

The Palestine Mandate and the Birth of the State of Israel

The territory that composed the British mandate for Palestine was only slightly larger than the state of Massachusetts. Yet the repercussions of developments in and attitudes toward this small piece of southern Syria have reverberated throughout the Middle East and the world at large, shaping regional and Great Power relationships, influencing US and European domestic politics, generating five wars, creating over 1 million refugees, and producing misunderstanding and bitterness among the various parties involved. Historians have offered numerous perspectives on why the mandate became the source of so much discord. To some, the failure to resolve the conflict between Jewish immigration and the preservation of Palestinian Arab rights rests with the indecisiveness and biases of the various British governments that held power during the twenty-eight years of the mandate (1920–1948). Others argue that the question is not one of failure but of triumph—the triumph of the Zionist immigrants and their supporters in overcoming Arab resistance, British opposition, and European anti-Semitism to forge the state of Israel against seemingly overwhelming odds. Another group of historians poses a different set of questions: Why did the solidly established indigenous Arab inhabitants, settled on the land and dominant in the urban administration of Palestine for centuries, and possessing a population majority of approximately eight to one in 1922, become a minority within the new Israeli state in 1948? Why did Zionism, not Arabism or Palestinian nationalism, win the day in Palestine? Did the Palestinian Arab leadership perform its tasks adequately, were its members prepared to cope with

the multitude of international issues with which they were confronted, and were they credible representatives of the Palestinian Arab population at large?

The purpose here is to examine the interactions among the British, the Zionists, and the Palestinian Arabs in order to illustrate the main issues of the mandate era. We should keep in mind from the outset the unique premise on which the mandate for Palestine was founded: A small territory that had been inhabited by an Arab majority for some 1,200 years was promised by a third party (Great Britain) as a national home to another people (the international Jewish community), the majority of whom lived in Eastern Europe. The oppressed conditions in which East European Jews lived prompted the Zionists among them to take up Britain's promise and to attempt to construct in Palestine a Jewish national home; at the same time, the established Arab community of Palestine opposed the notion of turning its homeland into a Jewish state and, to the extent that it was able to do so, resisted the process. The Zionist claims to the same territory inhabited by Palestinian Arabs lay at the root of the conflict over Palestine.

THE EMERGENCE OF POLITICAL ZIONISM

Throughout the centuries since their dispersion from Palestine by the Roman conquest of the first century, the Jewish communities of Europe kept alive the idea of a return to the Holy Land. Palestine occupied so central a place in Jewish religious culture because of the belief that the establishment of the Kingdom of Israel after the Exodus represented the fulfillment of God's promise to the Jews that they were chosen to complete their destiny in Zion. Historical memories of the reigns of David and Solomon intermingled with aspects of religious belief and ritual to create a sustained vision of the ultimate redemption of the Jewish people through a return to the Holy Land. The dream of the return was also kept alive by more tangible needs. Discriminated against by governments and private individuals alike, European Jews were subject to restrictions forbidding them from entering certain professions, denying them access to universities, barring them from state employment, and confining them to specific areas of residence. In the face of oppression and prejudice, the visionary belief in an eventual return to Zion offered Jewry a measure of hope with which to endure the hard reality of the Diaspora. Yet although the sentiment of Zionism was deeply ingrained in Jewish religious life, it received little organizational expression until the late nineteenth century.

The forces that eventually gave rise to organized political Zionism were spawned by conditions in nineteenth-century Europe. During the era of liberal nationalism, the states of Western Europe gradually adopted legislation to provide for the legal emancipation of the Jews. With emancipation came assimila-

tion, as Jews moved into middle-class occupations and increasingly identified themselves as citizens rather than members of a distinctive religious community. Although many Jews, especially in Germany, where emancipation had made the most progress, looked upon assimilation as the process that would bring an end to anti-Semitism, others regretted the dilution of the bonds of communal identity and the decline of religious observance that resulted.

If developments in Western Europe appeared to favor the integration of Jews into national life, the situation in Eastern Europe was considerably different. In Russia and Poland, the main centers of Diaspora Jewry, active persecution of the Jewish communities intensified during the last decades of the nineteenth century. The reigns of Alexander III (1881–1894) and Nicholas II (1894–1917) were marked by a series of pogroms tacitly encouraged by the government. Faced with continuing oppression and harassment, millions of East European Jews sought a new life by immigrating to the United States. For others, Zionism offered an alternative hope for escape from persecution; it was not the spiritual Zionism of centuries past but a new, political Zionism inspired as much by nationalism as by religious belief.

Modern political Zionism—Jewish nationalism focusing on Palestine—originated in Russia, where anti-Semitism was most virulent. Following the pogroms of the early 1880s, Jewish groups were formed with the specific objective of assisting Jewish settlement in Palestine. In 1884 these scattered groups were organized under a central coordinating agency and took the name the Lovers of Zion. During the 1880s and 1890s, the Lovers of Zion sponsored small agricultural settlements in Palestine, but the enterprise suffered from lack of funds and the settlements were not very successful. Despite the difficulties experienced by this early settlement movement, it has assumed a prominent place in the historical consciousness of modern Israelis and is regarded as the first of several *aliyahs*, or waves of settlement, that contributed to the eventual creation of the state of Israel. In 1882, at the height of the pogroms, a seminal treatise in the history of political Zionism appeared. Entitled *Autoemancipation* and written by Leo Pinsker (d. 1891), the booklet argued that anti-Semitism was so deeply embedded in European society that no matter what the laws said about emancipation, Jews would never be treated as equals. To end their perpetually alien status, Jews could not wait for Western society to change; they had to seize their own destiny and establish an independent Jewish state. Pinsker was more interested in issues of national identity than of religion, and he did not insist that the Jewish state be in Palestine. However, his call for action was appealing to young Russian Jews, and in the 1890s a variety of Zionist organizations emerged, each with its own solution to the problems of Jewish identity and persecution. At this stage in its development, Zionism was an uncoordinated movement without direction.

Theodor Herzl (1860–1904) did not originate the idea of Zionism, but through his energy and determination he forged the existing strands of the ideology into a coherent international movement. Born into a middle-class Jewish family in Budapest, Herzl grew up in an assimilated environment. After obtaining a law degree from the University of Vienna, he worked as a journalist for a prestigious Viennese newspaper. Herzl's experiences as a correspondent in various Western European cities convinced him that anti-Semitism was such a deeply rooted prejudice that it could never be eliminated by legislation. He saw emancipation as a facade designed to mask, but not to remove, anti-Jewish sentiments. Driven by this belief, Herzl wrote *The Jewish State* (1896), which provided the ideological basis for political Zionism. Perfectly suited to its era, *The Jewish State* was as much a treatise on nationalism as on religion. Herzl's thesis was that the Jews constituted a nation but lacked a political state within which they could freely express their national culture. These two factors—the existence of a Jewish nationality and the absence of a Jewish state—combined to make the Jews aliens in the lands in which they lived and contributed to their oppression by the dominant cultural majority. In Herzl's opinion the only resolution to this problem, and to the problem of anti-Semitism in general, was for the Jews to acquire political sovereignty in a state of their own, thereby liberating their nationality from its perpetually subordinate status. Like his predecessor, Pinsker, Herzl was motivated more by the pragmatic considerations of nationhood than by the religious associations of the Old Testament, and he did not specify Palestine as the location of the future Jewish state.

The Jewish State had an electrifying effect on East European Jewry and provided Zionism with a clearly stated political objective. Encouraged by the response to his book, Herzl undertook to organize the various strands of Zionism into a single unified movement. Largely because of his efforts, the first Zionist Congress was convened in Basel in 1897. It attracted over 200 delegates and represented a milestone for the Zionist movement. The congress adopted a program that stated that the objective of Zionism was to secure a legally recognized home in Palestine for the Jewish people. Equally important, the Basel congress agreed to establish the World Zionist Organization as the central administrative organ of the Zionist movement and to set up a structure of committees to give it cohesion and direction. In the years following the meeting at Basel, branches of the central congress were set up throughout Eastern Europe, and a grassroots campaign to gather popular support was undertaken. The Zionist Congress met annually after 1897, and although the sessions often revealed deep divisions within Zionism, Herzl's success in attracting more and more delegates to each congress revealed the increasing appeal of the movement he headed.

