

The Battle for Palestine

From the Archive: On the centennial of the British-French Sykes-Picot deal to carve up the Mideast, it's worth recalling other ways Europe worsened the region's problems, including the Israeli-Palestinian mess, ex-JFK adviser William R. Polk recalled in 2014.

By William R. Polk (Originally published on Aug. 11, 2014)

What we call the "Palestine Problem" is really a European Problem. No European society treated Jews as full members, and most have ugly records of anti-Semitism. Even relatively benign Western governments exploited, segregated or banished Jews (and such other minorities as Gypsies, Muslims and deviant Christians). Less benign governments practiced pogroms, massacres and expulsions. European history reveals a pervasive, powerful and perpetual record of intolerance to all forms of ethnic, cultural and religious difference.

Jewish reaction to the various forms of repression was usually passivity but occasionally flight interspersed with attempts to join the dominant community.

When Jews were attacked by Christian mobs during the Crusades, they suffered and tried to hide; when they were thrown out of such medieval cities as Cambridge, they fled to new refuges; when they and the Muslim Arabs were forced out of Spain in 1492, most found refuge in Muslim countries which were far more tolerant of minorities than contemporary Christian societies; when Eastern (*Ashkenazi*) and "Oriental," mainly Spanish, (*Sephardic*) Jews in small numbers began to reach Germany, Austria, France and England in the Eighteenth Century, many converted to Catholicism; finally, most of the European and American Jewish communities assimilated culturally and by generous public actions sought to prove their social value to their adopted nations.

Generally speaking, they were successful in their efforts in America, England and Italy but failed in France, Germany and Austria. Even when they faced existential threats, there is no record of a serious attempt by European Jews to defend themselves.

In the latter years of the Nineteenth Century, the reaction of the Jewish communities residing in Europe began to change. In part this was because, like other European peoples, Jews began to think of themselves as a nation. This transformation of attitude led to a change from the desire for escape to a temporary haven (*Nachtlager*) to permanent establishment in what Theodor Herzl called a *Judenstaat*, the creation of a separate, faith-based nation-state which was viewed as the permanent solution to anti-Semitism. This was the essential aim and justification for Zionism.

Nineteenth Century Europeans understood and approved of the concept of nation-states but only for themselves; in France, Germany, Italy, Austria and the Balkans, Europe was reforming itself along national lines. However, no European nation-state was willing to tolerate a resident rival nationalism. So Herzl's call for Jewish nationhood was generally regarded as subversive by non-Jews and was feared by the more established Jewish communities and the religious establishment as a probable cause of an anti-Jewish reaction. These attitudes would remain in contention down to our times.

Keen for Imperialism

Even before the Europeans were imbibing the ideas of nationalism, their ruling classes were thrusting into the Americas, Africa and Asia to create empires. Spain dominated the Americas and was insistent that the ethnic-religious problems of the Old World not be transmitted there so it sought ethnic "purity" of its colonizers; neither Jews nor suspect *conversos* were allowed. England effectively ruled India beginning in the last years of the Eighteenth Century, and the nature of its colonial government, drawn from the middle class, generally precluded Jewish involvement.

On the contrary, when France invaded Algeria from 1830, it opened its doors to fairly large-scale Jewish immigration from Malta and elsewhere. Germany briefly tried to create an empire in Africa but was stopped by the First World War.

Russia meanwhile was consolidating its Asian empire and in parts of it created Jewish zones in some of which people of non-Semitic backgrounds were absorbed into Jewish culture, but, in the western heart of the Russian empire, anti-Semitism was pervasive and violent. By the Nineteenth Century, Russian Jews were leaving in vast number for Western Europe and the United States. In the last decade of the Nineteenth Century almost 200,000 arrived in America alone.

Despite the differences, we can see that while nationalism was the ideology of choice domestically, imperialism captured the imagination of Europeans in foreign affairs. So how did these two ideologies impact upon what most Europeans regarded as "the Jewish problem?"

In England, we see most clearly what some leading politicians thought might be the answer: encouraging the emigration of Jews from Europe to the colonies. One of the early proponents of this, essentially anti-Semitic, policy was Sir Laurence Oliphant. As he proposed, getting rid of the Jews as neighbors – that is, in England – and thus solving the "Jewish Problem" would foster British trade and help Britain consolidate its empire if they established themselves as colonies in Africa or Asia.

Added to the benefit imperialists identified was the vague but attractive idea held by many fervent Christians that if the Jews returned to the Holy Land, they would become Christian. Thus, support for Zionism seemed to many Europeans to be a win-win policy.

Colonial Neglect

Europeans knew little about the peoples they were conquering in Africa and Asia and did not regard their well-being as of much importance. Americans, let us admit, were even more brutal in dealing with native Americans. So were the Australians with the Aborigines and the South African Boers with the Bantu. Rich, Western societies generally regarded the poor of the world, and especially other races, colors and creeds, as subhuman, without claims on freedom or even sustenance.

This was the attitude taken up by the early Zionists toward the Arabs. Even their existence was often denied. The Zionist leader, Israel Zangwill, described Palestine and Zionist aspirations for it as being “a country without a people for a people without a land.”

Zangwill’s was a powerful slogan. Unfortunately, it masked a different reality. Given the technology of the times, Palestine was actually densely populated. The overwhelming numbers of the inhabitants were villagers who farmed such land as they could water. Water, never plentiful, was the limiting factor.

Nomads lived on the edges but they were always few in number, never as much as 15 percent of the natives. They too used sparse resources in the only way they could be used, by moving their animals from one temporary source of grazing to another as rain made possible.

Until massive amounts of money and new technologies became available from the 1930s, population and land were in balance but, of course, in balance on a lower level than in wetter, richer climates where societies had more advanced technologies.

Oliphant, his successors in the British government and others in the French government were not concerned about what their policies did to native peoples.

The British were keen to take the lands of African blacks and to plunder the Indians of India while the French engaged in policies approaching genocide in Algeria. As focused on Palestine, the British sought to solve the problem of what to do with the Jews at the expense of peoples who could not defend themselves – and to benefit from the work of the Jews rather like medieval kings did – rather than to reform their own attitudes toward Jews.

