



THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT

An Introduction



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PALESTINE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Palestine, as part of Greater Syria, was under the Ottoman Caliphate for 400 years.

Apart from Jerusalem, there was not much infrastructure, but Palestine was not an empty land. Most of the countryside was run on a feudal system, with tenant farmers and labourers and large-scale landowners.

Napoleon's campaign in Egypt and Palestine led to a long struggle between Britain and France to control the area.

Small Jewish communities existed in Palestine and lived peacefully. Before World War I, around 7% of the Palestinian population was Jewish.



Jerusalem towards the end of the nineteenth century

THE BEGINNINGS OF ZIONISM

Moses Hess published *Rome and Jerusalem*, a defence of Jewish nationalism, in 1862. He argued that anti-Jewish sentiment was widespread and Jews were persecuted worldwide (this was largely true of Eastern Europe, less so in the west but it did still happen - as shown by the Dreyfus case in France in 1894-95). As such, he and other Zionists rejected the concept of assimilation among non-Jewish communities.

An Ottoman law of 1867 gave foreigners the right to own land in Palestine, a move which facilitated the Zionist acquisition of land in the region. The first aliyah (wave of Jewish immigration to Palestine) took place between 1882 and 1903, partly in response to the persecution of Russian Jews which followed the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. Arab protests against Zionist settlers in Palestine took place as early as 1891.

In 1896, Theodor Herzl published *The Jewish State*, and in 1897 the First International Congress of Zionists took place. Herzl sought support from one of the 'Great Powers' for the establishment of a Jewish homeland.

Christian Zionists

Early on, Zionism was more widespread among Christians than Jews. Notable Christian Zionists included the MP Lord Shaftesbury, David Lloyd George and Arthur Balfour (the latter two key to the Balfour Declaration). Christian Zionists believed in the Old Testament and argued that Jews had a divine right to possess the land of Canaan/Palestine. They also believed that the return of the Jews to "their" land would lead to their eventual conversion to Christianity and the Second Coming.

WHERE TO FOUND THE JEWISH NATIONAL HOME?

Many Zionists regarded Jews as the successors of an ancient people settled in the land of Canaan (roughly corresponding to contemporary Palestine). They saw Palestine as the "promised land", from which they had been exiled by the Romans. A Jewish National Fund was established in 1901 to buy up land in Palestine to use for settlement. Much land was owned by absentee landlords (including Arabs) who were happy to sell to the highest bidder.

Jews were not the first settlers in Palestine - in the second millennium BC many pagan tribes (including Canaanites, who gave their name to the ancient land) lived there. In addition, there was a considerable Jewish community in Babylonia from the sixth century BC, while in 70 AD, the time of their exile from Jerusalem, there were large communities elsewhere in the Roman Empire, especially Egypt and Syria.

Not all Zionists agreed that Palestine was "the promised land". One, the British Jew Israel Zangwill, supported Palestine as a location for the National Home until learning it had a sizeable indigenous population. In 1903, Herzl recommended accepting a British suggestion of a home in East Africa, although the Seventh Zionist Congress in 1905 rejected any alternatives to Palestine.

Meanwhile,1904 marked the beginning of the second aliyah, following the persecution of Jews in Kishinev in 1903.

PALESTINE PRE-1914

Zionist settlements in Palestine continued to grow during this period, leading to clashes with the native Arab population, both Muslim and Christian. Opposition to these settlements intensified during 1908-09, with local incidents developing into widespread resistance. While Palestine nationalism as a concept lagged behind Zionism, it developed in this period, in opposition to the Ottoman Turks as well as Zionists.

Jewish immigrants in Palestine began to establish Kibbutzim (agricultural communities): the first was Degania, created in 1910. Many Zionists focused on farming as a way to improve the Jewish race and develop their physicality, as well as a way to root themselves in the land they had purchased in Palestine. Influenced by socialism, they aimed to create a community of equals.



Haifa in 1915

BRITISH CONQUEST OF PALESTINE

During World War I (1914-18) the British, French and Italians (with the Arab Revolt) fought against the Ottomans, the Germans and Austria-Hungary. Discussions took place on what to do with Palestine should the territory be captured - which it was.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 was a secret treaty between Britain and France, supported by Russia and Italy. As part of the Agreement, Britain gained control of what is now southern Israel and Palestine.