Notwithstanding the growing participation of East European Jewry in Zionist activities, Herzl recognized that the movement would not be successful until

it secured the diplomatic support of a Great Power and the financial assistance of members of the Western Jewish community. Herzl was to be disappointed on both counts. The assimilated Jewish establishments in Western Europe and the United States feared that the assertion of Jewish distinctiveness, which was an integral part of Zionism, would produce an anti-Semitic backlash that might threaten their position in society. Moreover, Sultan Abdul Hamid II was opposed to the idea of large-scale European Jewish settlement in Ottoman territory, and none of the European powers was inclined to support a movement that offered no apparent diplomatic advantages. Thus, by the time of his death in 1904, Herzl had managed to infuse Zionism with his own energy and to provide it with an organizational structure that enabled it to survive his passing, but he had not been able to obtain the external governmental backing needed to fulfill the Basel program of establishing a legally recognized home for the Jewish people in Palestine. During World War I, however, the diplomatic status of Zionism improved dramatically.

THE BALFOUR DECLARATION

As noted in Chapter 9, the Ottoman decision to enter the war on the side of Germany prompted Britain, France, and Russia to plan for the partition of Ottoman territories in the event of an Allied victory. The British pledge to Sharif Husayn of Mecca and the Sykes-Picot Agreement between Britain and France constituted two of the principal proposals for dividing the Ottoman Empire among the Allies. The Balfour Declaration was another partition scheme; it was made all the more complex by the fact that it was issued unilaterally by Britain and was viewed by France and Sharif Husayn as contravening the agreements Britain had already made with them.

During the course of World War I, several factors combined to bring the question of Zionism to the attention of the British cabinet. The most pressing of them was the belief, held by several key government officials, that Jewish groups in the United States and Russia had the capacity to influence their respective governments' attitudes toward the war. Until the United States declared war on Germany in April 1917, the British cabinet was worried that Germany might make a declaration in support of Zionist aims and thus attract a sympathetic response from US Jewry. A similar consideration arose with regard to Russia, which was on the verge of military collapse and social revolution by autumn 1917. Officials within the British government argued that a British gesture of goodwill toward Zionist aspirations might persuade influential Jewish members within the revolutionary movement to attempt to keep Russia in the war. It does not matter that these various beliefs were ill founded; what is important is that they existed and helped determine British policy.

Chaim Weizmann, the Zionist spokesman in London, also played a significant role in British policymaking. The Russian-born Weizmann (1874–1952) was educated at universities in Berlin and Fribourg, Switzerland, where he received his doctorate in chemistry. He had been attracted to Zionism while a student in Berlin and had traveled extensively through the Russian pale of settlement, establishing local branches of the World Zionist Organization. Appointed to the Department of Chemistry at the University of Manchester in 1904, Weizmann continued his activities in the Zionist cause and set up contacts with leading figures among the British political establishment. A persuasive and persistent spokesman, Weizmann was effective in keeping the question of Zionism before the British cabinet and in cultivating ties with well-placed officials and public figures. He was helped immensely in his task by the cabinet's recognition that British support for Zionism had the potential to serve British imperial interests. Britain's sponsorship of Jewish settlement in Palestine would require a British presence in the region and would thus keep France out of an area that was contiguous to the vital Suez Canal zone.

All of these factors—the search to cement wartime alliances, Weizmann's skillful persistence, the existence of a certain sympathy within the cabinet toward the religious and humanitarian aspects of Zionism, and, most important, the chance to secure British strategic interests—interacted to produce a British declaration in support of Zionist objectives in Palestine. On November 2, 1917, the British foreign secretary, Arthur Balfour, wrote to Lord Rothschild, a prominent figure in British Zionist circles, informing him that the cabinet had approved the following declaration of sympathy for Jewish Zionist aspirations:

His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a National Home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may 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.¹

This was the fateful Balfour Declaration, a brief document filled with such ambiguities and contradictions that it confused all the parties named in it.

THE MANDATE FOR PALESTINE: BRITISH ADMINISTRATION

The territory that became the Palestine mandate was not a distinctive administrative entity during the Ottoman era (see Map 13.1). It was regarded as part of southern Syria and was divided between the provinces of Beirut and Damascus and the special administrative unit of Jerusalem. The British capture of

Jerusalem in December 1917 detached Palestine from Ottoman rule and led to its being placed under British military occupation from 1917 to 1920. During these years, Britain sought to reconcile the conflicting aspirations of Zionism and Arabism by facilitating discussions between Weizmann and the leading Arab personality of the time, Faysal of Syria. In an agreement reached in January 1919, Weizmann pledged that the Jewish community would cooperate with the Arabs in the economic development of Palestine. In return, Faysal would recognize the Balfour Declaration and consent to Jewish immigration, provided that the rights of the Palestinian Arabs were protected and the Arab demands for the independence of Greater Syria were recognized. Faysal did not, as some have claimed, agree to the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. When the French occupied Syria, the provisions of the Faysal-Weizmann agreement were violated and the document was rendered void.

Meanwhile, the San Remo Conference (1920) awarded Britain the mandate for Palestine, and the military government was replaced by a civilian administration. Two years later the newly created League of Nations gave formal sanction to the mandate and added provisions that raised Zionist expectations and alarmed the Arab inhabitants; the terms of the league mandate incorporated the Balfour Declaration and recognized Hebrew as an official language in Palestine.

The appointment of Sir Herbert Samuel as civilian high commissioner in 1920 offered further encouragement to the Zionists. Samuel was Jewish and an ardent Zionist, and he interpreted his task as facilitating the establishment of the Jewish national home. But what, precisely, was meant by that term? Weizmann had no doubts: At the Paris Peace Conference, he stated that the Zionist objective was gradually to make Palestine as Jewish as England was English. In short, the Zionists interpreted the term *national home* to mean a Jewish state, and they expected the British administration to cooperate in the creation of such a state. But Britain had not committed itself to the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. For, after all, in the Balfour Declaration Britain had also pledged to uphold the rights and privileges of the “existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine,” a dismissive way of referring to the 668,258 Arab inhabitants who constituted over 85 percent of the population. This was the duty of equal obligation, and it became the insoluble contradiction in the Balfour Declaration. How could Britain facilitate the establishment of a Jewish national home on the one hand and ensure that the rights of the Arab majority would not be threatened on the other? For the full twenty-eight years of the mandate, this question haunted British policymakers; in the end, they could not find a satisfactory answer.

In an attempt to clarify its future plans in Palestine, the British government issued a White Paper in 1922 that served as the basis for policy during most of



MAP 13.1 The boundaries of the Palestine mandate, 1923–1948

the 1920s. The document illustrates the balancing act that Britain attempted to perform. To placate the Arab community, the White Paper stated that the development of a Jewish national home did not mean the imposition of Jewish nationality upon the inhabitants of Palestine as a whole. However, it also conceded certain Zionist demands by declaring that the Jewish people had a right to be in Palestine and that Palestine should become a center in which the Jewish people as a whole could take pride on the grounds of religion and race. If the White Paper was intended to remove the ambiguities contained in the Balfour Declaration, it failed utterly to do so.

In conjunction with the special administrative difficulties posed by the existence of the policy of dual obligation, the Palestine mandate presented Britain with the challenge of fulfilling the essential obligations of a mandatory power—namely, to establish the instruments of self-government that would enable the mandate to achieve independence. But what was independent Palestine to be? High Commissioner Samuel held that the most desirable outcome was the creation of an integrated political community, and he proposed several schemes for the development of a unitary state. He believed that without Arab political participation, the mandate would be unworkable. Moreover, if the Arab leadership could be persuaded to participate in the governance of the mandate, it would imply Arab acceptance of the Balfour Declaration. The high commissioner was also motivated by a sincere belief that Jewish-Arab cooperation would improve the Arab standard of living.

