

## ADJOURNMENT Middle East

### Maria Vamvakinou MP (Labor)

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**Ms VAMVAKINO**U (Calwell) (9.34 p.m.)—Few conflicts today inspire the level of mistrust and misunderstanding that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict does, and few have the capacity to divide public opinion so sharply. These divisions are not new. Rather, they are symptomatic of the vastly different and competing national narratives alternatively advocated by Palestinians and Israelis over the meaning and legacy of May 1948. Among Israelis, 1948 is celebrated as a war of independence where Jewish determination, resilience and sacrifice gave birth to the modern state of Israel. Measured against centuries of Jewish persecution, the full significance of this achievement becomes evident. In sharp contrast, Palestinians remember 1948 as the year of the Nakba, or catastrophe, when 750,000 Palestinians were uprooted from their land and homes. They see 1948 through the prism of dispossession, exile and loss, as an open wound whose only remedy lies in Palestinian statehood and UN Resolution 194 on the right of return for Palestinian refugees.

1948 is a contested history over which Israeli narratives of statehood and independence and Palestinian narratives of statelessness and exile continue to clash. More importantly, it is a contested history that continues to be played out in the current Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In the intervening years since 1948, neither side has achieved security. Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories has shown itself to be a zero sum game, the siege of Gaza has only fuelled Palestinian anger, and the emergence of Hamas has further undermined the already fragile hope of peace.

If the origins of this conflict lie in 1948, then perhaps the lesson to be learned is this: that a just and lasting peace will continue to remain elusive until the historical grievances of 1948 are resolved. Yet, as many Palestinians are quick to point out, the Palestinian experience of 1948 is often ignored and routinely devalued despite an already sizable literature dealing with the Palestinian exodus of 1948. Palestinians see themselves as victims of a colonial heritage in which Britain took for granted the right of a colonial power to make decisions about the future of Palestine without consulting the Palestinians themselves. This was certainly true in the lead-up to the Balfour Declaration of 1917, and it also explains Palestine's rejection of the 1947 UN partition plan.

Regardless of whatever positions are taken on the current conflict, the brute historical fact is that the establishment of Israel cannot be separated from the displacement of 80 per cent of Palestine's indigenous Arab-Palestinian population. Opinions remain sharply divided on the causes of the Palestinian exodus. Historians like Efrain Karsh maintain that orders issued by the surrounding Arab governments led to the mass evacuation of Palestinians in preparation for war. This thesis has been disputed by Israeli revisionist historians like Benny Morris. Collating an enormous archive of primarily Israeli and British material, Morris argues that the Palestinian exodus was both multicausal and multidimensional. He identifies four distinct waves of Palestinian flight which Morris argues were a de facto consequence of Jewish strategic and military planning, and he goes on to famously conclude that the Palestinian exodus was 'born of war, not by design'. Other Israeli historians like Avi Shlaim and Ilan Pappé uncover what they see as a tacit Jewish-Hashemite agreement concluded between Golda Meir and King Abdullah of Jordan in November 1947, which centred on their mutual desire to thwart the establishment of a future Palestinian state. Further still, historians like Norman Finkelstein and the Palestinian academic Nur Masalha argue that an explicit Israeli policy of expelling Palestinians was in full swing by May 1948 under the guise of Plan Dalet.

What all of these authors exemplify is the richness of the debate that now surrounds the historiography of 1948. They show that 1948 contains a Palestinian history as well as an Israeli history with each woven into the very fabric of today's conflict. If we in Australia are to be even-handed in our approach to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and if we are to play a constructive role in encouraging peace initiatives consistent with our status as a middle power that supports multilateralism and dialogue over unilateral acts of aggression, then we must be attuned to and attentive to both of these histories. I strongly believe that many Australians share this view. The Palestinian experience of 1948 continues to shape Palestinian aspirations in 2008. Let us not forget that.