The occupation of Palestine and background to BDS
A brief overview compiled by the steering committee

The RECE steering committee and sub-groups have compiled the following information for RECE members about the history and conflict in Palestine/Israel and the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. While not everyone will agree with the content of some of the resources presented here, they do provide RECE members with information on this complex situation, mainly (but not exclusively) from a Palestinian and BDS perspective.

The following text is based on an abridged version of a statement from the BDS (Boycott, Disinvest, Sanction) movement on https://bdsmovement.net/ that provides important information and links about the historical and present situation in Palestine, and the rationale behind the Palestinian-led global BDS movement. These are important issues to be considered before our RECE meeting.

The violence between Israelis and Palestinians is often falsely presented as a conflict between two equal sides with irreconcilable claims to one piece of land. In reality, this is a conflict over territory between a nation-state, Israel, with one of the world’s most powerful and well-funded militaries, and an indigenous population of Palestinians that has been occupied, displaced, and exiled for decades.

The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) is a Palestinian-led movement for freedom, justice and equality. BDS upholds the simple principle that Palestinians are entitled to the same rights as the rest of humanity. Israel is occupying and colonising Palestinian land, discriminating against Palestinian citizens of Israel and denying Palestinian refugees the right to return to their homes. Inspired by the South African anti-apartheid movement, the BDS call urges action to pressure Israel to comply with international law.

BDS is now a vibrant global movement made up of unions, academic associations, churches and grassroots movements across the world. Since its launch in 2005, BDS is having a major impact and is effectively challenging international support for Israeli apartheid and settler-colonialism.

https://bdsmovement.net/what-is-bds

Bethlehem University is a member of the BDS movement.

History of Palestinian Occupation

At the core of the struggle is the unresolved dilemma of wanting to create a country for a persecuted group – Jews – in a country that is already inhabited by another people – Palestinians. Zionism, as a political movement, had been advocating and preparing for large scale settlement of European Jews in Palestine since the mid 1800s, when Palestine was part of the Ottoman Empire. The Zionist movement was grounded in the brutal reality of centuries of antisemitism, persecution and pogroms in Europe, but also in the growing movement to establish nation states that emerged in Europe in the 18th and 19th century. Zionists initially promoted and supported emigration to Palestine and the purchase of land for settlements.
After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in World War I (1918), Palestine became a British Mandate. It emerged as the colonial powers England and France divided the entire Middle East into their spheres of influence (Sykes Picot Agreement), basically by drawing lines on a map. Immigration of European Jews to Palestine continued between WWI and WWII. Also during this period, a militant Jewish settler movement (Haganah) took up arms against the British authorities and Palestinian population.

In Europe, in the late 1930s, atrocities against Jews (and Roma and other minorities) reached new heights, culminating in the German fascist regime proclaiming a ‘final solution’ by genocide. Six million Jews were murdered in the Shoa (‘catastrophe’) between 1938 and 1945. Allied countries at war with Nazi Germany (US, Britain, France and the Soviet Union) regularly denied refuge to Jewish refugees. This continued after the end of WWII.

Instead, the four countries used the newly established United Nations to convert the British Mandate in Palestine into the state of Israel in 1948. This resulted in the brutal displacement of nearly 800,000 Palestinians and the destruction of more than 530 towns and villages. This ethnic cleansing is known as al-Nakba in Arabic, which like ‘Shoa’ in Hebrew, means ‘the catastrophe’. Since then, Israel has implemented a regime of settler colonialism, apartheid and occupation over the Palestinian people. Some of the history of the formation of the state of Israel can be found here: https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/creation-israel.

During and since its foundation in 1948, Israel has set out to control the land of historic Palestine and drive the indigenous Palestinian population from the land. Israel’s oppression of Palestinians involves settler colonialism.

Israel has de-facto control over all of Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Palestinians are treated differently to their Jewish Israeli neighbours. They are given less rights than Jewish Israelis; this is institutionalised and written into the laws that govern how the Israeli state operates. The demand that Palestinian refugees be allowed their right to return to their homes is a key demand of the Palestinian struggle for freedom, justice and equality.

Although the US Press presents Israelis as though they were all in agreement with Israel’s policies of occupation and segregation, there is, in fact, an Israeli Peace Movement. Two of the most prominent groups are Yesh Gvul (“It’s enough”) (https://www.jpost.com/Israelis-70th-anniversary/Yesh-Gvul-
There are also Israeli/Palestinian solidarity groups that work to end the oppression of Palestinians. In November 2019, hundreds of Israelis flocked to the Palestinian Authority presidential headquarters in Ramallah to participate in an event marking the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People.


Resistance

Israel can only maintain its systems of oppression and settler colonialism over the Palestinian people because of the support that it receives from world governments and corporations. All states, particularly those 124 states that have ratified the Rome Statute of the ICC, have a legal obligation to suppress Israeli war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Waves of Palestinian popular resistance, especially the intifadas, have revealed to Israel, the U.S. and other world powers that are complicit in maintaining Israel’s regime of oppression, that Palestinians will never accept slavery as fate. New generations will continue to rise up and assert their will to be free, against all odds.

The Palestinian BDS campaign was founded as an effective way to provide support and solidarity to the Palestinian struggle for freedom, justice and equality. It aims to pressure Israel to comply with international law and to end international support for Israel’s regime of settler colonialism and apartheid

For a brief introduction to the history and reality of Palestine/Israel watch this short video https://youtu.be/YS8njT2oXfE

Further useful sources for information: