours were asleep, shots were fired in Sheikh Jarrah at a Jewish ambulance, that was on its way from the city centre to the Hadassah Hospital on Mount Scopus. All over the country Arabs attacked Jewish buses on the highways, killed and wounded passengers, and fired with light arms and machine guns into outlying suburbs and isolated settlementsÉ religious leaders called for a jihad against the Jews.' Thus began the war against the Jews that eventually would cost 6,000 Jewish lives.

Massacres. During the war there were a number of massacres of civilians, most of them by Arab forces. Among these was the infamous 'Hadassah massacre' of April 14, 1948

that was described in Oz's neighbour's diary as follows: 'The rumour that had been circulating since yesterday had been confirmed; yes, a hundred Jews were burnt alive yesterday near Sheikh Jarrah; they were in a convoy going up to Hadassah and the University. A hundred people. They included distinguished scientists and scholars, doctors and nurses, workers and students, clerks and patients. It is hard to believe it.' There were also Jewish massacres of Palestinians, some of which were carried out as acts of revenge for the Hadassah massacre.

Ethnic cleansing. The Arabs made it clear from the beginning that their goal was to rid the land of Jews. Again quoting Oz, 'All the Jewish settlements that were captured by the Arabs in the War of Independence, without exception, were razed to the ground, and their Jewish inhabitants were murdered or taken captive or escaped, but the Arab armies did not allow any of the survivors to return after the war. There were no Jews at all [remaining] in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip under Jordanian and Egyptian rule. Not one. The settlements were obliterated, and the synagogues and cemeteries were razed to the ground. The Jewish Quarter in the Old City, which had been inhabited continuously by Jews for thousands of years, fell to the Trans-Jordanian Arab Legions, all its buildings were looted and razed and the residents were killed, expelled or taken prisoner.' This ethnic cleansing by the Arabs, however, has not received much attention, nor does one hear about the 856,000 Jews who left or were forced from their homes in Arab countries. Yet it is Israel that today is accused of ethnic cleansing because 650,000 (est.) Arabs left their homes during the war.

Refugees. The cause of this emigration has been disputed, but it is beyond question that these refugees were fleeing from a war that they (the Arabs) had started, being urged to do so by Arab leaders who promised a swift return after the Arab victory. Some Jewish actions — and fear of Jewish actions — contributed to the exodus, but in general the choice to leave was voluntary. This statement is supported by a rather surprising source, Muammar Qaddafi of Libya, who wrote in the NY Times (emphasis added): 'It is a fact that Palestinians inhabited the land and owned farms and homes there until recently, fleeing in fear of violence at the hands of Jews after 1948 — violence that did not occur, but rumours of which led to a mass exodus. It is important to note that the Jews did not forcibly expel Palestinians. They were never 'un-welcomed'. On the other hand, many Arabs chose to remain, and were indeed 'welcomed' into Israeli society.' Today the 1.4 million Arab citizens of Israel, who prefer living there to becoming part of a Palestinian state, stand as a stark refutation of the charge of ethnic cleansing by Israel.

Outcome. Despite their best efforts, the Arabs failed to drive out the Jews, and in the process Egypt and Jordan captured and took over what was to be the independent Palestinian state. The intended 'international' city of Jerusalem wound up as another Jordanian city, while Israel ended up with more territory than was originally assigned by the UN. Amos Oz looks back and reflects: 'War was a terrible thing, of course, and full of suffering but who asked the Arabs to start it? After all, we had accepted the partition compromise that was agreed to by the United Nations, and it was the Arabs who had rejected any compromise and tried to butcher us all.' Yet the world and the UN did nothing to protect the Jewish nation it had created or to stop the attempted ethnic cleansing. Israel was left to fend for itself, and fend it did.

Stealing land. Whenever there is a large emigration, forced or not, land is left behind by the departing population and taken over by the new owners. This has happened many times in European and other histories, and it is not usually called 'stealing the land'. It happened to the 856,000 Jewish refugees who fled from Arab countries, leaving behind real

estate estimated as 'four times the size of the State of Israel', and it happened to the Arab refugees who fled from their land. (And who, as Qaddafi pointed out, were not expelled but left of their own volition.) While this privately-owned land was a very small proportion of Israel's total area, a governmental agency was created for the purpose of protecting it and making sure it was dealt with legally. No one in history has called such land 'stolen'.

Summary. There was a pre-existing (and ancient) Jewish presence in the land when Israel was created. Partition of the land between the two resident populations was not unprecedented, and was authorized and approved by the United Nations. It was the Arabs, not the Jews, who rejected the partition and began a war aimed at cleansing Jews from the land. During the war, Arab nations (Jordan and Egypt) took over what was intended to be the Palestinian state; if not for that there would be such a state today. Today it is the Arab nations that are free of Jews, not the other way around, while 1.4 million Arabs live as full citizens within Israel. As for land left behind by Arabs who fled from the war they had started, such land in history has never been considered 'stolen land'.

Given these facts (and they are facts), one can only wonder about the motives of those who accuse the only Jewish nation in the world of being illegally and immorally based, while condoning and accepting the existence of other nations whose justification has a far weaker legal and moral basis.

Dr. Brooks is a scientist retired from the US National Institutes of Health who has lived in New Zealand for seven years. He is Chairman of Kiwis for Balanced Reporting on the Mideast (www.kbrm.org.nz)