

Palestinians and Jews: To have a country of one's own

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As I write this, 115 Filipinos working in war-torn Gaza are waiting at the Rafah border for permission to cross into Egypt—and from there to fly back safely to the Philippines. Those married to Palestinians must go without their spouses because neither Israel nor Egypt, which control this border crossing, would allow Palestinians to leave Gaza. Fearing the war might spread beyond Gaza, overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) living in Israel and Lebanon have reportedly also requested to be repatriated. The certainty of having a country to go back to if life proves untenable abroad may be one reason why most OFWs feel confident about going overseas to find work. For others, who equate citizenship with nothing more than having a Filipino passport—whatever this may be worth abroad nowadays—the value of having a country of your own might be something that is beginning to dawn on them only now. So trustful have we been in the cosmopolitan assurances of a globalized world that we have scarcely paid attention to the forces that pull people back to their national origins and identities.

For centuries the Jews had no country they could call their own. Dispersed all over the world, they were subjected to various forms of discrimination and recurrent pogroms. The word “diaspora” originally referred to Jews living outside ancient Palestine. Today, it is used as a general term to describe the “scattering of a people away from an established or ancestral homeland.”

Treated as outsiders even in countries in which they and their ancestors were born, they were torn between having to assimilate or integrate into the dominant culture of the various countries in which they lived, and creating a Jewish homeland in which they could live in dignity, peace, and freedom. Today, those contrasting aspirations persist among the Jewish people. There are many still who do not subscribe to the ideology of Zionism.

Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, the political movement to establish and support a Jewish homeland in Palestine, himself started out as an advocate of assimilation. His turn to Zionism in 1897 resulted from his conviction that anti-Semitism in much of Europe had become so entrenched that integration was no longer possible even if Jews abandoned their religious traditions. A decisive turning point for him was the so-called “Dreyfus Affair,” the wrongful conviction in 1894 of Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish French military officer who was accused of passing military secrets to Germany. Though Capt. Dreyfus was subsequently exonerated, his trial exposed deep-seated anti-Semitism in French society.

Herzl had first asked the Ottoman government, which then controlled Palestine, for territory that Jews could govern autonomously. He was turned down. He found sympathy in Britain, which first offered Zionists portions of uninhabited land in Uganda, Africa. But nothing short of a Jewish homeland in populated Palestine would satisfy the Zionist dream.

The breakthrough finally came more than a decade after Herzl's death, when in 1917, at the outbreak of World War I, Zionists succeeded in obtaining the historic Balfour Declaration from Great

Britain. In essence, this document promised British support for a Jewish national home in Palestine. This pledge was later incorporated into the League of Nations' British mandate over Palestine. From 1922 onwards, Zionists were allowed to build Jewish urban and rural settlements in British-administered Palestine. Though slow at the start, the Jewish settlement process incited Arab uprisings as early as the late 1930s, prompting Britain to restrict Jewish immigration into Palestine in 1939. Underground Zionist groups responded to these restrictions with assassination and terrorist acts.

The mass extermination of European Jews under Nazi Germany during World War II dramatically swung public opinion in the West in favor of a Jewish homeland, triggering a post-war Jewish exodus to Palestine. In 1947, the United Nations (UN) proposed to partition Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states. The Palestinians rejected the partition, but the Jews declared the establishment of the state of Israel almost as soon as British forces left the area. This set off almost immediately the Arab-Israeli War of 1948-49. Israel won that war and ended up with more territory than the UN had granted to it. But, in the process, it displaced more than 800,000 Palestinians from their lands. With every war against the Arabs thereafter, Israel managed to annex more land than before.

Today, Palestinians find themselves in the same situation that the Jews had been in before the founding of the Israeli state—with one exception. Restricted to the margins of what used to be the Palestinian homeland, they are refugees in their own country, fighting for freedom and a dignified life.

Yesterday's oppressed have become today's oppressors. Worse, the survivors of Nazi genocide seem bent on exterminating what remains of a people they have long perceived as a threat to their existence. We cannot, by our silence or neutrality, be complicit in this heinous crime.

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P.S.

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