His first proposal, the constitution of 1922, called for the creation of a legislative council composed of elected Muslim, Christian, and Jewish representatives plus eleven members nominated by the high commissioner. However, the Arab leaders rejected the plan, declaring that they would not serve in any constitutional government that did not annul the Balfour Declaration. Samuel tried to forge ahead with elections, but the Arab community boycotted them, and the constitutional plan was shelved in 1923. Samuel then attempted to form an advisory council consisting of ten Arab and two Jewish representatives nominated by the high commissioner. This proposal also failed, as the Arab nominees were pressured into refusing to serve.

The Arab rejection of Samuel's various proposals for unitary representation was of the utmost significance in determining the future course of the mandate. It meant that Palestine was governed by the high commissioner and his officials alone. Institutions representing the population as a whole were completely lacking: Palestine never had a constitution, a parliament, or mandate-wide elections. The Arab and Jewish communities, rather than jointly participating in the development of "national" institutions, became increasingly hostile to one another. Each community developed its own political apparatus and engaged in its own separate spheres of economic activity. These practices

strengthened the communal solidarity within each community but widened the gap between them.

THE PALESTINIAN ARAB COMMUNITY: LEADERSHIP AND INSTITUTIONS

The Arab Executive

In the interwar period, the leadership of the Palestinian Arabs was assumed by local urban notables, whose power and prestige were based on their ownership of land and their domination of religious and municipal offices. As was the case with other interwar Arab politicians in the British and French mandates, the Palestinian notables sought to preserve their social and political preeminence by adopting a policy of moderate opposition to and cautious cooperation with the British authorities. They were aided in retaining their influence by the British preference for working within the existing social order and using the established notable families as intermediaries between the government and the population at large. Thus, in Palestine as elsewhere in the former Ottoman Arab provinces, the politics of the notables survived into the post-Ottoman era.

However, the existence of the Balfour Declaration and the encouragement of Jewish immigration made Palestine considerably different from the other Arab mandates and created an enormously complex challenge for the Palestinian elite. Not only did they have to confront British imperialism, Zionist determination, and the demands of their own constituents within the frontiers of the mandate, they also had to present the Palestinian case in the corridors of power in London, where none of them commanded the respect and influence that were accorded Weizmann. They were provincial notables into whose hands was placed one of the most intractable problems of the twentieth century. Although their numbers included individuals of outstanding talent and dedication, their collective leadership was weakened by factionalism and a tendency to overlook the importance of forming a cohesive political organization that could attract popular support.

The first organized Palestinian Arab response to the postwar settlement came from local branches of Muslim-Christian associations that were formed in large towns during 1918 and 1919. About thirty delegates from these associations gathered in Jerusalem in late 1919 and constituted themselves as the first Palestinian Arab Congress. Thereafter, the congress met annually and adopted resolutions on matters affecting the relationships among the Arab community, the Zionists, and the British. At the Third Congress, held in 1920, a standing Arab Executive was created under the presidency of Musa Kazim al-Husayni, a former mayor of Jerusalem. The Arab Executive claimed to repre-

sent all Palestinians, but the British refused to accept it as a properly elected body and only occasionally acknowledged its legitimacy. This British attitude undermined the ability of the Arab Executive to act as an effective channel of communication between the Arabs and the mandate government. An additional problem for the Arab Executive was its lack of structure. Both the standing executive and the branches of Muslim-Christian associations remained essentially loose coalitions of notables without an extensive administrative apparatus or instruments of popular mobilization. As a result, the Arab Executive failed to secure either mass support or formal access to the high commissioner's office. When Musa Kazim al-Husayni died in 1934, the Arab Executive ceased to exist.

The Arab Executive, and Palestinian political activity in general, was further weakened by the existence of a bitter rivalry between two of the leading Muslim notable families of Jerusalem, the Nashashibis and the al-Husaynis. Their competition for power within Palestine dated from the nineteenth century and was intensified during the mandate, adding a destructive factionalism to the politics of the Arab elite. This factionalism was not entirely self-induced; the British, aware of the rivalry, used their power over appointments to maintain the divisions between the two families. Thus, in 1920 Raghīb Nashashibi replaced an al-Husayni as mayor of Jerusalem. In the following year, the British counterbalanced this Nashashibi gain by securing the selection of Hajj Amin al-Husayni as mufti of Jerusalem. It is reported that Raghīb Bey responded to Hajj Amin's appointment by declaring that he would oppose any position that the mufti took. He and his supporters carried out this threat, even when it was clearly detrimental to the Palestinian cause.

Hajj Amin al-Husayni and the Supreme Muslim Council

As mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin (1895–1974) occupied the most prestigious religious office in Palestine, and he used it to build a political network that made him the acknowledged leader of the Palestinian Arab community during the interwar period.

The mufti of Jerusalem was traditionally responsible for regulating Islamic affairs within the greater Jerusalem district. With the termination of Ottoman authority and the creation of the Palestinian mandate, the British expanded the mufti's jurisdiction to include all of Palestine, thus providing the office with considerable influence in the Muslim community. Raised in his native Jerusalem, Hajj Amin studied at both al-Azhar in Cairo and the Imperial War College in Istanbul. He served behind the lines in Anatolia during World War I and eventually became an officer in the Ottoman army. Deeply shocked by the Balfour Declaration, he became active in organizing anti-Zionist demonstrations in the immediate postwar period. Despite his opposition to the

Balfour Declaration, he appeared willing to cooperate with the British administration in preventing acts of violence and was thus Samuel's preferred candidate for the office of mufti.

The mufti's authority was greatly expanded by Samuel's creation in 1921 of the Supreme Muslim Council, an autonomous body charged with the management of the entire range of Islamic institutions within the mandate. Hajj Amin was elected president of the council in 1922. In his twin capacities as mufti of Jerusalem and president of the Supreme Muslim Council, he acquired control of a vast patronage network. The council was responsible for the supervision of the *shari'ah* courts and the appointment of court officials and judges; for the management of *waqfs*, the assignment of *waqf* funds, and the appointment of *waqf* trustees; and for the system of Islamic religious schools, including the selection of teachers. The council paid the salaries of these officials out of an annual budget (ranging from £50,000 to £60,000 during the 1920s) provided by the mandatory government. Hajj Amin used his powers of appointment and dismissal to secure positions for his supporters and to prevent his opponents, especially the Nashashibi family and its clients, from obtaining employment within the religious establishment. In this manner, the mufti was able to transform his religious authority into the most extensive Arab political organization in Palestine.

Although Hajj Amin has been vilified by Zionists and glorified by certain Arab nationalists, his political behavior was more moderate than either group acknowledges. He was too pragmatic a politician to allow his opposition to Zionism to deceive him into thinking that an Arab uprising could dislodge the British. He also recognized that his own continued tenure in office depended upon British goodwill. Therefore, until the outbreak of violence in 1936, the mufti urged restraint on his followers and demonstrated a willingness to cooperate with the British in seeking a negotiated solution to the question of Jewish immigration.

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY: LEADERSHIP AND INSTITUTIONS

The Jewish Agency and the National Council

Zionist organizations were considerably more extensive than those of the Arabs and reflected the differences in the resources, both human and fiscal, that the two communities could marshal. The Jewish community was better organized, better financed, and better connected than the Arabs. There was no formally recognized body of Arab representatives empowered to present the Palestinian Arab case to the high commissioner, whereas Zionist access to British authority was sanctioned by the terms of the mandate, which authorized the formation

of a public body to consult with the mandatory government on matters affecting the establishment of the Jewish national home. To fulfill this function, the World Zionist Organization created the Palestine Zionist Executive in 1921, reorganized as the Jewish Agency in 1929. The Jewish Agency became the quasi-government of the Jewish community in Palestine, managing an impressive array of services that ranged from banking systems to health care and immigrant settlement. The chairman of the Jewish Agency had regular access to the high commissioner and other British officials.

Jewish communal affairs were conducted through a hierarchy of representative organizations. The national assembly, constituted in 1920, was an elected body of some 300 delegates who selected from among themselves the members of the national council, or Va'ad Leumi. The council was empowered to make administrative decisions on behalf of the Jewish community and was treated by the mandate government as the legitimate representative of Palestinian Jewry.

