

THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT

One Hundred Years of War

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FROM NATIONALISM IN PALESTINE TO PALESTINIAN NATIONALISM

Of all the public utterances made about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, none sums up each side's sense of victimization at the hands of the other better than two that straddle the 1967 war. On the eve of the war, Ahmad Shuqairy, then chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization, boasted that the Arab armies would drive the Jews into the sea. Not to be outdone in imprudent remarks, Golda Meir, Israeli prime minister from 1969 to 1974, gave an interview in the *Sunday Times* (London) on the second anniversary of the war. In that interview, she purportedly stated that there were no Palestinians.

Although Meir's attitude toward Palestinians is well known, were she alive today she might cite in her defense Yogi Berra's famous remark, "I didn't really say everything I said." The full text of the question and her answer is as follows:

Q: Do you think the emergence of the Palestinian fighting forces, the Fedayeen, is an important new factor in the Middle East?

A: Important, no. A new factor, yes. There was no such thing as Palestinians. When was there an independent Palestinian people with a Palestinian state? It was either southern Syria before the first world war and then it was a Palestine including Jordan. It was not as though there was a Palestinian people in Palestine considering itself as a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them. They did not exist.¹

What is going on here? Meir is not denying that there were indigenous inhabitants in Palestine who were displaced by Zionist settlement (at least not here). Nor does she appear to be denying the existence of a Palestinian nation. To the contrary, her whole point seems to be that the

fedayeen represent a new factor because they have goaded that nation into existence. And although her assertion that a Palestinian nation did not exist until after the 1967 war is absurd, the sketch she provides of the historical development of the nationalism that engendered that nation – and her implicit understanding of the unpredictable and conditional evolution of nationalisms in general – is, in the main, accurate.

Palestinian nationalism emerged during the interwar period in response to Zionist immigration and settlement. The fact that Palestinian nationalism developed later than Zionism and indeed in response to it does not in any way diminish the legitimacy of Palestinian nationalism or make it less valid than Zionism. All nationalisms arise in opposition to some "other." Why else would there be the need to specify who you are? And all nationalisms are defined by what they oppose. As we have seen, Zionism itself arose in reaction to anti-Semitic and exclusionary nationalist movements in Europe. It would be perverse to judge Zionism as somehow less valid than European anti-Semitism or those nationalisms. Furthermore, Zionism itself was also defined by its opposition to the indigenous Palestinian inhabitants of the region. Both the "conquest of land" and the "conquest of labor" slogans that became central to the dominant strain of Zionism in the Yishuv originated as a result of the Zionist confrontation with the Palestinian "other."

Indigenous inhabitants of Palestine resisted Zionist settlement almost from the beginning. This resistance took a variety of forms. In the countryside, where a majority of those inhabitants lived, they engaged in forms of resistance associated with peasants everywhere: forced reoccupation and repossession of lands, assaults against settlers, sabotage of crops and property, and the like. In the cities, there were incidents of mob violence. In August 1929, for example, rioting broke out in Jerusalem. Rumors that each community was attempting to restrict the other community's access to its holy sites inflamed tensions, and a demonstration organized by Betar demanding Jewish control over the Western Wall – a site that abutted the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif – seemed to prove the worst to Muslims. The ensuing riots spread to Hebron, Jaffa, and Safad. Overall, 133 Jews and 116 Arabs died in the violence.

(The parallels to events in 2000 are too close to ignore. In September 2000, Ariel Sharon, who hoped to become the Likud candidate for prime minister, visited the site of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif to demonstrate, he claimed, that it belonged to all. This was the immediate

¹ *Sunday Times*, 15 June 1969.

spark that set off what has been called "the second intifada." Then, as before, the underlying grievances that contributed to the uprising were ignored by many of those who watched events unfold. Israelis placed the blame for the outbreak of the second intifada on the head of the Palestinian Authority, Yasir Arafat – much as the Yishuv and the British placed the blame for the 1929 riots on the highest-ranking Muslim official in Palestine, the Hajj Amin al-Husayni. No innocents, Yasir Arafat and the Hajj Amin certainly contributed to the rising tensions and sought to exploit the violence for their own ends. Nevertheless, neither was directly responsible for the outbreaks.)