In 1915, via the British High Commissioner of Egypt Henry McMahon, Britain had promised independence and control of territories freed from Ottoman rule to the leader of the Arab Revolt, Hussein bin Ali, in return for his support. Once the Sykes-Picot Agreement and later Balfour Declaration were made public, Hussein and other Arab leaders were angered at what they saw as the breaking of promises.



General Sir Edmund Allenby entering Jerusalem, 11 December 1917

THE BALFOUR DECLARATION

This public declaration was issued by the British Government in 1917 in the form of a letter from Arthur Balfour, Foreign Secretary, to Lord Rothschild, a leader of the British Jewish community (later published in the press).
The government of Prime Minister David Lloyd George pledged to "facilitate" the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, while stating that nothing would be done to prejudice the rights of existing communities living there. These two statements were inherently contradictory.

Why issue the Declaration? Lloyd George and Balfour were both Christian Zionists, but encouraged by Herbert Samuel, a Jewish Zionist member of the Cabinet, it was widely believed that the Declaration would ensure that American and British Jews supported Britain in the war. The idea that Jews worldwide were both more powerful and more committed to Zionism than they actually were was exaggerated and potentially anti-Semitic.

Ironically Balfour, when PM, had introduced the 1905 Aliens Act, mainly to prevent Jews fleeing persecution in Eastern Europe from entering Britain.
In 1917 Edwin Montagu, then the one Jewish minister in the Government, submitted a memorandum arguing that the position of the British Government was anti-Semitic, and that the establishment of a Jewish National Home would encourage countries to disenfranchise their Jewish citizens. He also argued that marking out Jews in this way "forces a nationality upon people who have nothing in common".

THE BRITISH MANDATE FOR PALESTINE

The Balfour Declaration did not in itself have any legal significance, but in 1922 it was enshrined into the League of Nations Mandate for Britain to administer Palestine. Based on Winston Churchill's White Paper (mostly written by Herbert Samuel), it reaffirmed the creation of a Jewish national home in Palestine, but rejected the idea of a wholly Jewish Palestine.

This was despite further disturbances and riots in Palestine which coincided with the Third Aliyah. Major Arab riots took place in 1920-21, largely in response to the implementation of the Balfour Declaration, in which non-Zionist Jews were also targeted.

There was a widespread belief that Jewish immigrants were "civilising" the Middle East. Their capital and enterprise would save Britain money when it came to administering this new territory.

However, many British officials "on the ground" in Palestine sympathised with the Arabs.

While Arabs were protesting, Jews were steadily buying land and forming infrastructure. Land purchases doubled in the 1920s.

THE 1920S

Sir Herbert Samuel was the first British High Commissioner for mandated Palestine. Though a Zionist, he thought that the process of establishing a Jewish National Home should happen more gradually. He felt that things were going too far and that the native Arab population needed protection. Samuel appointed Haj Amin al-Husseini as Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and created the Supreme Muslim Council. However, Arabs rejected the legislative council and the concept of an Arab Agency, feeling that it would signify an acceptance of the situation.

In 1923, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, a Zionist leader, published *The Iron Wall*, arguing that the native Arab population of Palestine needed to be crushed by force as they would never agree to the founding of a Jewish homeland in their nation. Jabotinsky founded Revisionist Zionism in 1925, a form of Zionism advocating expansionism and the establishment of a Jewish majority.

In 1924, the USA tightened immigration rules, making it harder for Jews (or anyone else) to emigrate to the United States. The period 1924-32 marked the Fourth Aliyah in Palestine, and Arab riots took place in Jerusalem, Hebron and Safed during 1929.

THE 1930S AND THE GROWTH OF NAZISM

In 1930, the Passfield White Paper sought British disengagement from the Jewish National Home aspects of the Balfour Declaration and the Palestine Mandate. It limited Jewish immigration to Palestine and Jewish purchase of Arab land. In response, British Prime Minister Ramsay McDonald wrote a letter to the prominent Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann (known as the Black Letter in Arabic sources), effectively negating the White Paper and confirming British support for both immigration and land purchase.