Histadrut: The Political and Ideological Impact of the Labor Movement

Of the various organizations formed to generate self-sufficiency within the Yishuv (the name of the Jewish community in Palestine before 1948), the most important was Histadrut, the Federation of Jewish Labor. Founded in 1920 to promote Jewish trade unionism, Histadrut gradually expanded its role during the interwar years and came to engage in an extensive range of entrepreneurial activities and to exercise a decisive influence on the ideology and politics of both the Yishuv and the future state of Israel. In order to provide employment for its members, Histadrut created public works projects and founded companies that by the 1930s included such enterprises as shipping, agricultural marketing, road and housing construction, banking, and insurance. Since one of its objectives was to ensure the self-sufficiency of Jewish labor and produce, Histadrut instituted a boycott of Arab workers and Arab products.

In addition to its control over traditional trade union activities, Histadrut had interlocking ties with the kibbutz workers in the agricultural sector. The kibbutzim were collective agricultural settlements in which all property belonged to the community and all responsibilities were shared equally by the members. They became a symbol of the cooperative communal order that many of the early Zionists hoped to build in Palestine. Together, Histadrut and the kibbutz movement also represented the ideal of Jewish rejuvenation through the dignity of labor and working the land. This was a significant impulse within the Yishuv and imparted to the community a socialist economic orientation and a glorification of the new Jewish self-image in which the passive and oppressed ghetto dwellers of Europe gave way to the self-confident, physically active workers, farmers, and soldiers of Palestine capable of determining their own destinies.

Histadrut's influence on the development of the Yishuv was made all the more extensive by its control of the Jewish defense force, Haganah. Formed in 1920 in response to the Arab riots of that year, Haganah was to provide a trained and centralized military arm capable of defending the Jewish community against Arab attacks. It gradually evolved into a permanent underground reserve army with a command structure that was fully integrated into the political institutions of the Jewish community as a whole. The British authorities disapproved of the organization (especially its method of procuring arms by stealing them from British bases) but made no concerted effort to disband it.

As Histadrut's membership and functions expanded, the organization was placed in the unusual position of acting as both a trade union and the largest employer within the mandate, a combination that gave its leaders considerable power in the decisionmaking councils of the Yishuv. In 1930 two labor groups merged to form the Mapai Party, the body that dominated the political life of the Yishuv and the state of Israel until 1977. Holding the view that the interests of labor and Zionism were identical, Mapai was the perfect representative of the socialist egalitarian ideal that was so important in shaping the outlook of the Yishuv during its formative years. Among the individuals responsible for Mapai's enduring hold on political power, David Ben-Gurion (1886–1973) was especially prominent. Ben-Gurion's experiences and attitudes were typical of his generation of Zionist leaders in Palestine. Like the vast majority of Jewish immigrants who arrived in Palestine before 1933, he was from Eastern Europe. He came to Palestine from Poland in 1906, first working on a kibbutz and then becoming involved in the inner circles of labor Zionism. He was a founding member of Histadrut and served as its executive secretary for several years before being elected chairman of the Jewish Agency in 1935. He was also active in the creation of the Mapai in 1930 and soon became the party's leader. As both Mapai Party head and Jewish Agency chairman, Ben-Gurion was the acknowledged leader of the Yishuv and a popular choice as Israel's first prime minister in 1948.

The Zionist cause was aided not only by the institutions established within the mandate but also by political and financial support from individuals and organizations operating outside of Palestine. The most influential contacts between Zionism and British officialdom were those maintained by Chaim Weizmann. In 1920 the World Zionist Organization transferred its headquarters to London, and Weizmann became its president. His ready access to prime ministers, cabinet members, and journalists afforded him the opportunity to intervene quickly, and often decisively, on behalf of the Zionist cause whenever British policy toward Palestine veered from the course he thought it should take. Another source of outside support was provided by elements of the Jewish community in the United States. The Zionist Organization of America was

founded in 1917 and, under the leadership of the noted lawyer and future justice of the Supreme Court Louis Brandeis, became a factor in US political life. By the late 1930s, US representatives played an important role in the deliberations of the World Zionist Organization, and private contributions from the United States made up a significant portion of the funds donated to the Zionist cause. With the rise of the United States to global power during World War II, American Jewry would play a vital role in shaping the outcome of the Palestine conflict.

Divisions Within the Yishuv: Jabotinsky and Revisionist Zionism

Notwithstanding the settlers' success in establishing social and political institutions within Palestine, Zionism remained a fractious movement in which a broad spectrum of opinions found expression. One of the most heated of the interwar disputes concerned the territorial objectives of Zionism and the tactics best suited to obtain them. During the mandate period, when the creation of a Jewish state was still very much in doubt, most Zionists accepted Weizmann's strategy of relying on Britain to bring about the fulfillment of Zionist objectives. However, a splinter group, eventually called the Revisionists, condemned Weizmann's approach as too hesitant and too dependent on Britain. The founder and leading spokesman of Revisionism was a Russian Zionist named Vladimir Jabotinsky (1880–1940). Jabotinsky called for massive Jewish immigration into Palestine and the immediate proclamation of a Jewish commonwealth. He argued that Britain was quite capable of abandoning the Zionists and that the only way to achieve the Jewish majority required for independent statehood was by encouraging 50,000 immigrants to Palestine a year. Jabotinsky's territorial demands were even more controversial. He claimed that historic Palestine included Transjordan and insisted that large-scale Jewish colonization take place in that territory. At the annual Zionist Congress of 1929, he addressed the delegates with these words: "What does the word Palestine mean? Palestine is a territory whose chief geographical feature is this: that the River Jordan does not delineate its frontier, but flows through its center."²

The Revisionist movement attracted enthusiastic support among Zionist youth groups in Eastern Europe, where Jabotinsky's followers made him the object of a leadership cult. In 1933 the Revisionists formed a separate movement within Zionism, and shortly thereafter they set up their own military force in Palestine, the Irgun, which operated independently of Haganah and the Jewish Agency. Although Revisionism lost much of its force with Jabotinsky's death, two of his disciples, Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir, later became Israeli prime ministers and revived the uncompromising Zionism of their former leader.

In deepening conflict with one another, the Arab and Jewish communities in Palestine built up their political and social organizations. Both communities were terribly insecure throughout the interwar years. The Arabs were frustrated in their attempts to gain legal recognition as the rightful inhabitants of Palestine. At the same time, they rejected any overtures to participate in national organizations, believing that to do so would validate the mandate and imply their acceptance of the Balfour Declaration. Likewise, Zionist leaders were convinced that the British intent to be fair to Arabs as well as Jews was blocking the establishment of a Jewish national home. Accordingly, they intensified their efforts to promote immigration, develop self-sufficient communal organizations, and confront what they regarded as British lack of cooperation.

IMMIGRATION AND LAND

Jewish immigration and land acquisition lay at the heart of the communal tension in Palestine. The Zionist objective was to build up the Jewish population of the mandate through unrestricted immigration so as to have a credible claim to the existence of a national home. In order to settle and feed the immigrants, it was necessary to acquire as much cultivable land as possible. In pursuit of these twin objectives, Zionism resembled a project of settler colonialism undertaken at the expense of the local Arab population. The Arabs of Palestine recognized that the goals of Zionism represented a threat to their existence, and they opposed them by attempting to negotiate with Britain to restrict immigration and land transfers; when that tactic failed, they turned to armed revolt.

Jewish immigration to Palestine occurred in a series of waves called *aliyahs* (see above). The first two took place before World War I. The third, from 1919 to 1923, was composed of about 30,000 immigrants mainly from Eastern Europe. An additional 50,000 immigrants, primarily from Poland, arrived in the fourth *aliyah* between 1924 and 1926. The influx of immigrants then slowed considerably until 1933, when the rise of Hitler and the Nazi Party precipitated the flight of thousands of Jews from Germany and central Europe. Although many of these refugees were not Zionists, the restrictive immigration quotas imposed by such countries as the United States and Canada compelled them to seek refuge in Palestine. In the years of the fifth *aliyah*, from 1933 through 1936, about 170,000 Jews immigrated to Palestine, suddenly doubling the size of the Yishuv and creating widespread alarm within the Arab community. The composition of the fifth *aliyah* differed from the others in that the German immigrants included a significant number of educated professionals and businesspeople who often brought with them substantial amounts of capital. Less interested than their pioneering predecessors in working the land, they tended to settle in the coastal cities and to engage in professional or entrepreneurial pursuits.

