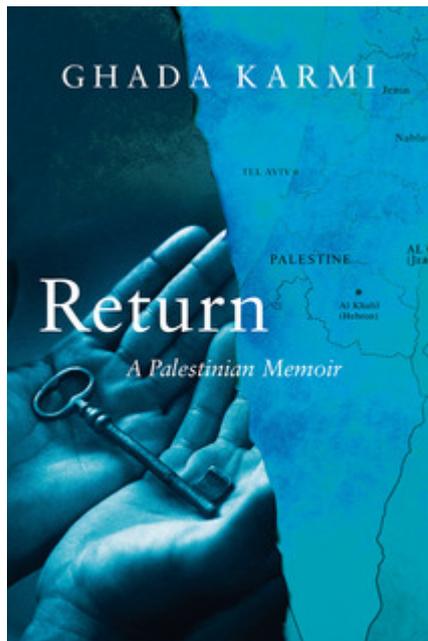


WHAT IS AT STAKE IN PALESTINE AND ISRAEL TODAY?

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Ghada Karmi, Palestinian writer and activist, visited Canberra last year as part of a speaking tour in which she spoke about her recent book *The Return: A Palestinian Memoir* as well as giving more general insights about Palestine and Israel. I was fortunate to meet Ghada and hear her speak.



Dr Karmi grew up in Britain following her family's exile from Palestine where she became a physician, author and academic. In 2005, she left her adoptive home in a quest to return to her homeland where she worked with the Palestinian Authority.



Photo: Dr Ghada Karmi.

Her book is a personal journey through a land that has been steadily militarised so that her childhood home was almost unrecognisable. She witnessed firsthand the Authority's bizarre system of bureaucracy and the brutality of Israel's occupation. While many exiles harbour the flame or return, she found those living there were focussed on simply addressing their daily struggles.

Anglican Christians in Australia are concerned about many aspects of the current situation in Palestine and Israel. Dr Karmi, herself a Muslim, found it amazing that Christians in Western nations were not speaking out against what is happening to Christians in her homeland.

I particularly appreciated the part of Dr Karmi's talk where she sought to deal with some of the myths surrounding the conflict. She gave an outline of what can be long-held and current views and what flaws can be seen and these are listed below.

1. What is happening in Israel and the Occupied Territories, despite how it may seem, is not a situation of conflict. To speak as if it were is to imply two roughly equivalent powers. People say 'this conflict has been going on for thousands of years' but today's situation has its own specific nature not as a conflict but a settler colonialist project, an occupation.

2. The situation's 'complexity'. The broad outlines are widely know and agreed by many. Various UN resolutions have been passed and although ignored show that underlying understanding and agreement are evident. The Israeli Government does not deny many of the claims and have opened extended the Jewish settlements.

3. The use of the Bible to shore up land acquisition and settlement expansion. This is not about Biblical truth and ancestral lands although many American Christians see the situation in these terms. Biblical prophecy is contestable and surely not intended as a 21st Century geopolitical guide.

4. The tragedy of the Holocaust is often used to justify the policies of modern Israel.
5. Israeli government actions are positioned as a moral enterprise to somehow right the wrongs of European history. Yet, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians remain in refugee camps, four generations later. When western nations created Israel as a homeland for the Jewish people in the aftermath of the war, the land was not empty but filled with people who belonged there. Israel's right to exist is not contested by most of today's Palestinian and advocacy groups. Nevertheless, Israel and others need to justly recognise the occupation, expansion of settlements and the continuing existence of refugee camps.
6. The conflict is often depicted in religious terms, as it is simply Jewish people against Muslim. This minimises the real political issues at stake while ignoring the existence of Palestinian Christians.
7. Finally, the emotive charge of anti-Semitism is used by the Israeli government to shout down its critics, especially in the US. It is not anti-Semitic to critique the policies of a government. To assume that all Jewish people support these policies and think in the same way is a form of anti-Semitism in itself. To call on Israel's government to adhere to United Nations resolutions is not being against "the Jews". Many Jewish Israelis speak out against the occupation, the land acquisition, the separation wall and the extension of settlements on Palestinian land.

Helen is involved with the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Network, a network of Australian Christians who seek lasting peace for the people of Palestine and Israel inspired by Christ's vision for universal reconciliation. It was established in 2006 by church leaders who saw a particular role for Christians to advocate from a faith perspective about Palestinian human rights.

By **Helen Rainger**