Jewish immigration to Palestine continued to increase. In 1933, Hitler came to power in Germany. The Fifth Aliyah took place from 1933-35. There was some cooperation between the Nazis and the Zionists regarding the emigration of Jews to Palestine, but there was also support for the Nazis from some Arabs.

In 1931, Jewish immigration to Palestine numbered approximately 4,000. By 1935, this had increased to 62,000. Jewish immigrants also often had better living and working conditions than Palestinian Arabs. Increasing unrest led to the 1936 Arab Revolt against both Zionism and the British Empire, defeated by a combination of infighting, British forces and Jewish forces trained and armed by Britain. The Revolt included a six-month general strike.

The Palestine Royal Commission, or Peel Commission Report, of 1937 argued that the pledges of the Balfour Declaration were irreconcilable and that Britain had failed to keep them. It proposed a two-state solution, strongly opposed by both Palestinian Arabs and Revisionist Zionists, although Weizmann and David Ben-Gurion, head of the Jewish Agency (later first Prime Minister of Israel), supported it as it would effectively have created a Jewish homeland. In 1939, MacDonald's White Paper formally abandoned the partition plan, favouring an independent Palestinian state.

WORLD WAR II AND THE END OF THE BRITISH MANDATE

In 1940, Jews made up around 28% of the population of Palestine. The Second World War took place 1939-45 and in Germany the Holocaust was well underway. The British chose this time to restrict immigration to Palestine: for instance, the *Struma*, carrying 769 Jewish refugees, landed in Istanbul in 1942. The refugees applied for entry visas to Palestine, which were rejected by the Colonial Office. The ship eventually sank, with the loss of all on board save one.

In 1946 the US President Truman supported the demand for the admission of 100,000 refugees to Palestine. This was refused by the British. Jewish sabotage operations took place throughout Palestine: the right-wing underground military group Irgun blew up the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, location of the British administrative headquarters, killing 91 people.

In 1947 the British government declared an intention to terminate its responsibility for Palestine and refer the Mandate back to the United Nations. The General Assembly voted for the partition of Palestine into a Palestinian and a Jewish state, allocating 55% of Palestine to the Jewish.



The King David Hotel after the bombing

THE CIVIL WAR OF 1947-48 AND THE CREATION OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL

The Jewish defensive militias including Haganah, Irgun and Lehi had organisation, training, weapons and funding which the Palestinian groups such as Jaysh-al-Jihad al-Muqaddas, supported by the Arab Liberation Army, lacked. Up to 750,000 Palestinians - 85% of the local population - fled or were chased away by Jewish forces.

Zionist immigrants implemented the Plan Dalet which planned the destruction of Arab villages and cities including Haifa and Jaffa. This strategy has been interpreted in different ways: some have seen it as defensive, others as a planned strategy to expel the native population.

On 9 April 1948, the Irgun, led by future Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, carried out a massacre at the village of Deir Yassin. 254 villagers, many of them women and children, were killed in cold blood. The resulting mass panic saw around two thirds of the population leave their homes. The events of 1948 are often referred to as the nakba (meaning “catastrophe” in Arabic).

David Ben-Gurion proclaimed the State of Israel on 14 May 1948, the end of the British Mandate.

THE PALESTINE WAR

The Palestine War began the day after the State of Israel was declared. Israel fought against the Arab League, a coalition made up of Egypt, Iraq, Transjordan (later Jordan), Syria, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. Arab armies entered areas assigned to the Palestinian state under the partition plan to support Palestinian resistance. During the war, Commander Moshe Dayan expelled all Palestinian civilians from Lydda and Ramleh by force.

The UN appointed Count Folke Bernadotte as a mediator, but he was assassinated in Jerusalem in 1948 by the paramilitary Zionist group Lehi. In 1949, Israel concluded armistice agreements with Egypt, Lebanon and Syria. The Gaza Strip was governed by Egypt until 1967.