TABLE 13.1 Population of Palestine by Ethnic Group, 1931–1946

	Arab	%	Jewish	%	Other	%	Total
1931	864,806	82	174,139	16	18,269	2	1,057,601
1936	983,244	71	382,857	28	22,751	2	1,388,852
1941	1,123,168	68	489,830	30	26,758	2	1,639,756
1946	1,310,866	67	599,922	31	31,562	2	1,942,350

Source: Justin McCarthy, *The Population of Palestine* (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 36.

As shown in Table 13.1, the Jewish community in Palestine numbered approximately 382,000 by the end of 1936, a dramatic increase from the 93,000 recorded in 1922. During the same period, the Arab population grew from around 700,000 to 983,000. Thus, in less than fifteen years, the number of people living in Palestine increased by more than 400,000. It is little wonder that in a region of limited agricultural potential, the ownership of arable land became a matter of contention.

The Zionist organization chiefly responsible for negotiating land purchases was the Jewish National Fund, which bought land it then regarded as belonging to the Jewish people as a whole and leased it exclusively to Jews at a nominal rate. The Jewish National Fund also provided capital for improvements and equipment, a practice that enabled impoverished immigrants to engage in agricultural pursuits immediately upon arriving in Palestine.

Zionist interests usually acquired land by purchasing it from absentee Arab owners. The first and largest such purchase under the mandate was from the Sursock family of Beirut, which sold 50,000 acres in the fertile Jezreel Valley to the Jewish National Fund in 1920. But even leading Palestinian notable families, attracted by the high prices the Zionists were willing to pay, sold cultivable land to agents of the Jewish National Fund or other Zionist purchasing organizations. By 1939 some 5 percent of the total land area of the mandate, making up approximately 10 percent of the total cultivable land, was Jewish-owned.

The transfer of cultivated land from Arab to Jewish ownership had a devastating effect on the Palestinian peasantry, which in 1936 still composed two-thirds of the Arab population of the mandate. The usual outcome of such a transaction was the eviction of the Arab tenant farmers and their addition to the growing ranks of the unemployed. The conditions of small proprietors also worsened during the mandate. British taxation policy, which required direct cash payments in place of the customary Ottoman payment in kind, forced peasant farmers to borrow funds at high rates of interest from local moneylenders—who were frequently the large landholders. As a result of the crushing burden

of indebtedness, many small proprietors found it necessary to sell their lands, sometimes to Zionist interests but often to one of the landed Arab families. The cumulative effect of land transfers, British policy, and Arab notable attitudes was the increasing impoverishment and marginalization of the Palestinian Arab peasantry. Alienated from their own political elite, who seemed to profit from their plight; from the British, who appeared unwilling to prevent their expulsion from the land; and from the Zionists, who were perceived to be at the root of their problems, they expressed their discontent in outbreaks of violence against all three parties.

COMMUNAL CONFLICT AND THE BRITISH RESPONSE

The two major eruptions of communal violence during the interwar years of the mandate—the Wailing Wall disturbances of 1929 and the great revolt of 1936–1939—were directly related to the dislocations caused by immigration and land transfers. Repeated British investigations into the causes of these incidents only served to highlight the unworkable nature of the mandate.

The Wailing Wall Disturbances of 1929

A dispute over the Jewish right of access to the remains of the Western, or Wailing, Wall came to serve as the focal point for all the communal antagonisms that had been building up since the beginning of the mandate. Jews regarded the wall as a holy site and had gone there since the Middle Ages to pray and to lament the passing of the ancient kingdom of Israel. Muslims also had deep religious attachments to the wall and its immediate surroundings, as it formed the western abutment of the Haram al-Sharif (the holy sanctuary) that contained the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa mosque, structures associated with Muhammad's nocturnal journey to heaven and two of the oldest and most revered Islamic shrines. At the time of the mandate, the wall was designated as *waqf* and was thus under Muslim jurisdiction.

Although Jews had the right to visit the wall, they were not allowed to set up such appurtenances as chairs, benches, or screens to separate men and women during prayer. The British, in keeping with their policy of maintaining the status quo in religious matters, agreed that these restrictions should remain in effect. However, Jewish activists constantly challenged the regulations, and in late 1928 the British police found it necessary to forcibly remove from the area a screen and the worshipers who had placed it there. The intensity of Jewish objections to this action galvanized the mufti and the Supreme Muslim Council into launching a publicity campaign about the danger that Zionism posed to the holy places of Islam. A year of claims and counterclaims over the status of the wall turned into violent confrontations in August 1929, during which Arab

mobs, provoked by Jewish demonstrations, attacked two Jewish quarters in Jerusalem and killed Jews in the towns of Hebron and Safad. By the time British forces quelled the riots, 133 Jews and 116 Arabs had lost their lives. Although the immediate cause of the riots was concern over the fate of a religious site, the real causes lay much deeper. The British decided to find out what they were.

In September 1929 London dispatched the first of what would become a nearly continuous series of royal commissions to Palestine. It was headed by Sir Walter Shaw and was instructed to conduct an inquiry into the reasons for the violence of the previous month. Its report concluded that the main source of tension within the mandate was the creation of a landless class of discontented Arabs and the widespread Arab fear that continued Jewish immigration would result in a Jewish-dominated Palestine. The Shaw Commission went on to recommend that British obligations to the Arab community should be more precisely defined, that Jewish immigration should be brought more directly under British control, and that the practice of evicting Arab tenants following land transfers should cease.

Instead of dealing with the Shaw Commission's report on its own merits, the British decided to send another commission of inquiry to Palestine. The Hope-Simpson Commission conducted its investigation in summer 1930, and its recommendations were incorporated into a statement of British policy known as the Passfield White Paper (1930). The white paper stressed Britain's dual obligation as a mandatory power and stated the government's intention to set aside state lands for the settlement of landless Arab peasants. It also declared that Palestine had a limited economic absorptive capacity and proposed that restrictions on Jewish immigration be introduced.

The Passfield White Paper addressed some of the Arab grievances, but its proposals to limit immigration were anathema to the Zionists, and they mounted a concerted effort to have the entire document withdrawn. Weizmann, joined by prominent members of the British and US Jewish communities and by British opposition politicians, put tremendous pressure on the government to rescind the policy statement. The campaign was successful. In February 1931 Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald read to the House of Commons a personal letter he had written to Weizmann in which the Passfield White Paper was effectively repudiated. Known to the Arabs as the Black Letter, it confirmed their belief in the ability of Zionist pressure groups to influence the decisions of the British government.

The General Strike and the Formation of the Arab Higher Committee

Following the Black Letter of 1931 and the decision to ignore most of the recommendations of the commissions of inquiry, the situation in Palestine deteriorated

further. The effects of the world depression, coupled with the large-scale immigration of the fifth aliyah, created widespread unemployment among Arabs and Jews alike. Within the Arab community, there was growing disenchantment with the moderate leadership of Hajj Amin and the Supreme Muslim Council. The mufti's preeminent political position was challenged by a new party, the Istiqlal, composed of young Palestinian notables who advocated direct action against Britain and endorsed the development of strong ties with other Arab countries. Although Hajj Amin was able to neutralize the Istiqlal, its demands for greater militancy were representative of sentiments held by increasingly large segments of the Arab population of Palestine. These sentiments, born of despair and frustration, found expression in the events of 1936.

The violence that swept through Palestine in spring and summer 1936 was a spontaneous popular reaction against Zionism, British imperialism, and the entrenched Arab leadership. It was set in motion on April 15 when an armed Arab band robbed a bus and killed a Jewish passenger; the following evening Haganah retaliated by killing two Arab farmers. These incidents provoked both communities into mass demonstrations and mob attacks against each other. In an attempt to channel the popular discontent into an effective weapon against Britain and the Zionists, local Arab resistance committees declared a general strike on April 19, 1936. The strike was to continue until Britain granted the Arabs' demands for restrictions on immigration and land sales and the establishment of a democratic government.

