

Britain must recognise Palestine - for all our sakes, says diplomat

The democratic election of a new government is a moment of hope – a new beginning. Our new government should restore hope of a peaceful solution to the Israel/Palestine conflict by recognising both states in the Holy Land. It is the right thing to do, morally and politically.

Britain rightly recognised Israel in 1950. We are right to recognise Palestine now, in 2015, making a positive change to the dismal status quo.

The moral case is unanswerable. There are two peoples in the Holy Land – Israeli and Palestinian. Both have the right to self-determination. Both merit our respect and esteem. One is free. The second is suffering under occupation by the first. Both deserve to live in security and at peace. That will only come when the two states agree. Israel's right to exist is beyond question – but so is Palestine's.

As long ago as 2011, the Christian Church leaders in Jerusalem came together to say "Israelis and Palestinians must live each in their own independent states with peace and justice, respecting human rights according to international law". To their great credit, Christian Church leaders have responded to this call, led by His Holiness Pope Francis. Here in Britain, the Church of Scotland, the Quakers, the Catholic Bishop of Clifton and the Anglican Bishop of Coventry have all spoken up for British Government recognition of Palestine. Cardinal Vincent visited Gaza last November, in solidarity with the innocents he met. He was grieved by the destruction and human misery he saw. It is our duty to prevent a repetition.

On 17th May in Rome, in the presence of President Abbas of Palestine, Pope Francis celebrated the canonisation of two great Palestinian nuns: Sister Marie-Alphonsine Ghattas and Sister Mariam Baouardy. Both founded religious orders, as Christian living stones in the Holy Land. Their legacy is eternal, but their successors are dwindling in number. Life for Christians in occupied Palestine – Gaza, East Jerusalem and the West Bank – is made much, much harder by the Occupation, the conduct of which is inhumane in many respects. The wonder is not that Christians leave, but that Christians stay in the birthplace of Christ. We need to help them. They need hope of a better life for their children in the land of their birth.

And so to the political issue, and Britain's role. Only the solution of two states will end this bitter conflict, by negotiation between the government of Israel and the PLO, representing the Palestinian people. Past failures cannot obscure this truth – they only make a negotiated solution more urgent. The immediate prospects for negotiation are bleak, particularly since the re-elected Prime Minister of Israel is on record as ruling out an independent Palestinian state on his watch. Mr Netanyahu controls the independence of Palestine, by maintaining the occupation begun in 1967.

He cannot control Palestinian statehood, which is in the hands of those states which decide to recognise Palestine as a state on the pre 1967 lines. Over 130 states out of the 193 members of the United Nations have already done so. Sweden did so last October. British recognition is overdue. It requires political courage and foresight, which a new government has the energy and liberty to show. Political courage, because the nay sayers from all sides

have loud voices. Foresight, because recognition of both states now safeguards the solution of two states living side by side in peace and security – a solution which is in greater danger today than ever before. And once it's gone, it's gone forever.

Why is it for us to take a lead? Because we can, and because we should. We can, because we helped to shape the history of the region, through the 1917 Balfour Declaration and our time responsible for the Holy Land, 1920-48. I warmly commend the educational efforts of the Balfour Project (www.balfourproject.org), shedding light on our shared past in the Holy Land, the better to guide our shared future. Today, we have influence rather than power. We can use our influence to help Israelis and Palestinians to appreciate what unites them – the three Abrahamic faiths serving the one true God, whose law is “Do unto others as you would be done by”. We should act, because our political actions make a difference – where we lead, France, Ireland, Italy and Spain etc will follow. We can do some things that the USA does not have our freedom to do. We need the USA to resolve this conflict – and the USA needs us. Each of us has a different role, with the same aim.

European recognition of Palestine on pre-1967 lines helps to safeguard Israel's future. The alternative to two states is the status quo, guaranteeing another bloody Gaza conflict – the 4th in 8 years – and further systematic settlement expansion in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, making a Palestinian state unviable.

Or it is the one state solution – sadly, not a state where Jews and Arabs share equal rights and power, but where Israel illegally annexes the country areas of the West Bank, trying to seize Palestinian land without acquiring the people.

Sheer folly: that way lies apartheid and the self-imposed alienation of Israel from the world.

Our new Government can take action now in the long-term interest of Israel, and to support Palestinian rights, by recognising Palestine, and renewing our permanent commitment to Israel – on pre-1967 lines, implementing the policy principles of the European Union. There is a moral dimension to political action. For the Holy Land today, UK recognition of the Palestinian right to statehood is simply the best we can do, for the good of all.

Vincent Fean

Sir Vincent Fean was British Consul-General, Jerusalem, 2010-14. Now retired, he is a trustee of Medical Aid for Palestinians and patron of the Britain-Palestine Friendship and Twinning Association.