Thus, as Claude Montefiore, the president of the Anglo-Jewish Association,

declared on Nov. 30, 1917, "The Zionist movement was caused by anti-Semitism."

The Deep Cause of War

The two World Wars set the parameters of the "middle term" causes of the struggle for Palestine. Briefly, we can sketch them under four headings: first, the desperate struggle of the British to avoid defeat in the First World War by courting Jewish support; second, the struggle of the British both to defeat the still powerful Ottoman empire and to avoid the danger of mutiny of Muslims in their Indian empire; third, the British attempts to "square" of the triangle of promises made during the war to Arabs, Jews and their French allies; and, fourth, the management of a viable "mandate," as they renamed their League of Nations-awarded colonies.

Taken together, these acts form the "middle term" of the causes of war in our times. They are:

First, in the final period of the First World War, the Russians were convulsed by revolution and sought a separate peace with Germany (the 1917-1918 negotiations that led to the Brest-Litovsk treaty). The Germans' incentive for the treaty was that it allowed them to shift their powerful military formations from the Eastern front to the Western front. They hoped that in one huge push they could overwhelm the already depleted and exhausted Anglo-French armies before America could effectively intervene.

The Allied High Command thought this was likely. Slaughter of the Allied forces had been catastrophic. At the same time, England faced bankruptcy. It had drawn down its own reserves and exhausted its overseas credit. It was desperate.

So what options did the British have? Let us be clear: whether their assessment was right or wrong is irrelevant because *they acted on what they thought they knew*. They believed that support for Zionist aspirations would, or at least might, change their fortunes because *they thought that*:

–The Bolsheviks who had become the Russian government were overwhelmingly Jewish and seeing British support for what was presumably their aspiration for a national home, they would rescind or not implement the contentious and unpopular Brest-Litovsk treaty and so keep the German army from redeploying on the Western front;

–A large part of the officer corps of the German army was Jewish and seeing British support for what was presumably their aspiration for a national home and also being disillusioned by the losses in the war and the way they were discriminated against by the Prussian high command they would either defect or at least fight less hard; and

-The American financial world ("Wall Street") was controlled by Jews who, seeing British support for what was presumably their aspiration for a national home, would open their purses to relieve the desperate need of Britain for money to buy food and arms. (Again, these British perceptions may have been far off the mark but they were their perceptions.)

This appreciation was the justification for the Balfour Declaration of Nov. 2, 1917. As then-British Prime Minister David Lloyd George later declared, "The Zionist leaders gave us a definite promise that, if the Allies committed themselves to give facilities for the establishment of a national home for the Jews in Palestine, they would do their best to rally Jewish sentiment and support throughout the world to the Allied cause."

British Maneuvering

Second, the Balfour Declaration was not a "stand alone" document: Britain had already sought the support of the predominant Arab Muslim leader. Since the Ottoman Sultan-Caliph had declared support for the Central Powers, *Sharif* ["noble descendant of the Prophet"] Husain, who was then the governor of Mecca, was the most venerated Muslim the British could hope to use to accomplish their two urgent objectives: the first was defeating the Ottoman army (which had just captured a whole British division and was threatening the Suez Canal) and the second was preventing what their jittery security service was always predicting, another Indian "mutiny" and/or the defection of the largely Muslim Indian army as a result of the declaration of a *jihad* by the Sultan-Caliph.

To accomplish these twin aims, the British encouraged the *Sharif* of Mecca to proclaim his support for the Allied cause and to organize a "Revolt in the Desert." In return, the British offered to recognize Arab independence under his rule in most of the Middle East.

The British offer was spelled out by the senior British official in the Middle East, Sir Henry McMahon, in a series of official letters of which the first was dated July 14, 1915. The area to be assigned to Husain was essentially "Syria" or what is today divided into Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, part of Arabia and Palestine/Israel. This initial offer was subsequently reconfirmed and extended to Iraq by a series of separate declarations and acts.

Although the British government had committed itself to support Arab claims for this area, it also began the following year negotiating with France and the Russian empire for this and other parts of the Middle East. An Anglo-French accord was reached in 1916 by Sir Mark Sykes with M. Georges Picot. Their agreement allocated to France much of what had been promised to the Arabs and designated as an international zone the then Ottoman coastal areas from the

Sinai frontier with Egypt including Gaza up to and including the now Lebanese city of Tyre (Arabic: *Sour*) except for a small British enclave at Acre.

Third, as the war ended and the negotiations began in Paris for a Treaty of Peace, the British had to try to explain, hide or revise these three wartime agreements. They were embarrassed when the new Bolshevik government published the hitherto secret Sykes-Picot agreement, but they managed for years to keep the Husain-McMahon correspondence secret. What they could not hide was the Balfour Declaration. However, they began a process of "definition" of their policy that ran completely counter to what the Zionists had expected.

Zionist Goals

The Zionists, from the beginning, were determined to turn Palestine into a Jewish nation-state (Herzl's *Judenstaat*), but, being sensitive to British politics, their leaders denied "the allegation that Jews [aimed] to constitute a separate political nationality." The word the Zionists proposed for what they intended to create in Palestine, coined by Max Nordau as a subterfuge "to deceive by its mildness," was *heimstette* (something less than a state, roughly a "homeland") to be employed "until there was no reason (soto dissimulate) our real aim."

Predictably, the deception fooled no one. As Lord Kitchener had remarked when the Balfour Declaration was being debated in the English Cabinet, he was sure that the half million Palestinians would "not be content [with an Old Testament role as a suppressed minority to be] hewers of wood and drawers of water." He was right, but few people cared. Certainly not then.

The native Palestinians were not mentioned in any of the three agreements: the agreement with *Sharif* Husain dealt broadly with most of the Arab Middle East while the Sykes-Picot agreement shunted them, unnamed, aside into a rather vague international zone and the Balfour Declaration used the curious circumlocution for them as "the existing non-Jewish communities." (However, while focusing on Jewish aspirations and avoiding naming the Palestinians, it specified that nothing should be done that would "prejudice" their "civil and religious rights.")

