

Reflections on the Partitions of India and Palestine after 70 Years

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The Institute of South Asian Studies and the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore jointly organised a workshop on ‘Reflections on the Partition of India and Palestine after 70 Years’ on 15 August 2018. The workshop hosted speakers from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, the United Kingdom and the United States who discussed the dynamics of the partition in India and Palestine after 70 years and drew parallels between their respective political histories.

Introduction

On 15 August 2018, the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) and Middle East Institute (MEI) at the National University of Singapore (NUS) jointly organised a workshop on “Reflections on the Partition of India and Palestine after 70 Years”. The event analysed the partition of British India and Palestine and examined the tapestries such as the political leaderships, ideologies, laws, and institutions that connected the two events.

The panellists for the workshop were Dr Ian Talbot, Professor of Modern British History at the University of Southampton; Dr Ayesha Jalal, Mary Richardson Professor of History at the Tufts University; Dr Penny Sinanoglou, Assistant Professor of History at the Wake Forest University; Dr Laura Robson, Associate Professor of Modern Middle Eastern History at the Portland State University; Professor Amrita Shodhan, Senior Teaching Fellow at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies; Professor P R Kumaraswamy, Professor at the School of International Studies at the Jawaharlal Nehru University; Dr Iqbal Singh Sevea, Visiting Research Associate Professor at ISAS; and Dr Mohamed-Ali Adraoui, Marie Sklodowska Curie Fellow at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service. There were four panel discussions chaired by Dr Gyanesh Kudaisya, Associate Professor of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore; Dr Victor Kattan; Senior Research Fellow at MEI; Dr Iftexhar Ahmed Chowdhury, Principal Research Fellow at ISAS; and Dr James M Dorsey, Senior Fellow at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University respectively.

The event also witnessed the participation of Mr Bilahari Kausikan, Chairman, MEI; Professor C Raja Mohan, Director, ISAS; and several faculty members from NUS.

Welcome Remarks

Mr Kausikan delivered the welcome remarks where he spoke about the intrinsic importance and significance of the topic to understanding contemporary issues. He highlighted the artificial nature of conventional geographic boundaries between regions. He noted how new technologies, cross-border flows of people, ideas, trade and investment have dissolved

these boundaries and have helped in overcoming the obstacles created by conventional borders. He mentioned “Eurasia” and “Indo-Pacific” as grand geo-political aspirations that capture the new reality. He also mentioned how “partition” is a harsh and loaded concept compared to “separation”, and cited Singapore and Malaysia as a successful case of “separation” whereby, though the two countries are not absolutely unweighted by emotional and historical baggage and complications, they get along fairly better than India and Pakistan or Israel and Palestine, and have managed to cooperate expansively and forge a mutually-beneficial relationship.

Mr Kausikan concluded his remarks by expressing the need for research institutes to consider the new realities of the world and resultant possibilities, and called for trans-boundary frameworks beyond traditional conceptions of geography – especially in light of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. He also conveyed the efficacy of collaborative efforts between research institutes such as ISAS and MEI, and highlighted how these efforts eliminate resource constraints and optimise the usage of available resources.

Introductory Remarks

In his introductory remarks, Professor Raja Mohan discussed the salience of the partition of British India in the Indian subcontinent. He noted its impact in not only contemporary domestic politics in respective countries, but also in the inter-state relations in the region and beyond. He mentioned how the consequences of both India-Pakistan and Palestine-Israel partitions were so terrible and cataclysmic for the respective regions that the unhealed scars of partition continue to express themselves even today. He also noted how unlike the separation of Malaysia, the involved states in the partition of India-Pakistan and Palestine-Israel still have not been able to come to terms with it and recuperate from its consequences.

He highlighted the tragic outcomes de-colonisation and the partition brought for the region and expressed the necessity for academic enterprises to make fresh enquiries into the multiple dimensions of the phenomenon, and renew efforts to transcend its negativities. As such, he highlighted the significance of the workshop in consolidating formative scholarship to compare the two partitions, especially considering the extraordinary interconnection between the Middle East and South Asia in terms of history, economy, security, culture and language, among other things.