The push of popular resistance from below forced the Arab leaders to act, and on April 25 they formed a national organization, the Arab Higher Committee, under the presidency of the mufti. Including Christians, Muslims, Nashashibis, al-Husaynis, and prominent members of Istiqlal, the Arab Higher Committee was a belated attempt to unify the factions within the Palestinian elite. Although the committee attempted to coordinate the strike, it lagged behind popular opinion and tended to respond to events rather than to create them. The strike spread rapidly during the summer and was accompanied by attacks on Jews and Jewish property and the destruction of British transport. When various attempts at mediation failed, Britain made a determined effort to crush the rebellion, and in October, after the deaths of 1,000 Arabs and 80 Jews, the strike was terminated by order of the Arab Higher Committee. It had revealed the depth of Palestinian Arab resentment but had resolved nothing; it was thus only a precursor of greater violence to come.

The Peel Commission and the Great Revolt

One of the reasons the Arab leadership called off the strike was Britain's pledge to send yet another investigative commission to Palestine. This commission, chaired by Lord Peel, issued its report in July 1937. It recognized that the

premise on which the mandate was based was untenable; a unitary state could not be created out of the contradictory obligations contained in the Balfour Declaration. According to the report, "It is manifest that the Mandate cannot be fully or honorably implemented unless by some means or other the antagonism between Arabs and Jews can be composed. But it is the Mandate which created that antagonism and keeps it alive and as long as the Mandate exists we cannot honestly hold out the expectation that Arabs or Jews will be able to set aside their national hopes or fears or sink their differences in the common service of Palestine."³ On the basis of these findings, the Peel Commission recommended that the mandate be terminated and that Palestine be partitioned into separate Arab and Jewish states. Britain would continue to exercise mandatory authority in a corridor from Jerusalem to the Mediterranean and in other scattered areas.

This unique solution to the problem of an unworkable mandate satisfied neither of the two parties affected. The Arab Higher Committee opposed partition as a violation of the rights of the Arab inhabitants of Palestine. For their part, the Zionist leaders favored the principle of partition but regarded the territory allocated to the Jewish state as inadequate. This position was adopted at the World Zionist Congress of 1937 and amounted to a Zionist rejection of the Peel Commission's report. Britain's efforts to find a way out of the Palestine labyrinth collapsed in the face of opposition from both Arabs and Jews, and the idea of partition was allowed to fade away.

However, Palestinian Arab discontent would not vanish as easily as a commission report. Upon the announcement of the Peel Commission's proposals in July 1937, Arab violence was renewed. As with the general strike of the previous year, it was spontaneous and locally led rather than premeditated and nationally organized. When the British district commissioner for Galilee was murdered in October, Britain responded by dissolving the Arab Higher Committee and arresting and deporting its members. The mufti escaped to Damascus, where he attempted to reconstitute the committee and to direct the uprising, but his influence over events in Palestine was on the wane. The Arab rebel bands, composed mainly of peasants, concentrated their attacks on railroads, bridges, and British police stations but also destroyed Jewish property and killed Jewish settlers. Although the rebels probably never numbered more than 5,000, they were supported by the bulk of the rural population, and by summer 1938 much of the countryside and several of the major towns were in their hands. Government services came to a virtual halt, and even portions of Jerusalem fell under rebel control.

In addition to its anti-British, anti-Zionist thrust, the revolt contained elements of a peasant social revolution against the established notability. In villages under rebel control, rents were canceled, debt collectors were denied

entry, and wealthy landlords were coerced into making “donations” to the rebel cause. Local resistance committees banned the *tarbush*, the headgear of the Ottoman administrative elite, and insisted that men should instead wear the *kaffiya*, the checkered headcloth that has become a symbol of Palestinian national identity.

In an attempt to put down the uprising, Britain poured 20,000 troops into Palestine and adopted harsh measures of collective punishment on villages suspected of harboring rebels. Jewish forces also engaged in military action against the rebels as well as in retaliatory terrorist attacks against noncombatants. Despite the numerical superiority of their military forces, the British did not manage to restore order until March 1939. The revolt took a heavy toll: More than 3,000 Arabs, 2,000 Jews, and 600 British were killed; the economy of Palestine was in chaos; and the Arab leaders were in exile or under arrest.

If the revolt failed to dislodge Britain from the mandate, it nevertheless succeeded in forcing it to make one more reassessment of its Palestine policy. This was prompted not only by the violence within Palestine but also by the impending war in Europe. In any coming conflict, the oil resources and airfields of the Arab Middle East would be vital to Britain. With the Arab states becoming increasingly involved in the issue of Palestine, Britain recognized the need to placate them in order to secure their future cooperation.

Against this background, the Colonial Office convened an Anglo-Arab-Jewish conference in London in February 1939. However, the conference failed to break the deadlock, and Britain was left to formulate a policy that would inevitably displease one of the parties. This policy, announced in the White Paper of 1939, came as a shock to the Zionists. The White Paper stated: “His Majesty’s Government therefore now declare unequivocally that it is not part of their policy that Palestine should become a Jewish State.”⁴ The document declared that Jewish immigration was to be limited to 15,000 a year over the next five years, at which point it would cease altogether unless the Arab community consented to its continuation; that land transfers to Jews were to be restricted to certain specified areas; and that in ten years Palestine would be granted independence. It also proposed that an additional 25,000 Jewish refugees be allowed into the mandate. Coming at a time when Jews were fleeing Hitler’s terror en masse, the White Paper was widely condemned by the international Jewish community. As Zionist leaders marshaled their supporters and prepared for a political campaign against the white paper, Germany invaded Poland, and World War II began. The Jewish community in Palestine, despite its outrage over Britain’s statement of policy, could hardly support Hitler’s Germany in the conflict; but it could not acquiesce in the terms of the White Paper either, for that document meant the end of the dream of a Jewish state. As Ben-Gurion proclaimed, “We shall fight with Great Britain in this war as if there was no

White Paper, and we shall fight the White Paper as if there was no war.”⁵ Although the mufti, in exile in Baghdad, rejected the White Paper for not granting immediate independence, most other Palestinian Arab leaders regarded it as a victory of sorts. They now had every reason to believe that they would remain a majority in Palestine.

WORLD WAR II AND THE BIRTH OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL

Responses to the Holocaust

Wartime events outside Palestine exercised considerable influence on the future status of the troubled British mandate. The most far-reaching of these events was the Holocaust, the systematic murder of millions of European Jews and others in Hitler’s death camps. As the extent of the Nazi atrocities became known, the public conscience of the West came to embrace the notion that the settlement of the surviving Jews in Palestine could atone for the horrors that Western civilization had inflicted upon them. This attitude was especially prominent in the United States. Casting aside the general lack of enthusiasm that had characterized their attitude toward Zionism during the interwar years, many American Jews became ardent supporters of a Jewish state in Palestine. The most forceful public expression of this position was contained in the Biltmore Program, a set of resolutions adopted at a meeting of US Zionists in 1942 calling for open immigration to Palestine and the establishment there of a Jewish commonwealth.

In the wake of the Biltmore gathering, the United States became the center of international Zionist activity, and American and Palestinian Zionists embarked on an intensive publicity campaign to involve the US electorate and US politicians in the issue of Palestine. President Harry Truman, from his arrival in the White House in 1945 through his reelection campaign of 1948, publicly endorsed the Biltmore Program, demonstrating not only humanitarian concerns but also an awareness of the growing power of the Zionist lobby within the Democratic Party. Truman’s commitment to the creation of a Jewish state was significant because the United States, with its expanding industrial economy and its unprecedented military might, emerged from the war as a global superpower capable of exerting immense pressure on its allies.

Within Palestine itself, the wartime policy of Britain was intended to keep the mandate tranquil. Seeking to prevent another outbreak of violence like the revolt of 1936–1939, the British administration placed restrictions on Arab political activity and refused to allow the exiled Arab leaders to return. As a result, the Arab community, still reeling from the effects of the British suppression of the revolt, was politically quiescent during the war.