Not all forms of resistance are nationalist, of course. It would be wrong to project prevailing nationalist beliefs further back in history than evidence warrants. The acts of resistance by the indigenous inhabitants of Palestine were what historian Eric Hobsbawm has called "primitive rebellion." There are two characteristics of primitive rebellions. First, primitive rebellions are motivated by a desire on the part of the rebels to redress specific grievances. Rebels act defensively. They do not intend to accomplish anything more by their actions than to reestablish what they consider to be the status quo. In addition, primitive rebellions tend to be spontaneous, localized, and short-lived. Neither of these two characteristics hold for nationalist struggles. Nationalist struggles do not merely attempt to redress grievances; rather, their purpose is to establish a new political order. Nor are nationalist struggles spontaneous, localized, and short-lived. Since they are organized around specific ideologies and require strategies for political reconstruction as well as resistance, nationalist struggles take planning. Although such planning may not occur at the beginning of a nationalist struggle, it must occur at some point for the struggle to succeed. Furthermore, the struggle must mobilize or at least win over a large portion of the population to its side. Such a process takes time.

A separate Palestinian nationalism that reflected a separate Palestinian national identity began to emerge after World War I. Before World War I, most of the Arab inhabitants of Palestine who gave any thought at all to the matter viewed themselves as Ottoman subjects, then, starting about the fifth decade of the nineteenth century, as Ottoman citizens. Three processes served to corroborate their Ottoman identity: their participation in common activities with other inhabitants of the empire, the further intrusion of the state into the lives of its subjects, and the

dissemination of an ideology of "Ottomanness" (*osmanlilik*) which inspired loyalty (and served as a model for future nationalist movements).

With the destruction of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, an Ottoman identity was no longer a viable option for the Arab inhabitants of Palestine. Some, particularly among the thin stratum of educated elites, adopted Arab nationalism, the idea that all Arabs comprised a single nation because they spoke the same language, were of the same ethnicity, shared the same history and culture, or any combination of the three. This sentiment, more powerful in retrospect than at the time, was, nevertheless, sustained by roving bands of displaced bureaucrats and exiles, romantic belletrists, and even the Hashemite family (the family to which Sharif Husayn, Amir Faysal, and Amir 'Abdullah belonged) that sought to rule the Arab nation. Many of the aforementioned continued to nourish Arabist sentiments well into the 1950s and beyond.

Other Arab inhabitants of Palestine viewed themselves as Syrians. By the late Ottoman period, Greater Syria had become an economically and socially integrated unit. Not only did infrastructure like railways and carriage roads link together the inhabitants of the region, Greater Syria developed as a consolidated marketplace with its own division of labor. Peasants and bedouin from the territory that is now Palestine regularly migrated back and forth to the rich farmland of the Hawran district, which now belongs to Syria. Urban elites in Damascus and Beirut invested in large landed estates in areas such as the Galilee and arranged marriage alliances with families in Jerusalem and Jaffa (but rarely with families in Cairo or Baghdad). Over the course of the nineteenth century, the economic and social evolution of Greater Syria so diverged from that of its neighbors that neither Syrian nationalists nor the entente representatives meeting in Paris contemplated anything more than a loose affiliation between Greater Syria and the territory that would become Iraq. So great was the identification of the Arab inhabitants of Palestine with Greater Syria that up through the 1930s one of the most important newspapers published in Jerusalem was called *Suriya janubiyya* – Southern Syria.

Over the course of the mandate period, however, both the Arab nationalist and the Syrian nationalist options no longer proved practicable. The mandates system not only divided the Arab world into a variety of proto-states, it severed Palestine from Syria. Because Palestinians could not reasonably expect to unite with Syrians, a Syrian identity

eventually lost its hold on Palestinians. Furthermore, the fact that the subsequent history and development of Palestine diverged from the subsequent history and development of Syria and the rest of the Arab world strengthened a Palestinian identity. Syrian elites, for example, would further their education by studying in France, and French became their second language. Since Britain held the mandate for Palestine, Palestinians would study in Britain and learn to speak English.

Further encouraging the emergence of a separate Palestinian identity was the confrontation with Zionism. Zionist settlement not only sparked resistance, it presented the Palestinians with a problem that no other population in the Middle East faced. Zionist colonization was very different from anything the inhabitants of Iraq, Trans-Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon experienced under the British and French mandates. As in Palestine, the British and French ruled their mandated territories indirectly through local collaborators, and as in Palestine their actions disrupted existing social and economic relations in their allotted territories. Nevertheless, neither the British nor the French appropriated land, established a rival and competing economy, or established rival and competing political structures. Furthermore, mandatory rule was, theoretically, temporary – a far cry from the permanent settlement program of the Zionists. Because they faced a different type of enemy, the response of Palestinians came to be different from the response of their neighbors. Had this not been the case, Palestinian nationalism would most likely have evolved along the same lines as Syrian or Iraqi nationalism – if, indeed, it had evolved at all.