Professor Raja Mohan expressed the necessity to explore this understudied connection fully – especially following the Anglo-American retrenchment from the Middle-East, the growing weight of East Asia and increasing stakes of South Asia in the region. He concluded his remarks by expressing his pleasure in working with MEI and suggested greater collaboration between ISAS and MEI in the future on potential common issues of interest.

Introductory Lecture: What is Partition?

In the first segment of the workshop, Dr Kattan presented the introductory lecture in which he unpacked the meaning of partition. He defined it as a form of statecraft that has been employed by different *actors*, in different *contexts*, at different *moments*, for different

reasons. He stated that it is essentially a policy that leads to the division of territory to preserve order amongst the great powers, often with the invocation of law in its practice. Therefore, it is not a strictly bilateral arrangement. In contrast, he contended that it is a *hegemonic act of imposition* by which territory is divided by a colonial, neighbouring, regional, or superpower, or by a group of states acting in concert, perhaps through an international organisation. Its imperialist nature, he maintained, sets the partition apart from other forms of territorial re-organisation such as federalism and secession.

Dr Kattan noted the differences between the India-Pakistan and Palestine-Israel partitions in terms of size, demography, the length of time they were subject to British rule and their legal status in the imperial system. He also discussed how the transfer of power during the partition of Palestine was more complex and messier than in India, given that Palestine was not a British colony, but a geopolitical entity under the League of Nations Mandate where the United Kingdom (UK) did not have exclusive jurisdiction. Accordingly, the UK needed the consent of another 50 or so members of the United Nations (UN). The major difference, according to Dr Kattan, was that, Palestine, despite the numerous partition proposals, was not partitioned the way Peel Commission or the UN intended even though the Peel Commission's report was extensively discussed by the Permanent Mandates Commission and the UN Partition Plan was debated at length by the General Assembly. Instead, he explained, the modern borders of Israel were forged through war with the neighbouring Arab states.

Despite many differences between the partitions, he conveyed that they also had similarities in ontologies, personnel, and policies. He explained the how individuals like the Indian jurist, Sir Mohammed Zafarullah Khan, and the British Indian Army officer and diplomat, Sir Henry McMahon, were linked to both partitions. Another link between the two partitions, he identified, was the intense opposition to British policy in Palestine by the Arabs and Indian Muslims because of the importance attached to the Holy Places there. He also mentioned British failure to maintain law and order during the partition, which led to mass expulsions and acts of ethnic cleansing scarring the histories of both places, as another similarity between the two partitions.

He concluded his lecture by stating that while India and Palestine maybe the paradigm cases of partition, the *act* of partition was a broader phenomenon, interrogating which require a broader historical and geographical perspective. Nonetheless, he proclaimed that Israel-Palestine and India-Pakistan partitions remain an unfinished business of decolonisation and areas of global instability, thereby highlighting the significance of the workshop.

Panel I: The Partition of British India (August 1947)

Following the Introductory Lecture, the first panel discussion was on "The Partition of British India (August 1947)". It was chaired by Dr Kudaisya.

The first speaker, Professor Talbot, re-examined the Louis Mountbatten's Viceroyalty to address the question if the British were "reluctant partitionists" and the reasons that impelled them to pursue the Partition of British India. He argued that Pakistan's post-independence strategic value to the West was not a major issue in pre-independence

thinking concerning the transfer of power. Instead, he asserted that Pakistan's strategic value emerged in the context of its feared collapse, after the partition-related massacres and the eruption of the Kashmir crisis.

He also argued that the partition was reluctantly adopted by the British who were concerned about Pakistan's economic and military viability, as well as the desire to maintain India's administrative unity. The British saw partition as a pragmatic response to pressures arising from anti-colonialism and communalism in the Indian subcontinent. As such, Professor Talbot contended that the partition was undertaken as part of a wider reassessment of how to maintain British informal influence and prestige in an Asian context of diminished economic and military resources, but continuing imperial commitments. He also maintained that religion played a crucial element of political identity in this process. He also highlighted the marginalisation of Mohammad Ali Jinnah and the All India Muslim League in the British drive for an all-India settlement.