At the end of the war, approximately 4,000 soldiers and 2,400 Jewish civilians were dead, while Palestinian deaths numbered between 12,000 and 20,000. In addition, approximately 4,000 Arab soldiers had been killed. At the war's conclusion, Israel possessed 77% of Palestine, as opposed to the 55% they were allocated in the 1947 partition plan.

The United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 194 towards the end of 1948, stating that Palestinian refugees wishing to return to their homes should be permitted to do so and that compensation for loss or damage to property should be paid. The UN has reaffirmed the Resolution every year since 1949, but to date it has not been implemented.

ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

The Law of Return, passed by the new State of Israel in 1950, gave the right to settle in Israel to every Jew worldwide.

Conflict between Israel and Arab countries such as Egypt, Syria and Jordan typified the 1950s and 1960s. The Suez Crisis of 1956 saw France, Britain and Israel unite to invade Egypt and regain control of the Suez Canal. The invasion led to humiliation for Britain and France, but Israel's reputation as a military power was strengthened.

The Six-Day War of 1967 was fought by Israel against Egypt, Syria and Jordan. As part of the hostilities, Israel seized the West Bank, previously annexed by Jordan, resulting in the displacement of 280,000 to 325,000 Palestinian civilians. Arab states also expelled many of their Jewish communities. The UN Security Council issued Resolution 242, which called for Israel's withdrawal of troops from occupied territories. In 1973, Egypt and Syria launched a full- scale war against Israeli forces occupying the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights.

The Israeli settlement programme, which accelerated after 1977, began at this time. It ignored the internationally recognised territorial limits established in 1949. Post-1967 settlements allocated 40% of the arable land to less than 1% of the total population.

PALESTINIAN REBELLION

The Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) was founded by the Arab League in 1964. It was to act as an umbrella organisation for a number of groups, including Fatah, the largest, founded in 1959, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). In 1969, Yasser Arafat was elected Chairman of the Executive Committee of the PLO.

PLO's policy-making authority was the Palestinian National Council. Its founding document was the Palestinian National Covenant, and for around 20 years it aimed to liberate the whole of Palestine through the use of arms.

Palestinian camps in Arab countries like Jordan were starting points for incursions into Israel. In September 1970 King Hussein of Jordan ordered the destruction of this "state within a state", resulting in the death of thousands of Palestinians and the exile, once again, of thousands more. Many PLO fighters ended up in Syria and south Lebanon. In 1974 a summit meeting of Arab leaders in Rabat declared the PLO the only legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.

In 1972, an organisation calling itself Black September (named after the aforementioned events in Jordan) kidnapped Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics. Nine Israelis died in the resulting airport shootout. Palestinian militants, a breakaway group of the PFLP, hijacked an Air France plane in 1976 to demand the release of 40 Palestinian prisoners. The hostages were rescued by Israeli forces as part of Operation Thunderbolt after the plane was diverted and landed in Uganda. These terrorist acts did little but harm the Palestinian cause.

Between 1978 and 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon in order to attack PLO guerrilla bases. This resulted in the massacre of Palestinian refugees in the Sabra and Shatila camps. PLO officials were scattered, most ending up in Tunis.

THE FIRST INTIFADA AND THE OSLO ACCORDS

A Palestinian *intifada* (in Arabic, a rebellion or an uprising) took place between 1987 and 1993, after an earlier Israeli Air Force attack on the PLO headquarters in Tunis. Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad), a key PLO official, was assassinated by Israeli commandos. The intifada took the form of resistance, civil disobedience, strikes and commercial boycotts, and largely took the PLO by surprise.

In 1988 the 19th session of the Palestine National Council took place in Algeria. Known as the Intifada Meeting, the PLO declared an independent Palestinian state, comprising Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Yasser Arafat agreed, in front of the UN at Geneva, to recognise Israel according to its pre-1967 borders, and also to renounce terrorism. The USA agreed to open talks, but the secret Oslo Accords in 1993 were key to the peace agreement, with terms signed by Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.



Rabin, US President Bill Clinton and Arafat outside the White House in 1993

THE SECOND INTIFADA

After the Oslo agreement, Israeli forces commenced withdrawal from Jericho and the Gaza Strip, while the Palestinian Authority came into being. In 1995, Rabin was assassinated at a peace rally in Tel Aviv by a Jewish extremist. Hamas and Islamic Jihad terrorists then carried out a series of suicide bombings.