It was not until 1919, at the Paris Peace Conference, that an attempt was made to find out what the Palestinians wanted. No one in Paris knew; so, strongly opposed by both Britain and France, President Woodrow Wilson sent a mission of inquiry, the King-Crane Commission, out to the Levant to find out. Wilson, already desperately ill and having turned over leadership of the American delegation to my cousin Frank Polk, probably never saw their report, but what the Palestinians, Lebanese and Syrians told the American Commissioners was

essentially that they wanted to be left alone and if that was not feasible they would accept American (but not British) supervision. The British were annoyed by the American inquiry; they did not care what the natives wanted.

The British were also increasingly disturbed that *heimstatts* was being taken to mean more than they had intended. So, when Winston Churchill became Colonial Secretary and as such was responsible for Palestine, he publicly rebuked the Zionists for trying to force Britain's hand and emphasized that in the Balfour Declaration the British government had promised only to support establishment in Palestine of a Jewish homeland. It did not commit Britain to make Palestine as a whole the Jewish homeland.

Echoes of these statements would be heard, because shouted back and forth over the following 30 years, time after time. Ultimately the shouts would become shots.

Irreconcilable Differences

British attempts over the years to reconcile their promises to the Arabs, the French and the Zionist movement occupies shelves of books, filled a number of major government studies and was taken up in several international conferences. The promises were, of course, irreconcilable.

One must admire the candor of Lord Balfour, the titular author of the Balfour Declaration, who, in a remarkable statement to his fellow Cabinet ministers on Aug. 11, 1919, admitted that "so far as Palestine is concerned, the Powers [Britain and France] have made no statement of fact which is not admittedly wrong, and no declaration of policy which at least in letter, they have not always intended to violate."

Fourth, having driven out the Ottoman Turkish forces, the British set up military governments. Knowing about these double- or triple-deals, efforts at concealment, post-facto interpretations, lawyer-like quibbles, linguistic arguments and Biblical allusions, the British commander, General (later Field Marshal, Lord) Edmond Allenby, refused to be drawn into the fundamental issue of policy, declaring that such measures as were being taken were "purely provisional," but the military government quickly morphed into a British colony, defined by the new League of Nations as a "mandate" in which the imperial power was obligated to "uplift" the natives and prepare them for self-rule.

Practical decisions were to be set by the civil High Commissioner. The first such official was an English Zionist, Sir Herbert Samuel, who came into office to begin large-scale immigration of Jews into Palestine, to recognize de facto a Jewish government (the "Jewish Agency") and to give Jewish immigrants permission

to acquire and irrevocably hold land that was being farmed by Palestinian villagers. I turn now to the transformation of Palestine under British rule.

The Deep Cause of War

The Palestine, which the British had conquered and around which they drew a frontier, had a surface area of 10,000 square miles (26,000 square kilometers) and had been divided among three *sanjaqs* (subdivisions of a province) of the Ottoman *villayet* (province) of Beirut. The British had expelled its governors and their civil, police and military officers, who were Ottoman officials, and had established a colonial government.

The population of 752,000 was divided mainly between 600,000 Arabic-speaking Muslims and roughly 80,000 Christians and the same number of Jews. Each group had its own schools, hospitals and other public programs staffed by religiously educated men. The Jews were mostly pilgrims or merchants and lived mainly in Jerusalem, Haifa and the larger towns. Christians, similarly, had their own churches and schools, but unlike the Muslims and Jews they were divided among a variety of sects.

A British study in 1931 found them to include adherents of the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Greek Uniate (Melkite), Anglican, Armenian (Gregorian), Armenian Uniate, Jacobite, Syrian Catholic, Coptic, Abyssinian, Abyssinian Uniate, Maronite, Chaldean, Lutheran and other churches. Whatever else the land of Palestine produced, it was certainly luxuriant in religion.

The Palestine that emerged at the end of the First World War was also an heir to the Ottoman Empire because the British had decided that Ottoman laws were still in effect. What these laws mandated would play a major role in Palestinian-Zionist affairs so they must be noted. The key point is that in its later years, the Ottoman empire had attempted various reforms that were primarily aimed at increasing its ability to draw tax revenue from the population.

The most important of these changes was the imposition of quasi-private ownership on the traditional system of land ownership. From roughly 1880 onward, wealthy urban or even foreign merchants, money lenders and officials were able to acquire title to lands by agreeing to pay the taxes. Similar systems and similar transfer of "ownership" occurred in many areas of Asia and Africa. "Modernization" often came at the price of legal dispossession. So important was this was a concept and a process in future events that it must be understood.

Land in Palestine (and adjoining Lebanon as in Egypt, India and much of Africa and Asia) was an extension to a village. Like the houses, the plots mirrored the kinship structure. If a family tree were superimposed on a map, it would show

that adjoining parcels were owned by close relatives; the further away the land, the more distant the kin relationship. One could read into the land ownership pattern the history of births, deaths, marriages, family disputes and the waxing and fading of lineages.

Despite the Ottoman changes, villagers continued to plow and harvest according to their system. In fact, they did everything they could to avoid contact with the government. They did so because the collection of taxes resembled a military campaign in which their grain might be confiscated, their cattle driven away, their sons kidnapped for military service and other indignities imposed.

In Palestine as in Syria, Iran and the Punjab where the process has been carefully studied, peasants often agreed to have their lands registered as the possession of rich and influential merchants and officials who would promise to protect them. In short, the new system promoted a sort of mafia.

That was the legal system the British found when they set up their government in Palestine. Ottoman tax records specified that large blocs of villages and their lands "belonged" not to village crop farmers but to the influential "tax farmers."

One example was the Lebanese merchant family, the Sursuks. In 1872, the Sursuks had acquired a kind of ownership (known in Ottoman law as *miri*) from the Ottoman government for a whole district in the Vale of Esdraelon near Haifa. The 50,000 acres the Sursuks acquired was apportioned among some 22 villages. In return for the title to the land, they agreed to pay the yearly tax which they extracted from the villagers in their multiple roles as tax collector, purchaser of shared crops and money lender. They apparently made at least 100 percent profit yearly on their purchase; the land was one of the most fertile areas in the country.

As an English traveler, Lawrence Oliphant, wrote in 1883, this land "looks today like a huge green lake of waving wheat, with its village-crowned mounds rising from it like islands, and it presents one of the most striking pictures of luxuriant fertility which it is possible to imagine."