Professor Talbot's presentation was followed by Professor Ayesha Jalal who drew on Saadat Hasan Manto's literacies to present an intimate history of the partition and its devastating consequences. She re-assessed the role and legacy of Jinnah in the partition of British India and contended that Jinnah had opposed the partition of Punjab and Bengal until mid-1947, but was made to accept a settlement which he had rejected at the end game of the British *Raj* (rule), by the votaries of unitary and monolithic sovereignty. She also discussed the difference between religion as faith, and religion as a social demarcator of identity; while religion as faith can be seen to be a matter of personal belief; religion as social demarcator aims specifically at establishing boundaries with other communities.

She noted that it was mainly religion as social demarcator rather than concerns with religion as faith, not the dream of an Islamic theocracy, which informed the All India Muslim League's demand for a Pakistan in March 1940. In putting forward a claim to nationhood, she claimed that the Indian Muslims were decidedly revolting against minoritarianism, caricatured as 'religious communalism'. As such, she argued that religion's role in the partition has been overplayed by scholars. Instead, she stressed that the lack of power sharing arrangements between members of different religious communities at the all-India level as well as in key regions like Punjab and Bengal, and scrambles over *zar* (wealth), *zameen* (land) and *zan* (women) within the patriarchal structures of rural society as the British raj crumbled were more crucial factors.

Following the two presentations, Dr Kudaisya highlighted the importance of going back and critically interrogating the archives to make fresh enquiries. He raised questions about the format of the partition and Mountbatten's influence on the Boundary Commission. Professor Talbot explained that Mountbatten might have had a pro-India bias. He further noted that even though the British sold the idea of the partition on the basis that it would be a means to ending the violence and political conflict that wrecked the subcontinent, the flawed partition machinery not only failed to resolve conflict, but also created new arenas for conflict.

The Question and Answer session discussed the concept of multi-layered sovereignty and how the partition continues to influence people and inter-state relationships in postcolonial

South Asia. Professor Jalal asserted that Jinnah would have preferred parity over equitable share of power. However, circumstances forced him to settle for the latter and agree to the partition.

Dr Chowdhury from ISAS highlighted the contemporary situation in India's Assam and asked if the partition is an evolving or continuing phenomena, to which Professor Jalal responded that the partition will continue so long as the people choose to separate rather than share power. As such, she reiterated that the partition emerges from intrinsic differences in people, that is, when a nation is a monolithic, homogenous sovereignty that cannot harbour any degree of difference, division or contestation or share power, we will continue to see more nation-hyphenated states in South Asia and beyond. She went on to discuss how the usage of the partition, as a conflict management tool, has hindered the two nations from reaching a conflict resolution. She asserted that partition does not solve the problem because even when walls are created, people can still hear one another from the other side. Instead, she urged, the aim should be to learn to live with one another. On the issue of the revival of separate electorate in India for minority groups to assert their rights, Professor Jalal mentioned that Jinnah wanted to abandon separate electorate as early as 20s and 30s but his own constituents were not ready to give up that privilege. The justification provided was that separate electorates reduced Muslims to be a permanent statutory minority and disadvantaged them.

On the question of the partition's ability to avoid bigger conflicts, Professor Talbot noted that the partition internationalises conflicts that are within a particular region. As a result, it produces a different kind of conflict instead of resolving conflicts altogether. Professor Jalal added that many of the contemporary problems in the subcontinent are similar to the issues it faced pre-partition, that is, issues of representation of the schedule castes, Muslims and other minority groups. However, these issues do not lead to a partition because outside powers do not intervene. As such, she stressed the centrality of outside powers in enabling the partition. She concluded by reflecting that the legacies of the India-Pakistan partition continues to evolve and force its respective constituencies to ferret out people that are united and create differences where there are none or could be negotiated.