For its part, as we have seen, the Yishuv responded to the circumstances of the war with two conflicting policies: On the one hand, it committed itself to the British war effort against Hitler; on the other hand, it attempted to subvert the White Paper of 1939 and to prepare for an armed confrontation with Britain once Germany was defeated.

In support of the Allied cause, thousands of Jewish volunteers joined the British forces, eventually forming a Jewish Brigade that fought as a unit of the British army in Italy. The modern combat experience that the Jewish troops who fought alongside British soldiers gained during the war provided the Haganah with a cadre of trained veterans for fighting against Britain after 1945. In Palestine the Haganah, although technically illegal, was allowed by the British administration to acquire weapons openly and to participate with the British forces in preparations for the defense of Palestine against an anticipated Axis invasion. When the Axis threat subsided after 1942, Haganah members retained their arms as well as their intimate knowledge of the British military network in Palestine.

Notwithstanding the abiding anti-Nazi sentiment within the Yishuv, its leaders continued to regard the British presence in Palestine as the primary obstacle to the fulfillment of their dream of establishing a Jewish national home. In the light of what was becoming known about the fate of European Jewry, Britain's insistence on enforcing the 1939 immigration quotas appeared to be a monstrous injustice, and the Jewish Agency mounted a concerted effort to rescue European Jews and bring them into Palestine illegally. Hiring ships that were often barely seaworthy, the Jewish Agency transported refugees out of ports in southern Europe and landed them on the Palestine coast. When British authorities turned away ships crowded with refugees or apprehended the vessels and sent their passengers to detention camps in Cyprus, they compounded the Yishuv's determination to be rid of British control. These incidents were highly publicized and were used to buttress the Zionist claim that only a Jewish state could provide a haven for the rootless victims of Nazi brutality.

Terror and Intercommunal War

There were three phases of the conflict that brought the state of Israel into being and confirmed its existence: First was the Yishuv's campaign of sabotage against the British administration in Palestine from 1945 to 1947; second was the brief intercommunal war between the Arab and Jewish communities of Palestine in 1947 and 1948; and third was the 1948 war between Israel and the invading forces of the Arab states. Each of these phases was accompanied by a flurry of diplomatic activity that consistently failed to produce an agreement acceptable to both Arabs and Jews.

The first phase of the conflict was part of the strategy contained in the Jewish Agency's decision, made toward the end of World War II, to push for the immediate establishment of a Jewish state. Zionist leaders in Palestine, now more than ever guided by the views of Ben-Gurion, concluded that because Britain would not sponsor the gradual development of a Jewish national home by eliminating immigration quotas, the Jewish state would have to be seized by force. This was to be accomplished by making Britain's position in Palestine untenable.

Ben-Gurion did not intend to confront Britain until the war was over. However, other elements within the Jewish community were impatient. Two irregular armed units that operated independently of Jewish Agency control—though at times with its tacit approval—launched a campaign of terror against British personnel in 1944. The most important of the two units was the Irgun, a fiercely nationalistic organization that served as the military arm of revisionist Zionism. The Irgun consisted of a dedicated core of militant Zionists who advocated a policy of reprisals against Arab civilians and British personnel. Although the Irgun's terrorist tactics often brought discredit to the Zionist enterprise as a whole, its ruthless single-mindedness appealed to a certain segment of the Jewish community that believed that any action taken in the cause of the creation of a Jewish state was justified. In 1943 the Irgun came under the command of Menachem Begin, a recent immigrant from Poland who led the organization until its dissolution in 1948 and who then carried his spirit of uncompromising militancy into Israeli politics. The other dissident military unit, Lehi (often called the Stern Gang after its founder, Abraham Stern), was much smaller and less effective as a combat force but was capable of isolated acts of terror, such as the 1944 assassination of the British minister of state for the Middle East, Lord Moyne.

The Jewish Agency joined the conflict in 1945, when units of the Haganah undertook a series of well-coordinated acts of sabotage against British communications in Palestine. Mainstream Palestinian Zionism had gone to war against Britain. Over the next two years, the combined pressure of Haganah sabotage, Irgun terror (such as the blowing up of a wing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1946), and US opinion placed Britain in an impossible position. In February 1947 Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, recognizing that Britain had lost control of the situation in Palestine, referred the matter to the United Nations.

Bevin's request for the United Nations to formulate a solution to the Palestine mandate was followed by several months of feverish diplomatic activity centered on the United Nations in New York and the White House in Washington. The General Assembly created a United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) and charged it with investigating conditions in Palestine

and submitting recommendations by September 1, 1947. Composed of representatives from eleven nations, UNSCOP arrived in Jerusalem in June and spent five weeks in Palestine. The committee found that Jews were still a considerable minority, constituting only a third of the population and owning roughly 6 percent of the total land in Palestine. However, the committee also felt a sense of urgency, with regard both to the deteriorating conditions in Palestine and to the plight of Jewish refugees from Europe. In its report to the General Assembly, UNSCOP unanimously recommended the termination of the British mandate and the granting of independence to Palestine. But the committee was divided, by a vote of eight to three, on what kind of state independent Palestine should be. The minority report called for a federal state. The majority report recommended the partition of the mandate into two states, one Arab and one Jewish, with Jerusalem designated as an internationalized district. Although the provisions of the majority report were far from perfect, they nevertheless offered the possibility of independent Arab and Jewish states within Palestine (see Map 13.2). Zionist leaders endorsed the report; Arab leaders rejected it.

President Truman, fully supportive of the creation of a Jewish state, was determined to achieve the passage of the majority report. Because the proposal required a two-thirds majority vote in the General Assembly and because Washington assumed that the Soviet Union and its allies would oppose it, the vote was expected to be close. Truman—in defiance of the advice of his own State and Defense departments, whose heads recognized the usefulness of maintaining cordial relations with the newly independent Arab states—launched an extensive lobbying effort on behalf of the majority report, and pro-Zionist members of Congress pressured UN delegates with threats of the withdrawal of US economic assistance from their countries if they did not vote for the UNSCOP proposal. When the roll call was taken on November 29, 1947, there were thirty-three votes (including that of the USSR) in favor, thirteen against, and ten abstentions: The General Assembly approved the partition of Palestine into separate Arab and Jewish states and accorded international status to Jerusalem. As Charles Smith wrote, “Whatever the nature of the Zionist accomplishment in Palestine, the victory at the United Nations was essentially won in the United States.”⁶ That victory and the policies that flowed from it have colored US-Arab relations ever since.

Throughout the months of negotiations, the Palestinian Arab community was curiously marginal to the discussions. Ever since the British had dismantled the Higher Arab Committee and the Supreme Muslim Council in 1936, the Palestinian Arabs had been without effective leadership. In the absence of unified leadership from within Palestine, the responsibility for presenting the Palestinian Arab case came to rest with the Arab League and its member states.



MAP 13.2 The UN proposal for the partition of Palestine, 1947

However, the postwar Arab regimes, especially those in such key states as Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, faced mounting domestic unrest. The ruling elite of these regimes, anxious to shore up domestic support, adopted a hard-line stance on the Palestinian issue as a means to demonstrate their antiimperialism and to assert their newfound independence in foreign policy. On behalf of the Palestinians, they rejected all attempts at compromise, including the UN partition plan, assuring the Arabs of Palestine that they stood ready to defend them militarily. It was a self-deluding posture.

The disorder within Palestine was intensified by Britain's refusal to assist in the implementation of the UN partition plan. When the UNSCOP report was presented to the UN, Britain did not wait for the General Assembly's vote and immediately announced in September 1947 that the Palestine mandate would be terminated on May 15, 1948. In the months between the announcement and the final British withdrawal, Palestine was plunged into chaos. This was the period of intercommunal war during which the Jewish forces sought to secure the territory allotted to the Jewish state in the UN resolution. Since most of that territory was still inhabited by an Arab majority, there was quite naturally Arab resistance. However, the scattered Arab bands were no match for the disciplined Haganah forces, and by spring 1948 the major centers of Arab population that fell within the proposed Jewish state were in Jewish control and the Arab inhabitants, about 400,000 Palestinians, had fled. During the course of the intercommunal war, the Irgun perpetrated one of its most notorious acts: It massacred the 250 civilian inhabitants of the village of Dayr Yassin near Jerusalem. News of the massacre spread among the Arab population and contributed to the panic that made so many flee their homes. An Arab unit retaliated for Dayr Yassin by ambushing a Jewish medical relief convoy on the outskirts of Jerusalem and killing a number of doctors. Thus did atrocity build upon atrocity in the territory that was still Britain's responsibility.