Peace talks continued, but agreements could not be reached. The second intifada took place between 2000 and 2005, fuelled by annoyance at these failures. Settlement in the occupied territories was expanding. Before becoming Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon had paid a visit to the Temple Mount in the Old City of Jerusalem - a deliberately provocative act that resulted in riots in East Jerusalem. Suicide bombers attacked a nightclub in Tel Aviv and a pizzeria in Jerusalem, and Israel assassinated Abu Ali Mustafa, General Secretary of the PFLP.

Israel launched 'Operation Defensive Shield', a full-scale occupation of the West Bank. Yasser Arafat was imprisoned by the Israeli army in Ramallah, and Israel began building the 'Separation Wall' along the Green Line (the Israeli border set out in 1949) and within the West Bank. The wall is often referred to by Palestinians as a "wall of apartheid", and it is described by the International Court of Justice as a violation of international law.

Sharon did come to realise the necessity of peace and Israeli withdrawal from some settlements. In 2004 he announced a plan to withdraw settlers and troops from the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank, and met Arafat's successor Mahmoud Abbas in 2005 to pledge an end to violence. He founded a new centrist political party after facing a revolt in his own right-wing party, but in 2006, before elections could take place, he suffered a stroke and never recovered.

THE RISE OF HAMAS AND BEYOND

The two largest Palestinian factions were Fatah (who supported the Oslo Accords) and Hamas (who rejected them). Tensions had been rising between them in Gaza since Arafat's death in 2004.

In 2006, Fatah and Hamas candidates competed for seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council, Hamas under the name 'Change and Reform'. The USA had called for elections in Gaza and tried to influence the outcome in favour of Fatah, but Hamas won a majority of seats. Hamas was viewed by Israel and the US as a terrorist organisation, but post-election polls suggested that their victory was largely owing to Palestinians' desire to end corruption in government. In addition, they had grown in popularity after providing support on the ground for the struggling population of Gaza.

The following year, after several incidents of open violence between Fatah and Hamas, the two parties agreed to form a coalition government, but when Hamas took over the Gaza Strip later in 2007, the Palestinian Authority dismissed the coalition. The PA now led only the West Bank while Hamas ruled over Gaza. In 2008, details emerged of a US-backed plan to provoke civil war in Palestine with the aim of removing Hamas from power. In the event, Fatah fighters supported by the USA inadvertently provoked Hamas to seize total control of the Gaza Strip.

Since 2007, Israel has imposed a land, sea and air blockade on the Gaza Strip. The movement of people and goods is severely restricted. Imports and exports have been mostly banned, while travel to the outside world is restricted to "exceptional humanitarian cases" such as the need for medical treatment. Essential infrastructure and basic human necessities such as electricity, medicine, food and water are restricted.

THE LAST TEN YEARS

Mahmoud Abbas has appeared before the UN General Assembly demanding an end to Israeli occupation and recognition of the Palestinian state. In 2021, he postponed the first planned elections in fifteen years, ostensibly because of a question mark over whether Israel would allow Palestinians in East Jerusalem to vote. There have been no real contested elections in the West Bank or Gaza since 2006.

On 8 July 2014, Israel launched Operation Protective Edge in the Gaza Strip, aiming to stop rocket attacks from Gaza. Human rights groups have long argued that both Israel and Hamas have committed war crimes.

Settlement building has continued to be a contentious issue. In 2016 a UN Security Council resolution argued that Israeli settlements since 1967 were illegal. The following year, the Israeli Parliament passed a law retroactively legalising dozens of settlements built on private Palestinian land in the West Bank. In 2019, the US stated that it no longer considered such settlements to be illegal, but the following year Israel's own Supreme Court struck down the law.

US President Donald Trump has recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, moving the US Embassy there from Tel Aviv, and also recognised Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. In 2018, the 'Great March of Return' saw Palestinians demonstrate in the Gaza Strip, calling for Israeli authorities to lift the blockade of Gaza and allow refugees to return to their towns and villages.

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