Panel II: The Partition of Mandate Palestine (November 1947)

The second panel was chaired by Dr Kattan and it examined 'The Partition of Mandate Palestine (November 1947)'.

The first panellist, Dr Sinanoglou, discussed how the 1937 report by the Peel Commission, a royal commission sent to Palestine in the immediate wake of the Arab uprising that began in 1936, shaped conceptions of the British plans to partition Palestine. She discussed how the Peel Commission's partition plan was soon abandoned by a British government seeking to pacify Palestine, and indeed the wider Middle East, on the eve of World War II. She tracked the transition from British imperial to international partition planning, analysing the relationship between the Peel Commission's partition proposal of 1937 and the Woodhead Commission's multiple unworkable partition plans of 1938 on the one hand, and, on the other, the work of the UN Special Committee on Palestine and the resulting partition plan voted on by the UN General Assembly a decade later.

Tracing cartographic, demographic, financial and political ideas and practices from interwar British Palestine to post-war India and Palestine, she demonstrated the many ways in which key personnel and concepts from the Peel Commission helped to shape plans for and debates over the partition. She discussed the contours and provisions of the 1937 and 1947 plans in order to understand what underlying structures and assumptions they had in common, and what shifted as the partition moved from an imperial to an international tool.

The second presentation by Dr Robson looked at the role of the 1947 United Nations Special Committee on Palestine. She examined Palestine as a locus of arguments about internationalism, sovereignty, and external governance, and argued that the UN's decision for the partition in 1947 represented a step towards a more interventionist state-building strategy for the "Third World" whose ramifications would go well beyond Palestine itself. She highlighted that the case of Palestine, where the partition was first proposed in 1937 and partially implemented in 1947/1948, echoed Ireland and foreshadowed India. Like Ireland, Palestine's partition involved an important settler colonial element; like India, it involved a longer history of British colonial imposition of communal legal and political distinctions. As in both other instances, the partition was proposed at a time of anxiety and violence both locally and globally; the strikes that inaugurated the 1936-1939 revolt provided the initial pretext for the exploration of the partition, and fears about an approaching war in Europe had much to do with the urgency of the British desire to put an end to the uprising in Palestine. The idea of the partition emerged as a "solution" to ethno-communal divisions in the context of an emerging and unstable international/imperial system built around the rhetorical principle of ethnic nation-statehood.

Dr Robson also discussed how the Jewish Agency had pressed hard not to include British or Arab representatives in the Commission, and successfully lobbied for its members to visit "displaced persons" camps in Germany and Austria as part of its investigation, and won Zionist representation on the political sub-committee. The Arab Higher Committee, representing the Palestinian Arab political establishment, saw the resolution as a violation of their right to self-determination and boycotted the proceedings on the grounds that the transition of authority to the UN was illegal and the question should go to an international court, she added.

She concluded by noting two central points: (1) that the UN's support for the forcible partition of Palestine – which in the end did not lead Palestinians even to the geographically truncated "independent Arab state" originally envisioned but rather to permanent dispossession and statelessness – served to underline the ways in which postcolonial nation-statehood could serve an emerging neo-imperial world order; and (2) by endorsing the partition and rejecting a federalist vision of sovereignty for Palestine, the newly constituted UN had clearly demonstrated that ethnic nationalism represented the only kind of claim to political sovereignty that would have a chance at being heard in the international arena.

The Question and Answer session that followed discussed several issues such as the then domestic situation in Britain and the lack of leadership in Palestine that influenced the Palestinian partition.

On Dr Kattan's question regarding Britain's decision not to cooperate with the Palestine Commission, Dr Robson responded that the domestic situation in Britain had changed so dramatically that no stance on Palestine was really viable for the new constituency; the British did not want to spend more time, finances and military to the Palestinian cause. They were also afraid that if they appealed to the Palestine Commission, they would have to do the same for other regions they were de-colonising. Furthermore, by 1939, leaders from the Palestine national movement had been deported, arrested or executed. As such, the voice of the Palestine Commission was weakened. The two panellists further explained that the failure to create a legislative council in Palestine was a key turning point as legislative councils had been a crucial means of transferring power from the executive to representatives of the colonial population. While the power structures among the Arab population in Palestine were weak, the Mandate specifically enjoined Britain to establish a Jewish Agency for the purpose of empowering it with governmental, and even military, institutions, and allowing them gradually to build the structures of a state within a state.