Throughout the intercommunal war, the British administration made little effort to enforce order, concentrating instead on preparations for its withdrawal. On May 14, 1948, in the midst of the turmoil, the last British high commissioner, General Alan Cunningham, quietly departed from Haifa. As one eyewitness recalled the moment, "The Union Jack was lowered and with the speed of an execution and the silence of a ship that passes in the night British rule in Palestine came to an end."⁷ There had been no formal transfer of powers from the mandate authority to a new local government for the simple reason that there was no government of Palestine. Britain had failed to create political institutions in its mandate, instead leaving the Arab and Jewish communities to struggle for supremacy. In this struggle, the Jewish community emerged victorious; a few hours after High Commissioner Cunningham's



David Ben-Gurion announcing the independence of the state of Israel, May 14, 1948. The portrait looming over the proceedings is of Theodor Herzl, the founder of the political Zionist movement and author of *The Jewish State*. (AP/World Wide Photos)

departure, Ben-Gurion proclaimed the independence of the state of Israel. The new state was immediately recognized by the United States and the Soviet Union.

THE FIRST ARAB-ISRAELI WAR

On May 15, 1948, units from the armies of Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan, and Iraq invaded Israel, launching a regional war, interspersed with several truces, that lasted until December 1948 and resulted in the defeat of the Arab forces, the enlargement of Israeli territory, and the collapse of the UN proposal for a Palestinian Arab state.

Ostensibly operating under the unified authority of the Arab League, each of the Arab states participating in the invasion in fact placed its own interests first. Thus, the invasion of Israel was hampered from the outset by inter-Arab political rivalries that led in turn to a lack of coordination on the battlefield. In addition, the Arab forces, with the exception of King Abdallah's Arab Legion, were not only poorly prepared, poorly equipped, and poorly led; they were also outnumbered. The legend of a defenseless, newborn Israel facing the onslaught of hordes of Arab soldiers does not correspond to reality. During the first round

of fighting from May 15 to June 11, 1948, the combined Arab armies numbered around 21,500, whereas the Haganah and its affiliated units fielded a force of some 30,000. Numbers, of course, do not tell the whole story. The Israeli forces, under the overall strategic command of Ben-Gurion, were motivated by the belief that they were engaged in a life-and-death struggle for the very existence of a Jewish state. They performed exceptionally well, exhibiting the daring and combat improvisation that were to characterize the Israeli military in its subsequent wars. By the time of the first UN armistice in June, the Arab attacks had been repulsed on all fronts except Jerusalem, where the Arab Legion took East Jerusalem and Israeli forces held the new, western portion of the city. Although both sides used the truce to improve their armaments, the Israelis entered the next round of combat (July 9–18) with markedly superior forces. The size of the Haganah was doubled and its firepower substantially increased by the procurement of supplies of small arms, heavy equipment, and even a few aircraft from Europe. When the second armistice took effect in July, the Israeli victory was assured.

Over the course of the next twelve months, each of the belligerent Arab states concluded an armistice agreement with Israel. These agreements were not peace treaties, and they did not constitute recognition of Israel on the part of the Arab signatories; they simply stabilized the cease-fire borders without accepting them as final. Palestine had effectively been partitioned among Israel, Egypt (which remained in occupation of the Gaza Strip), and Transjordan (which had taken the old city of Jerusalem and the territory west of the Jordan River; see Map 13.3).

Not only was there no Palestinian Arab state, but the vast majority of the Arab population in the territory that became Israel—over 700,000 people—had become refugees. The Arab flight from Palestine began during the intercommunal war and was at first the normal reaction of a civilian population to nearby fighting—a temporary evacuation from the zone of combat with plans to return once hostilities ceased. However, during spring and early summer 1948, the flight of the Palestinian Arabs was transformed into a permanent mass exodus, as villagers abandoned their ancestral soil and city dwellers left behind their homes and businesses. Once the Arab flight had started, it was encouraged by the Haganah. In order to secure the interior of the Israeli state and protect Jewish settlements lying outside its UN-decreed borders, the Haganah in April 1948 authorized a campaign against potentially hostile Arab villages. Known as Plan D, the campaign “provided for the conquest and permanent occupation, or leveling, of Arab villages and towns.”⁸ The Haganah field officers interpreted Plan D as giving them authority to undertake the systematic expulsion of the Palestinian Arabs living within the area allocated to the Jewish state as well as those whose villages



MAP 13.3 The Arab-Israeli armistice lines, 1949

were situated just inside the territory awarded to the Arab state. The implementation of Plan D intensified the fears that already existed among the Arab population and contributed to the flight that soon took on an irreversible momentum. As hundreds of thousands of Arab civilians headed for the frontiers, the Israeli command took advantage of the opportunity that was presented to ensure a contiguous and homogeneous Jewish state with a solid Jewish majority. Throughout the remainder of 1948 and into 1949, there were incidents of forced expulsion of Arabs. As a result, by the time the last armistice agreement was concluded in 1949, there remained only 160,000 Arabs within the borders of Israel.

The majority of those who had fled or been deported were destitute and crowded into refugee camps in various Arab states. The forceful creation of the state of Israel replaced the European Jewish refugee problem with a Middle Eastern refugee problem that has caused great personal suffering and regional political turmoil ever since (this issue is examined in more detail in Chapter 17).

In addition to creating the tragedy of displaced Palestinians, the decisive Israeli military victory—referred to as the War of Independence in Israel—over the invading Arab forces discredited the regimes that had ordered such unprepared units into combat. The Arab defeat took on civilizational overtones, bringing about a critical self-examination of the social and political bases of Arab life. One of the most influential Arab commentaries on the subject, Constantine Zurayq's *The Meaning of the Disaster*, received such widespread circulation that it made the term *disaster* synonymous with the Arab defeat of 1948. That defeat, and its widespread condemnation among Arabs themselves, transformed the original struggle between the Arab and Jewish inhabitants of Palestine into the tragic Arab-Israeli conflict.

CONCLUSION

From the perspective of relations between states, the decade of the 1940s was a period of profound change in the Middle East. The creation of Israel, the flight and homelessness of several hundred thousand Palestinians, the formation of the Arab League, the achievement of independence by the core Arab states, and the decline of Britain and France and the emergence of the United States and the Soviet Union as world powers clearly represented new and significant developments for the region. Yet in the realm of domestic politics, there was remarkably little change. With the exception of the young shah of Iran, the ruling monarchs of 1949 had been on their thrones in the 1930s, and the men who held office as prime ministers and presidents in 1949 had served in similar capacities in the 1930s.

In several countries, especially the populous Arab states, these ruling elite no longer represented the aspirations of their people. They were seen to perpetuate an old order of corruption and privilege and to owe their political power to their willingness to cooperate with the forces of imperialism. They were also regarded as responsible for creating the circumstances that led to the “disaster” of 1948. They managed to retain their positions during and immediately after World War II, but in the emerging era of national independence, the ruling elite and the social and political order that supported them would be swept aside by new forces of change.

NOTES

1. Cited in Walter Laqueur and Barry Rubin, eds., *The Israel-Arab Reader: A Documentary History of the Middle East Conflict*, 6th ed. (New York, 2001), p. 16.
2. Cited in Christopher Sykes, *Cross Roads to Israel* (London, 1965), p. 135.
3. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 205.
4. Cited in Laqueur and Rubin, *The Israel-Arab Reader*, p. 45.
5. Cited in Sykes, *Cross Roads to Israel*, p. 246.
6. Charles D. Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 4th ed. (New York, 2001), p. 195.
7. Cited in John Marlowe, *The Seat of Pilate* (London, 1959), p. 252.
8. Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 63.

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