Unlike Michael Gurdon, I will not purport to be uncommitted on the Palestinian issue — I am unashamedly pro-Palestinian.

Initially, I must concede that, in his article “Arab-Israel Conflict -- Where to from here?” (ALR, March/April 1974), Mr. Gurdon distinguishes himself as a proponent of a solution which essentially conforms with declared PLO policy.

However, I do take issue at the perspective from which the conclusion is drawn and unfortunately, the credibility of Mr. Gurdon’s entire article is marred by his feeble attempts to credit the State of Israel with some sort of plausible genesis and motivation. In fact, it almost seems as though he has thrown in the optimum number of palliatives for those who may sense that an injustice has been done to the Palestinians.

Much could be said upon the interpretation of facts but it will suffice to demonstrate just a few of the fallacious propositions presented to the reader by the author.

Quote: “The Arab-Israeli conflict could feasibly be traced back to the first contact between Jews and Mohammed’s legions in the seventh century.”

This is surely one of the most intriguing of Mr. Gurdon’s many cryptic statements. Just what connection Mohammed’s legions have with the Arab-Israeli conflict must remain a mystery because he does not elaborate.

Historians tell us that the Jews were almost totally expelled from Palestine during Roman occupation. Furthermore, we know that well after the commencement of Russian Jewish migration in the late 1800s there were still only 24,000 Jews domiciled in Palestine by the turn of the century (the total population then being 500,000).

Consequently, it is difficult to see any relevance in an encounter between what must have been an insignificant minority group and “Mohammed’s legions”. No doubt Mohammed did command legions, but it is also worthy to recall that Moslems were not colonists and it has been estimated by Glubb Pasha that no more than 25 per cent of new blood was introduced into Palestine as a result of the Arab invasions.

Quote: “the conflict ... can be said to have arisen out of a confusion of pledges made by Great Britain during the course of the 1914-18 war. Because of this very confusion both the Israelis and the Arabs can and do lay claim to have right and justice on their own side.”
That these pledges were extremely and deliberately equivocal is certainly true. But that native Palestinians have to rely upon a pledge given by Great Britain, even if such were entirely unequivocal, in order to justify their continued occupation of their own land is preposterous in the extreme.

The writer evidently presupposes that "Mr." Balfour, as he was known, had both the right and the authority to determine the destiny of the 700,000 Palestinians then living in Palestine. Later on, Mr. Gurdon does generously concede -- although almost casually -- that the Arabs "wanted Palestine simply because they lived there" as if such were hardly a valid enough reason of itself.

Israelis may well use the Balfour Declaration as establishing their credentials, but Palestinians do not credit the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence any such similar merit.

In addition to raising these irrelevancies, Mr. Gurdon then proceeds to imply discredit to the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence anyway by designating the Sherif Hussein as "the ruler of the western part of the Arabian peninsula". If Hussein was, in fact, merely such a "ruler" then, of course, any reader of even average intellect would have cause to question the significance of Britain's pledge to this, apparently, obscure chieftain from remote Arabia. In fact, the Sherif Hussein was the Emir of Mecca -- the elected Sherif of all Sherifs (direct descendants of Mohammed) and, consequently, the nominal leader of the Moslem Arab world.

Clearly the pledge was just as sacrosanct as were the promises that were given to the Jews, as the writer so eloquently puts it, by "their God, Yahweh, and confirmed more recently by Balfour and the League". However, as already indicated, none of these "promises" were credible; even supposing that the League of Nations had confirmed God's promise -- which it did not; and even supposing that the prophecy of return was not fulfilled under the auspices of King Cyrus in 538 B.C.

If, indeed, the deceitful Balfour and the discredited League can be equated with God, then there is no end to the improprieties that can be perpetrated in the name of God!

The article then proceeds to inform us, in appropriately vague terms, that Jews had -- in any case -- already made "large land purchases from the local Palestinian inhabitants". As it happens, neither of these statements are true.

Firstly, a large proportion of the land sold to Jews was previously owned by absentee landlords from Syria and Lebanon.

Secondly, when British troops occupied Palestine in 1918, Jews owned two per cent of the total land area and even at the termination of the Mandate in 1948, only 5.67 per cent of the land was Jewish owned.

In terms of arable land, the figure given for Jewish land ownership by Chaim Weizmann in 1944 was 0.73 million dunums out of a total of 7.6 million dunums of cropped land.

Finally, to demonstrate the absence of chronological, and therefore coherent, perspective I would draw attention to the following passage:-

"The day following the proclamation of the State of Israel, the armies of six Arab countries launched their offensive. The Mufti of Jerusalem and other Arab leaders exhorted the Arab population to leave their homes and seek refuge behind Arab lines."

As to whether the Mufti, or any other Arab leaders did actually "exhort" Palestinians to leave their homes is entirely irrelevant. After the savage massacre by the Irgun of 254 Arab men, women and children at Dier Yassin on April 9, 1948, it was quite unnecessary for any Arab leaders to exhort Palestinians to flee for their lives.

In fact, some 200,000 of the 700,000 odd Arabs, who Mr. Gurdon tells us subsequently became refugees, had left their homes prior to the proclamation of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948. This is not surprising when we consider that Zionist forces captured Tiberius on April 18, Haifa on April 21, Safad on May 10, Jaffa on May 13, etc. In other words, all major centres of the Arab population, including the Katamon quarter of Jerusalem and Acre, had already fallen into Jewish hands prior to the proclamation.

Clearly, therefore, the creation of Israel was the culmination of the enforced exodus of Palestinians from their homes.

No doubt the space allotted to correspondence does not permit me to continue this critical appraisal, but suffice to say that I feel that I have, without recourse to commentary, exposed sufficient serious discrepancies in the article to give the reader cause for extreme scepticism.

R. WHITE
Spokesman,
Friends of Palestine.