Dr Sinanoglou also discussed the American role in the Israel-Palestine partition, especially after 1959, when the Zionist leadership in Palestine made the decision to stop appealing to the British and began appealing to the Americans.

Panel III: The Partitions of India and Palestine Compared

The third panel discussion of the day was on "The Partitions of India and Palestine Compared". It was chaired by Dr Chowdhury and included Dr Shodhan and Professor Kumaraswamy. While Dr Shodhan's paper examined whether and/or how we can make sense of the connections between the two places of Mandate Palestine and British India, Professor Kumaraswamy expounded on India's dilemma of pragmatism versus principles, that Jawaharlal Nehru's preference for a partitioned India but a federal Palestine.

Dr Shodhan looked at the real connections in personnel, policies and ontologies between the two locations – Mandate Palestine and British India and examine connections starting with the years of the Great War and the demand for self-determination, through the various governance options that developed under the League of Nations, as well as the ideas of representation initiated in the two places, through regional partitions and discussions at the Round Table, Oxford, to the laws and practices of the Government of India Acts, the Peel Commission Reports and the various laws and ordinances enacted to effect a legal if not orderly living together in the two places of Mandate Palestine and British India. Her presentation brought together the evidence in whispers, rumours, footnotes and broad analytical discussions in recent research to make sense of the two partitions.

Professor Kumaraswamy argued that the partition and federation were Nehru's preferred options for India and Palestine respectively, and having achieved independence through a partition, Nehru was urging the Arabs and Jews of Palestine to live under one roof through accommodation and cooperation. He contended that the Federal Plan was not only a sign of Indian naivety, but also a reflection of its hypocrisy as its political pragmatism was confined to the subcontinent but moral eloquence elsewhere.

The Question and Answer session then delved into how the British labelled and categorised different communities in terms of religion, who were often racially and culturally heterogeneous. The differences between the religious communities were later politicised and constructed as irreconcilable.

Dr Chowdhury questioned if Nehru indeed was insincere and hypocritical in his stance against Palestinian partition, given India's federal structure post-partition. To this, Professor Kumaraswamy responded that Palestine had become a domestic issue in India, especially among the supporters of the All India Muslim League and the Indian National Congress. As such, Nehru had to adopt different positions, depending on the situation.

On the discussion on Jinnah's ideological commitment to a "Muslim state", Dr Jalal commented that the issue is contentious because in 2050, India will have the largest Muslim population in the world. She stressed the importance of exploring regional identity as new questions related to power sharing arrangements between the different communities in a state and at higher levels will come to the fore once again. In response, Professor Kumaraswamy said that, if by 2050, India indeed had the largest Muslim population, it would make India an inclusive, multi-religious nation with a Hindu majority, to which Professor Jalal countered that India's inclusivity is questionable.

One of the members of the audience also noted the crucial difference in the two partitions about the origins of Muslims in India and origins of Jews in Palestine – the Jews had migrated into Palestine. On the other hand, India had its own Muslim population. The discussion also affirmed that processes and outcomes of different partitions are contingent on their respective contexts and contingencies, even when there are similar trajectories.

Dr Chowdhury used the partition of East Pakistan from India and its subsequent partition from Pakistan to show how the factors of the partition were transient. Similarly, he mentioned how secular values, which hallmarked India during the partition, are losing ground in the country today.

Panel IV: Consequences of the Partition for South Asia, the Middle East and Beyond

The last panel explored the consequences of the partition for South Asia, the Middle East and beyond. The panellists for the session were Dr Sevea and Dr Adraoui. It was chaired by Dr Dorsey.