Although the first nationalist organizations founded in Palestine during and after World War I did not call for a separate Palestinian state, they paved the way for those that would. There were two types of nationalist organization founded during this period: those that represented the convictions and aspirations of the elites and would-be elites of Palestinian society and those that had a more populist orientation. Each left a legacy for nationalist movements in Palestine that would last through the 1930s.

The first type of nationalist organization included mainly urban notables, former Ottoman bureaucrats, and an emergent stratum of professionals who no longer feared Ottoman repression and were eager to play a role in any future political order. Although a few from these groups had participated in conspiratorial organizations before the war, it was in fact

the British who provided the wherewithal for the first openly nationalist organizations in Palestine. As the British army moved north from Egypt to Damascus, political officers assigned to the army organized nationalist clubs to enlist the support of local leaders for the Arab Revolt and, more broadly, the entente campaign against the Ottomans. In the immediate aftermath of the war, these clubs acted as local branches of the Damascus-based Arab Club and even provided the club's Damascus headquarters with two of its chairmen.

The Arab Clubs did not have the political field to themselves for long. Syrian exiles who had spent the war in Cairo followed in the wake of the British army, establishing branches of their nationalist society – the Syrian Union – in Palestine as they journeyed back to Damascus. At the same time, notables, professionals, and former bureaucrats who had stayed in Palestine during the war founded nationalist groups called Muslim-Christian Associations in their hometowns. A host of other clubs, salons, and parties also joined the nationalist fray.

Although there was some differentiation among these groups, most held to a common agenda. Most opposed the mandate, the Balfour Declaration, and the division of Palestine from Syria (although the Muslim-Christian Associations, reflecting the sentiments of indigenous elites, made Palestinian autonomy within a federated Syrian state a central plank of their platform.) All recruited their members from the same layers of the population. Indeed, it appears that the proliferation of these sorts of nationalist groups often had more to do with individuals and families jockeying for position than with disputes over the political future of Palestine.

Populist organizations – branches of the Damascus-based Higher National Committee and committees of national defense – spread to the territory of Palestine from Syria in early 1919. These organizations also opposed the mandate, the division of Palestine from Syria, and the Balfour Declaration. But these organizations differed from other organizations in two ways: Their leadership included a large number of lower-middle-class religious dignitaries and shopkeepers, textile and grain merchants, local toughs, and tribal leaders, and the organizations appealed directly to peasants and nonelite townsmen. Not only did they recruit these peasants and townsmen into militias to resist the French occupation of Syria and Zionist settlement (one of their dispatches called on the indigenous inhabitants of Palestine to “ignite the country”), they

framed their nationalism in an idiom that reflected militancy, antielitism, and egalitarianism. Calling on the Arab inhabitants of Palestine to "protect the patrimony of our prophets and our ancestors" and promising "death to those who would betray Palestine," these organizations found an avid following among a population that had become acclimated to the culture of nationalism during the Ottoman period.

In February 1920, representatives of both types of organization met in Damascus to establish a common front. They established the first Palestine General Congress. Soon thereafter the following leaflet appeared on the streets of Damascus:

Palestine is our Country!

The Decision of the Palestinian General Congress

On Friday, 27 February 1920, at 3:00 in the afternoon, a meeting was held at the Arab Club, which included delegates from the Higher National Committee, the Syrian General Congress, and representatives from the Arab Independence Party, the Syrian National Party, the Syrian Union, the Syrian Pact, the Iraqi Pact, the Democratic Party, the Moral Revival Association, the Arab Club, leaders from the Hawrani, Dandashli, Karak, Fadl, Sakhur, and Circassian tribes and communities; finally, a large number of religious leaders, lawyers, journalists, merchants, secondary school students, and the heads of the guilds of Damascus.

Having considered the Palestinian situation, they agreed on the following five points:

1. We confirm what we have always said, that Palestine is an integral part of Syria. We demand that it remain so, and shall use all measures to the last drop of our blood and the last breath of our children to achieve this end.
2. Because we come from all parts of Syria, we consider the Zionist danger to be directed against us and against our political and economic existence in the future. We shall therefore throw back the Zionists with all our force. If the allies continue to let them pursue their activities we shall oppose them by all means possible. . . .