While the law was Ottoman, it corresponded to English practice dating from the Seventeenth Century "enclosures" of commons. The British imposed it on Ireland and enforced it on the Punjab, Kenya and other parts of their empire.

Selling the Land

The Sursuks had purchased the land, according to the records, for an initial £ 20,000. Under the Land Transfer Ordinance of 1920, they were allowed to sell it. So in 1921, the Zionist purchasing agency bought the land and villages for £726,000. The Sursuks became rich; the Zionists were delighted; the losers were

the villagers. Some 8,000 of them were evicted.

Moreover, for the most laudable of reasons – the Zionist regulation that forbade exploitation of natives – the dispossessed villagers could not even work as landless laborers on their former lands. Nor could the land ever be repurchased from the Jewish National Fund which provided that the land was inalienable.

Both anger and greed gripped the Palestinian upper class: some sold their lands for what appeared then astronomical prices, but about 80 percent of all purchases were from absentee owners, like the Sursuks.

In less than a decade, tensions between the two communities reached a flash point. The flash point was then, and continued to the present time to be, the place where the Wailing Wall abutted the principal Islamic religious site, al-Aqsa mosque. For the first time, on Aug. 15, 1929, a mob of several hundred Jewish youths paraded with the Zionist flag and sang the Zionist anthem.

Immediately, a mob of Arab youths attacked them. Riots spread across the country and for the first but far from the last time, Britain had to rush in troops. Within two weeks, 472 Jews and at least 268 Arabs had been killed. It was a harbinger of things to come

The British were deeply disturbed. Riots were expensive; a civil war would be ruinous. So the Home government decided to seek advice on what it should do. It turned to a man with great experience. Sir John Hope-Simpson had been a senior officer in the elite (British) Indian Civil Service, had helped to solve serious problems in Greece and in China and had been elected to Parliament as a Liberal. He was commissioned to find a solution.

Not surprisingly, he concluded that the issues were land and immigration because “the result of the purchase of land in Palestine by the Jewish National Fund has been that the land ... ceased to be land from which the Arab can gain any advantage either now or at any time in the future. Not only can he never hope to lease or to cultivate it, but, by the stringent provisions of the lease of the Jewish National Fund, he is deprived for ever from employment on that land. Nor can anyone help him by purchasing the land and restoring it to common use. The land is mortmain and inalienable. It is for this reason that Arabs discount the professions of friendship and goodwill on the part of Zionists.”

Hope-Simpson pointed out that Palestine was a small territory, only 10,000 square miles of which more than three quarters was “uncultivable” by normal economic criteria; with 16 percent of the good land owned by Jews or the Jewish National Fund. He thought that the remainder was insufficient for the existing Arab community. Further sales, he was sure, would provoke further Arab

resistance and violence. Thus, he recommended a temporary halt to immigration.

Zionist Protests

Infuriated by his report, the Zionists immediately organized a protest movement in and around the government in London and in the English press. Under unprecedented pressure, the Labour Party government repudiated Hope-Simpson's report and refused to consider his recommendation. From the episode, the Zionist leaders learned that they could change government policy at its source by applying money, propaganda and political organization. Dealing with the ultimate authorities first in England and then in America would become a persistent Zionist tactic down to the present time. Palestinians never developed such a capacity.

The Zionist aim was, naturally, to bring to Palestine as many immigrants as possible and to bring them as quickly as possible. Between 1919 and 1933, 150,000 Jewish men, women and children came to Palestine. In the four years from 1933 to 1936 the Jewish population quadrupled. In 1935, as many arrived as in the first five years of the Mandate, 61,854.

Seeing that the British government had spurned even its own officials and that it would not or could not control either the land or population issues, the Palestinians became increasingly furious. They concluded that their chance of protecting their position by peaceful means was almost nil.

In 1936, a general strike, something unheard of before, turned into a siege; terrorists blew up trains and bridges and armed bands, which also for the first time included volunteers from Syria and Iraq, roamed throughout Palestine and, most sobering of all, the Arab elite which had worked closely with the British as judges and officials registered their "loyal opposition":

According to senior Arab officials in the Palestinian government, "the Arab population of all classes, creeds and occupations is animated by a profound sense of injustice. ... They feel that insufficient regard has been paid in the past to their legitimate grievances, even though these grievances had been inquired into by qualified and impartial investigators, and to a large extent vindicated by those inquiries. As a result, the Arabs have been driven into a state verging on despair; and the present unrest is no more than an expression of that despair."

Annoyed but not deterred, the British Colonial Office decided, as it was then also doing in India, to crack down hard on the "troublemakers." It put Palestine under martial law and brought in 20,000 regular soldiers to be quartered on rebel villages, blew up houses of suspected insurgents and imprisoned

Palestinian notables. Over 1,000 Palestinians were killed. But it was clear to the government in London that these were measures could be only temporarily and that more durable (and affordable) policies must be found and implemented. The British appointed a Royal Commission to find a solution.

Seeking a Solution

Echoing what previous investigators had found and recommending much of what they had suggested, the Royal Commission report has a modern ring. It concluded that:

“An irrepressible conflict has arisen between two national communities within the narrow bounds of one small country. ... There is no common ground between them. The Arab community is predominantly Asiatic in character, the Jewish community predominantly European. They differ in religion and in language. Their cultural and social life, their ways of thought and conduct, are as incompatible as their national aspirations. ... In the Arab picture the Jews could only occupy the place they occupied in Arab Egypt or Arab Spain. The Arabs would be as much outside the Jewish picture as the Canaanites in the old land of Israel. ... This conflict was inherent in the situation from the outset. ... The conflict will go on, the gulf between Arabs and Jews will widen. (emphasis added)

Agreeing that repression “leads nowhere,” the Royal Commission suggested the first of a number of plans to partition the land.

Partition sounded sensible (at least to the English), but in 1936 there were too many Palestinians and too few Jews to carve out a viable Jewish state. Small as it was to be, the Jewish state would have 225,000 Arabs or only 28,000 less than the 258,000 Jews, but it would contain most of the better agricultural land. (The land expert of the Jewish Agency reported that the proposed Jewish state would contain 500,000 acres “upon which as many people could live as in the whole of the remainder of the country.”)