Dr Sevea discussed how social identities in South Asia were impacted by the partition both by the varied and complex retellings of the trauma of the partition. Particularly, he explored how transnational identities such as caste, religious and linguistic identities relate to and are reshaped by the postcolonial states' attempt to shape the national identity by using Pakistani province of Punjab, which was partitioned between India and Pakistan, as a case study. While drawing upon census reports, religious publications and official historiography, he focused specifically upon how folklore and Punjabi cinema reflect complex shifts in (and resistance to) post-partition realities. He explored multiple representations of two rebellious figures – Dulla Bhatti and Maula Jatt – and related them with the history and

politics of Pakistan. Dulla Bhatti is a 16th century rebel celebrated for his resistance against the Mughal emperor, Akbar. Though tales of Dulla Bhatti continue to be sung in India and Pakistan, post-1947 realities are reflected in the retellings. For instance, in some versions, Dulla Bhatti is a Sikh resisting Muslim oppression. In others, he is an orthodox Muslim resisting Akbar's irreligious empire. Yet, in others, he is the paradigm of Punjabi regional and Rajput caste pride resisting the centralising attempts of the foreign power, that is, the Mughals. Maula Jatt is an extremely popular cinematic rebel who has featured in numerous Pakistani Punjabi films. Films featuring Maula Jatt are largely centred on caste and regional pride, and often demonstrate a rejection of state and religious institutions. By examining the multiple retellings of the adventures of these two figures, Dr Iqbal demonstrated how regional (Punjabi), linguistic (Shahmukhi, Gurmukhi and Urdu), religious and caste identities were and continue to be recast by and resist the events of 1947.

Dr Adraoui explored the impact of the Palestinian partition on Islamist movements, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood. Using official archives from that period, he highlighted that the Palestinian cause was, from the very beginning, a core question within Islamist circles and leading to the 'Islamisation' of Palestine. It also reinforced both Islamist mobilisations and narratives. To demonstrate this, he explored the debates, demonstrations, speeches and political actions undertaken by Islamist forces (with a specific focus on Egyptian, Syrian as well as Jordanian cases) that encountered the official birth of the state of Israel which was seen as alien in the region. He also analysed the words and expressions used to describe the partition to deduce its religious and political edges.

Following the two presentations, Dr Dorsey remarked how the memories of the partition and dislocation are still fresh in the minds of the populations, to which Dr Sevea commented that memory and recollection varies across generation. Dr Dorsey also noted the role of political mobilisation post-partition and asked why the Palestinian cause, as a mobilising factor, is so salient in transnational Islamist movements. Dr Adraoui attributed it to the centrality of Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa in Islam.

During the Question and Answer session, a member of the audience commented that, even though the Palestinian issue existed in rhetoric of radical Islamist movements, they have not done anything for Palestine. Dr Robson added that Palestinians are overrepresented in ratio to their population size in a lot of transnational movements which are not necessarily Islamist and highlighted the role of the Palestinian diaspora in mobilising support for the Palestinian cause.

The Question and Answer session also focused on the concept of "caste" in non-Hindu religions in the Indian sub-continent. Dr Sevea stated that, for Muslims, even though there are not scriptural claims to caste, there are religious spaces in India where "lower caste" Muslims are not allowed to enter. He attributed this to the replication of the Hindu culture in the subcontinent. On a question on paradoxical identities in communities, Dr Sevea discussed how colonial labelling and categorisation of different communities moulded their identities. He explained how the Sufis are presumed to be apolitical and peaceful even though that is not necessarily true. Similarly, the classification of the Jatts being aggressive was created during colonialism. Dr Jalal highlighted that the film, Maula Jatt, gained popularity when General Ziaul Haq was in power in Pakistan and asserted that its

acceptance was due to its messages of justice, righteousness and speaking up for the oppressed, and not so much about caste. She also mentioned that “caste” had lost its resonance in the last few elections, though she agreed that it was important during the Zia era.

Conclusion

Dr Kattan thanked the speakers and members of the audience for their participation in the event. He expressed the view that both ISAS and MEI could work together towards publishing the presented papers.

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