Partition was immediately rejected by Vladimir Jabotinsky who was the intellectual father of the Israeli terrorist groups, the Stern Gang (*Lohamei Herut Yisrael*) and the Irgun (*Irgun Zva'i Leumi*), and the sequence of Israeli leaders, Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Shamir, Ariel Sharon and Benjamin Netanyahu.

He warned the British that “We cannot accept cantonisation, because it will be suggested by many, even among you, that even the whole of Palestine may prove too small for that humanitarian purpose we need. A corner of Palestine, a ‘canton,’ how can we promise to be satisfied with it. We cannot. We never can. Should we swear to you we should be satisfied, it would be a lie.”

The Zionist Congress refused the Royal Commission plan, and patterning themselves on Gandhi’s passive resistance movement, the Palestinians set up a

“National Committee” which demanded that the British allow the formation of a democratic government (in which, the Arab majority would have prevailed) and that the sale of land to the Zionists be stopped until the “economic absorptive capacity” could be established.

And they offered an alternative to partition: essentially what today we call a “one state solution”: Palestine would not be divided, but the current ratio of Jewish and Palestinian inhabitants would be maintained.

The Royal Commission proposal got nowhere: because the Zionists thought they could get more while Palestinian leaders could not negotiate since they had been rounded up and put in a concentration camp.

Blocked from peaceful and non-violent action, the Palestinian leaders and their followers began a violent campaign against the British and the Zionists. To protect themselves, the British created, trained and armed a Jewish paramilitary force of some 5,000 men. Violence grew apace. In 1938, the Mandate government reported 5,708 “incidents of violence” and announced that it had killed at least 1,000 Palestinian insurgents and imprisoned 2,500.

Neither the British, nor the Zionists, nor the Palestinians could afford to give up. In the middle of the Great Depression, the British could not afford to rule a hostile country from which they expected no return (unlike Iraq, Palestine had no oil); the Zionists, faced with the existential challenge of Nazism and having gone far toward statehood, could not agree to the terms proposed by the Palestinians; and the Palestinians saw in every shipload of immigrants a threat to their hopes for self rule.

So, eight years after the Hope-Simpson report, two years after the Royal Commission another British Government commission (the “Palestine Partition Commission”) was sent to try to redraw the map in some fashion that would create a larger Jewish state.

A Single State

The best deal the partition commissioners could get for the Jewish state was an area of about 1,200 square miles with a population of roughly 600,000 of whom nearly half were Palestinians; to increase the Jewish ratio to Palestinians, the proposed Jewish state would have had to be drastically reduced in size.

A rumor that the British had decided to recognize Palestinian independence had the expected effect: throughout Palestine, Arab groups danced with joy in the streets and Zionist militants bombed Arab targets.

Actually, the British did decide to implement much of the new proposal: the

Government favored a plan to stop Jewish immigration and to restrict land sales after five years and after ten years to make Palestine a single state under representative government. The policy was approved by Parliament on May 23, 1939.

The Zionist reaction was furious: Jewish hit squads burned or sacked government officers, stoned policemen and on Aug. 26 murdered two senior British officers. Five days later, the Second World War began.

While attention was otherwise directed in the midst of the war, partition was formally rejected by the Zionist organization in the so-called Biltmore program proclaimed in America in May 1942, and the solution to the dilemma of Jewish-Palestinian population ratios would be found in 1948 when most of the Palestinian population fled or was driven out of Palestine.

During the 1930s, while most of the world was plunged in a stultifying depression, the Jewish community, the *Yishuv*, profited from a material and cultural expansion. Money poured in from Europe and America. While the amounts were small by today's standards, Jewish donations enabled land to be bought, equipment purchased, factories opened, systems of transport set up and housing to be built.

Jerusalem was built in stone by Arab labor and Zionist money, and Tel Aviv began to look like Miami. The *Yishu* became a quasi state with its own schools, hospitals and other civic institutions, and enlivened by the influx of Europeans, it pulled increasingly away from both the Palestinian community and from the surrounding Arab societies. That has remained the persistent aspect of "the Palestine Problem": while physically located in the Middle East, the *Judenstaat* was and is a European rather than a Middle Eastern society.

Palestinian Evolution

The Palestinians slowly began to evolve from a colonial, peasant-farmer, village-centered society. Their agriculture spread in extent and began to focus on such specialized crops as Jaffa oranges, but villagers continued their traditional habit of isolating themselves from (now British) government and did not develop, as did the Zionists, their own governmental and administrative institutions.

The growing but still tiny urban middle class of Christians and Muslims worked with the British administration and enrolled their children in British-run, Arabic-language, secular schools. That is, they accommodated. Meanwhile, the traditional urban elite contested power not so much with the Zionists as with one another; whereas the Arab leaders spoke of national causes, they acted in

and asserted leadership over mutually hostile groups.

Overall, the Palestinians never approached Israeli determination, skill and financial capacity; they remained divided, weak and poor. That is, they remained over all a colonial society. What constituted their national cause was not so much a shared *quest* for independence as a *reactive* sense of having been wronged.

So, year-by-year as more immigrants arrived and as more land was acquired by the Jewish National Fund, opposition increased but never coalesced. Whereas anti-Semitism created Zionism, fear of Zionism fostered a Palestinian reaction. But, until another generation had passed that reaction remained only a seedbed of nationalism, not a national movement. To understand this, we must look back to the previous century.

The idea of nationalism came to the Levant (Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria) and Egypt nearly a century after it had become dominant in Europe, and it came only to a small and at first mainly Christian elite. One's identity came not from a nation-state, as in Europe, but either from membership in an ethnic/religious "nation" (known in Ottoman law as a *millet*) – for example, the Catholic "nation" – or, more narrowly, membership in a family, a clan or a village. The Arabic word *watan* catches exactly the sense of the French word *pays*: both "village" and "nation."

Arabs, like Europeans, welcomed nationalism, *wataniyah*, as a means to overcome the evident and weakening effects of division not only among the religious communities, particularly the division between Muslims and Christians, but also among the families, clans and villages.

In Palestine, nationalism by the end of the British mandate had still not coalesced into an ideology; to the extent the concept of a *watan* had been extended beyond the village and had become popular, it was a visceral reaction to the thrust of Zionism. Anger over loss of land and the intrusion of Europeans was general, but the intellectual underpinning of nationalism was slow to be formulated in a way that attracted much of the population. It still had not attracted general support until long after the end of the British mandate. In part, it became possible in large part because of the destruction of the village communities and the fusing of their former residents in refugee camps: simply put, the *watan* had to die before *wataniyah* could be born.

A More Powerful Drive

Jewish nationalism, Zionism, drew on different sources and embodied more powerful thrusts. The Jewish community as a whole benefitted from two experiences: the first was that for centuries in what they call their *diaspora*

virtually all Jewish men had meticulously studied their religious texts. While intellectually narrow, such study inculcated a mental exactitude that could be, and was, transferred to new, secular, broader fields when the opportunity presented itself in the late Eighteenth Century in Austria, Germany and France.

Thus, with remarkable speed, Polish and Russian Jews emerged in the West as mathematicians, scientists, physicians, musicians and philosophers, roles that were not part of the religious tradition. While the British had certainly been wrong to believe that Jews dominated the Bolshevik movement in Russia, Jews also certainly played a major political and intellectual role both there and in Western Europe.

The second experience that increasing numbers of Jews shared was the *sense* of exclusion but increasingly the *reality* of participation. During the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries, while often disliked and occasionally maltreated, Jews were generally able to take part in Western European society.

Thus, they were able to expand their horizons and to develop new skills. Many thought that they had arrived at a satisfactory accommodation with non-Jewish Europe. It was the shock of finding this not to be true that motivated Theodor Herzl and his colleagues to begin the quest for a separate Jewish nation-state, a *Judenstaat*, outside of Europe, and it was the conservatism of religious Judaism that forced the Zionist movement to reject offers of lands in various parts of Latin America, Africa and Asia and to insist on the location of that nation-state in Palestine.

Jews, of course, had to focus more on Europe than on Palestine. The Zionist movement was located in Europe and its leaders and members were all European. From the end of the First World War, secular, "modern" Jews began to migrate to Palestine and soon outnumbered and overshadowed the traditional Jewish pilgrims.

Then, from the election of Hitler in 1932 and the collapse of the Weimar Republic in 1933, pressure on the German Jewish community moved through increasingly ugly incidents like the 1938 *kristallnacht* toward a crescendo of anti-Semitism. Desperate, increasing numbers of Jews sought to flee from Germany. Most went to other countries – particularly America, England and France – but they were often not welcomed and in some cases were actually prevented from entering. (America implemented restrictions and accepted only about 21,000 Jewish refugees up to the eve of the Second World War.)

So, in increasing numbers, mainly secular, educated, Westernized Jews went to Palestine. The numbers were important but more important was that the individuals and groups coalesced to create a new community. It was this "nation-state-in-formation," the *Yishuv*, that set the trend toward the future.

Shaping Palestine

Nothing like these impulses were felt by the Palestinians. They had never experienced pogroms but lived with neighbors of different faiths in a carefully structured and religiously sanctioned form of mutual "tolerance" and, despite the Ottoman Empire's moves toward modernization/westernization/fiscal control, they lived in an acceptable balance with their environment. Few had an enlivening contact with European thought, industry or commerce. To the English, they were just another colonial people, like the Indians or the Egyptians.

That is how the British officials in Palestine treated the Palestinians. As I read Indian history of the same period, I find striking parallels: colonial officials in India were equally dismissive of even the richest and most powerful Hindu and Muslim Indians. As "natives" they had to be kept in their place, punished when they got out of order and rewarded when they were submissive. Generally, the poorer natives could be treated with a sort of amused tolerance.

But the Jews didn't fit in the colonial pattern and could not be treated as "natives." After all, they were Europeans. So the British colonial officials never felt comfortable dealing with them. Should they "belong to white men's clubs" or not? With the natives one knew where he stood. With the Jews, relations were at best uncertain. Worse, they were adept at going over the heads of the colonial officials direct to London. This minor but important aspect of the Palestine problem was never resolved.

Then, suddenly, as Germany invaded Poland, the world slipped into war.

The War Years

Both Palestinians and Zionists enlisted in large numbers – 21,000 Jews and 8,000 Palestinians – to help the British in their hour of need. But both kept their long-term objectives firmly in mind: both continued to regard British imperialism as the long-term enemy of freedom. And, like the Hindu Parliamentarian Subhas Chandra Bose, the Muslim Mufti Hajj Amin al-Husaini actively flirted with the Axis. Bose led a Japanese-supplied and -sponsored army into India. (Bose's Palestinian counterpart, Hajj Amin had no such army. He fled the country.)

What Bose had tried to do fighting the British in India, Jewish terrorists, inspired by Vladimir Jabotinsky, began to do in Palestine. By 1944, Jewish attacks on British troops and police, raids on British arms and supply depots and bombings of British installations had become common, and military training camps were set up in various *kibbutzim* to train an army to fight the British.

In response, the British commander-in-chief in the Middle East issued a

statement condemning the “active and passive sympathisers [of the terrorists who] are directly... assisting the enemy.”

On Aug. 8, 1944, a Jewish attempt was made to assassinate the High Commissioner and on Nov. 6, 1944, members of the Stern Gang murdered Prime Minister Churchill’s personal representative in the Middle East, the British Minister of State Lord Moyne. Churchill was furious and told Parliament that “If our dreams for Zionism are to end in the smoke of assassins’ pistols and our labours for its future are to produce a new set of gangsters worthy of Nazi Germany, many like myself will have to reconsider the position we have maintained so consistently and so long in the past. If there is to be any hope of a peaceful and successful future for Zionism these wicked activities must cease and those responsible for them must be destroyed, root and branch.”

In the last months of the war, the tempo of attacks increased. Carefully planned raids were made on supply dumps, banks and communications facilities. With Germany going down in defeat, Britain had become the Zionist Enemy Number One.

The Holocaust

But for a time, Zionist action focused on Europe. As the war ended, the enormity of the Nazi crimes against the European Jews came to public attention, and demands to “do something” for the survivors moved to the forefront of British and American politics. The British asked the U.S. government to join it in enforcing a solution no matter what that solution might be.

In America, there was a sense of collective guilt: anti-Semitism, like anti-black prejudice, while still common was beginning to be equated to Nazism and Fascism. But only beginning. America had actually turned back Jews trying to flee Nazi persecution. So when President Harry Truman announced in December 1945 that the U.S. would begin to facilitate Jewish immigration, there was little public or Congressional support. (Only 4,767 Jews were actually admitted.)

Meanwhile, various schemes were bandied about to do something for Europe’s Jews. One, never really seriously considered, was to give a part of defeated Germany to the Holocaust victims as their *heimstatte*. It died aborning when moves toward the Cold War argued for the reconstruction of Germany as a barrier to the Soviet Union.

No one, to my knowledge, suggested that Americans cede a part of the United States as an alternative Israel. Americans quickly adopted the European program for having the “Jewish Problem” solved at the expense of someone else.

Zionists, quite reasonably, were not prepared to bet their future on Western benevolence. They were determined to act, and they did so in four interconnected

programs: first getting the survivors of the Holocaust to Palestine; second, lobbying the American government to support their cause; third, attacking any and all who stood in their way; and, fourth, making staying in Palestine too expensive for Britain.

Building a Jewish Presence

First, the Zionists understood and were informed by the British studies that if they were to succeed in taking over Palestine, they would need far more Jewish immigrants than the British were likely to allow. So already in 1934, shortly after the Hope-Simpson report, they organized the first ship, a Greek tramp steamer, to take “illegals” to Palestine. The little SS *Velos* would be the first in what became a virtual fleet, and the 300 passengers it carried would be followed by many thousands in the years to come. British attempts to limit the flow – to try to keep the peace in Palestine – were generally ineffective and were, in part nullified by the anti-Semitism of the European states and particularly by the Nazis.

The Nazi involvement in the Palestine issue and the Zionist relationship to the Nazis form its most bizarre aspect. By 1938, not only the Nazis but also the Polish, Czech and other Eastern European governments were determined to get rid of their Jewish citizens. The Zionist leaders saw this as a major opportunity. So they sent an emissary to meet with the Nazis, and even with the Gestapo and the SS, to propose to help them speed the Jews away: they proposed that if the Nazis would allow the Zionists scope, they would set up training camps for selected young people to be shipped to Palestine.

Hitler had not yet made up his mind on “the final solution” but he was keen to promote a Jewish exodus. So the German officials, including Adolf Eichmann, made a deal with the Zionists that enabled them to select would-be emigrants. The choice of who was to go was purely pragmatic: it was not on humanitarian *needs* but on physical and mental *capacity* of the candidates to join the incipient Zionist army, the Haganah and its various offshoots.

By the end of 1938, the first batch of about a thousand Jews was being organized and trained by the “Committee for Illegal Immigration” (*Mossad le Aliyah Bet*), and roughly that many started their journey each month.*

As the Nazis moved to implement “the Final Solution,” they lost interest in the relatively small-scale Zionist emigration operation and began their horrible liquidation program in which millions of Jews, Gypsies and others died at Auschwitz, Treblinka and other concentration camps. With Europe closed to them, the Zionists turned to encouraging and facilitating the migration of Jewish communities from the Arab countries. To take over Palestine, they needed Jews

from anywhere and so they actively recruited them from Iraq to Morocco. Then, as the war reached its final stages, the Zionists turned back to Europe.

Their first move was to take over – literally to buy – the virtually defunct Red Cross headquarters in Romania. The newly arrived Soviet army was otherwise occupied so under the “Red Cross” emblem, the Zionist organization was able to restart the program of shipping Jews to Palestine. What the Zionist agents found was that the condition of the hundreds of thousands of remaining Romanian Jews was desperate; they were willing to go anywhere to get out Romania. Allegedly 150,000 signed up to go to Palestine, but the problem remained, how to get them there.

The answer was found in Italy. Stationed there was the small Jewish logistical support formation enlisted by the British in Palestine. Its main piece of equipment was exactly what the Zionist organizers most needed, the truck, and they were also decked out in British army uniforms and armed with British army documents.

Under Zionist orders and literally under British noses, they ranged throughout Italy, gathering displaced persons in their trucks and delivering them to ships that had been hired by the Zionists to smuggle them into Palestine.

Then disaster struck: along with other formations, the Jewish unit was redeployed. So the Zionists made what was by far their boldest move: in one of the most remarkable ventures of the Second World War, they created a fictitious British army.

A Fake Army

In the chaos of the last months at the end of the Second World War, Allied military units and supply dumps were scattered throughout Western Europe. Most troops were in the process of being redeployed or sent home. Command-and-control structures were falling apart. Dumps were often unguarded or even forgotten.

So, into this chaos, the Zionists ventured. Almost overnight, they “became” a separate British army formation with their own faked documents, phony unit designation and looted equipment. They drew petrol for their trucks and fuel for the ships with which they could rendezvous on the coast. With forged requisition papers they seized a building right in the center of Milan to use as their headquarters and others to create staging areas in various areas of Italy.

Second, they were utterly ruthless in achieving their objectives. As Jon and David Kimche have written in *The Secret Roads*, the European Jews “hated the Germans who had destroyed their corporate life; they hated the Poles and Czechs, the Hungarians and Rumanians, the Austrians and the Balts who had helped the

Germans; they hated the British and the Americans, the Russians and the Christians who had left them, so it seemed to them, to their fate. They hated Europe, they held its precious laws in contempt, they owed nothing to its peoples. They wanted to get out. ... Thus, *anti-goyism*, that malignant growth in Jewish life, received a new lease of life. Linked with Zionism, it now galvanised the Jewish camps in Europe.”

Their Zionist guides stimulated this hatred among the Displaced Persons (DPs) because, as the Kimches wrote, “they had to be uplifted; they had to be galvanised; they had to be given a stronger pride than their cynicism, and a stronger emotion than their demoralised if understandable self-seeking. The only thing that could do it, as they had seen during the Hitler era, was propaganda – hate propaganda for preference.”

Jews who attempted to go back to their former homes found their ways barred; others had taken over their houses and shops so their attempted return stimulated vicious riots, particularly in Poland, that convinced most Jews that they could not restart their old lives. If they needed further convincing, the Polish government closed the frontier and threatened to shoot returnees. And where the displaced persons were in temporary camps, their hosts were anxious to speed them on their ways.

By All Means Necessary

So, the Zionists felt justified in slandering, boycotting or even destroying those who thwarted or threatened to reveal their actions. When the head of the United Nations program charged with giving aid to the displaced persons in Germany, General Sir Frederick Morgan, reported that some “unknown Jewish organization” was running a program to transfer European Jews to Palestine – exactly what they were doing – he was pilloried as an anti-Semite.

That charge came easily. It was a charge, not unlike the McCarthyite charge of being a Communist, that all those who dealt with or wrote about the Palestine problem would learn to fear. It was used often, usually effectively and was always bitterly resented by those so attacked. It is a tactic that Zionists and their supporters often employed and is still employ frequently today.

Third, back in Palestine, the Zionist organization was doing all it could to make staying in Palestine too expensive for Britain. The Zionist army, the Haganah, its elite military force, the Palmach and the two terrorist organizations (in British eyes)/freedom fighters (to the Zionists), the Stern Gang and the Irgun, were attacking government buildings, blowing up bridges and taking hostage or shooting British soldiers.

When I first went to Palestine in 1946, the streets of every city were rivers of barbed wire, with frequent barriers and checkpoints manned by heavily armed British soldiers. The calm of evenings was frequently shattered by the sounds of machinegun fire and by night exploding bombs could be heard nearby. Everyone, including the soldiers of Britain's crack parachute division, was constantly on edge. Calm was feared as a prelude to the storm. Danger was everywhere, even when not intended.

On Christmas Eve 1946 at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem I sat in the midst of a congregation armed with the unreliable but lethal sten gun, expecting at any minute one might be dropped and go off. A few days later, I was nearly shot, in the midst of Jerusalem by a very nervous soldier. Everyone was suspect in the eyes of everyone else.

Denying Responsibility

When the Zionist civil authorities tried to stand aloof, pretending that they knew nothing of the use of terror, the British published intercepted documents showing that they were orchestrating the attacks and were involved in collecting and passing out arms to the insurgents. For the first time against the Zionists the British cracked down as they had done against the Palestinians, and as they had been doing and were still doing against the Indians in their independence movement, putting hundreds of Jews into what amounted to a concentration camp.

In riposte, Jewish terrorists/freedom fighters blew up the headquarters of the British government in Jerusalem, the King David Hotel, killing 91 people and wounding about 46. To the English Parliament, press and public, the bombing was taken as an act of war. The Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee denounced it as a "brutal and murderous crime ... an insane act of terrorism."

But the "brutal and murderous crime ... an insane act of terrorism" accomplished its purpose. Almost everyone – except of course the Palestinians – had concluded that the attempt by the British to establish an acceptable level of security had failed.

Fourth, the American government had long since decided to throw its support to the Zionists. Already at its presidential convention in 1944, the Democratic Party issued a statement stating that "We favor the opening of Palestine to unrestricted Jewish immigration and colonization and such a policy as to result in the establishment there of a free and democratic Jewish Commonwealth."

Shortly before his death, President Franklin Roosevelt affirmed that declaration and promised to do what was necessary to effect it. (But he, like the British in the First World War, also made a conflicting promise to the Arabs: just as the

British had promised the *Sharif* of Mecca so Roosevelt promised King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud, that he “would take no action which ... might prove hostile to the Arab people.” Then he immediately reversed himself, reaffirming his unrestricted support for Zionism.)

When he came into office, President Harry Truman called in August 1945 for the immediate admission to Palestine of 100,000 European Jews. Not to be outdone, Truman’s Republican opponent, Gov. Thomas Dewey, called for the admission of “several hundreds of thousands.” The rush to win Jewish money, influence in the press and votes was on. It has grown stronger year by year.

Caught in the Middle

Feeling increasingly isolated and desperate to turn to the host of problems it faced – both domestically and throughout the other parts of its increasingly fragile empire – the British government urged that America join in what was hoped to be a final commission, the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry, which was to focus not primarily on Palestine but, for the first time, on the plight of the European Jewish community.

It was in the emotional vortex of the hideous German concentration camps that the Commission began its work; its work would be continued in the context of American partisan politics. Its result was shaped both by the sight of the misery of the surviving Jews in Europe and driven by the political winds in America. It paid virtually no attention to the Palestinians.

The end of the mandate was in sight. The British decided to withdraw on May 15, 1948, eight months to the day after they had withdrawn from India. The results were similar: they had inadvertently “let slip the dogs of war.” Millions of Indians and Pakistanis and nearly a million Palestinians would pay a terrible price.

India was, perhaps, a more complex story, but the sole justification for the British rule of Palestine was the British obligation specified in the preamble to the Mandate instrument to “be responsible for putting into effect the declaration originally made on November 2nd, 1917, by the Government of His Britannic Majesty, and adopted by the said Powers, in favor of the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, it being clearly understood that nothing should be done which might prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”

Britain had failed. Indeed, three months before its forces withdrew, Britain warned the UN Security Council that it would require foreign troops to effect

the UN decision to divide the country. In reply, the U.S. Government ducked. On Feb. 24, it informed the UN that it would consider the use of its troops to restore peace but not to implement the partition resolution. On March 19, it went further, suggesting that action on partition be suspended and that a trusteeship over all Palestine be established to delay final settlement. Britain refused.

UN Division

The United Nations decision was to divide Palestine into three zones: a Jewish state, a Palestinian state and a UN administered enclave around the city of Jerusalem.

While Britain and America argued at the United Nations, Palestine slid into war. Over 5,000 people had been killed since the end of the Mandate had been announced: trains were blown up, banks robbed, government offices were attacked, and mobs, gangs and paramilitary troops looted, burned and clashed.

Then on April 10, about five weeks before the final British withdrawal, came the event that would establish the precondition of the Palestinian refugee tragedy – the Deir Yasin massacre. The regular Zionist army, Haganah, had tried to take the village, known to be peaceful and, insofar as anyone then was, neutral, and ordered the terrorist group, the Irgun, which was under its command, to help.

Together the two forces captured the village. The Irgun, possibly acting alone, then massacred the entire village population – men, women and children – and called a press conference to announce its deed and to proclaim that this was the beginning of the conquest of Palestine and Trans-Jordan. Horror and fear spread throughout Palestine. The precondition for the flight of the entire Palestinian community had been established. Much worse was to follow.

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