O Arab sons of Palestine:

The Syrian nation and the Palestinian associations are incensed that the [allies] would seek to detach Palestine from its motherland, Syria, under the guise of establishing a national government. How can we accept the life of slaves to the Jews and foreigners and not defend our political and natural rights? Raise your voice, protest this treachery, and never fear threats or intimidation. . . . If there exists a man among you who, bribed by gold or

honors, rallies to the occupation government, stay away from him, boycott him, and show him your scorn, for he is a traitor to his country and his nation. Likewise, boycott the Jews, sell them nothing and buy nothing from them. Boycott those who sustain them and serve them as underlings. . . .

Life, life, O Brothers!

True to form, the entente powers ignored the resolutions of the Palestine General Congress. In June 1920, the French sent an army into inland Syria to establish their control there. Although it was not until three years later that the boundary separating French-mandated Syria from British-mandated Palestine (the Paulet-Newcombe line) was set, the separation of the two territories was never in doubt. To curtail resistance to their occupation and the division of Syria, the French dismantled the Damascus-based nationalist organizations, including the Arab Club, the Higher National Committee, and the Syrian Union, condemned a number of nationalist leaders to death, and drove others into exile. The various Palestine-based Muslim-Christian Associations fared better for a while, and even came together at the end of 1920 to establish an Arab Executive to coordinate their activities. Acting in the name of "the Arabic-speaking people who were living in Palestine at the outbreak of the Great War," the Arab Executive demanded the termination of the mandate, the withdrawal of the Balfour Declaration, and the end of Jewish immigration and land purchases. It also called for the election of a "national" government in Palestine. In the end, however, most of the Muslim-Christian Associations withered away, and factionalism weakened those that remained. By the mid-1920s, the momentum behind the Arab Palestinian nationalist movements had slowed to a crawl. At the same time, the Zionist movement had already put in place rudimentary institutions of statehood.

Why was it so difficult for the Arab inhabitants of Palestine to organize themselves into a unified nationalist movement? Historians cite a number of reasons. First, as should now be obvious, in the aftermath of World War I most of the indigenous inhabitants of Palestine hitched their nationalist wagon to the wrong mule: Syrian nationalism. Even after the French and the British assumed control over their mandates, some nationalists in Palestine held on to their dream of joining a Greater Syrian state. More pragmatic nationalists agitated for a separate Palestinian nation, but they waged an uphill battle: Not only did they have to formulate a new set of doctrines, they had to disseminate

those doctrines while fighting a rearguard action against their Greater Syrian nationalist rivals.

The victory of the former group might have been more assured had the Palestinian national movement been able to use state or statelike institutions to communicate their ideas and make them tangible to the population. But here again indigenous Arab nationalists faced a number of hurdles unknown to their Zionist counterparts. Because Zionists established their colonies in a remote land under conditions that were often adverse, they had to embody their movement in institutions from the start. The nationalist movement in Palestine emerged in a territory that had been part of a functioning empire. Institutions already existed. Not only was there no imperative to create national institutions to govern day-to-day life, those that nationalists attempted to create had to compete with preexisting ones. Further abetting the institutionalization of the Zionist movement and obstructing the institutionalization of nationalism among the indigenous inhabitants of Palestine was the reaction of the leaders of each community to the British-imposed political order. Although groups of Zionists opposed specific policies of the British, they were, in the main, more than willing to work within the framework provided by the mandates system. Most nationalists within the indigenous community refused to sanction either the mandates system or the Balfour Declaration. They thus refused to cooperate with the British and declined to participate in the governing structures the British imposed.

Aspects of the Ottoman legacy also directly impeded the development of national institutions in Palestine. The population of Palestine included a number of non-Muslim religious groups, including Christians, who made up about 10 percent of the population at the time of the first real census in 1922. Under the Ottomans, each religious community of Palestine had regulated many of its own affairs, from social welfare to marriage and divorce. And during the nineteenth century, European powers that had taken a special interest in the religious minorities of the empire intervened in Ottoman affairs, ensuring that the previously informal and loose boundaries separating the various communities would become hard and fast – and sanctified by law. Seeking to enlist reliable local collaborators and redeem what they took to be their “benighted” and “oppressed” coreligionists, European powers extended protection to select minority communities, granted members of those communities

honorary citizenship and special commercial privileges, and made sure the Ottomans would apportion them representation at all levels of government according to their number.

When the British received the mandate for Palestine, they carried over many Ottoman-era policies, including those dealing with communal autonomy and minority representation. Thus, for example, when the first British high commissioner for Palestine, Herbert Samuel, attempted to set up an advisory council, he did not create three categories of seats for British, Zionist, and Arab representatives. Instead, he created four categories: British (ten seats), Muslim Palestinian (four seats), Christian Palestinian (three seats), and Jewish (three seats). In addition to granting the 11 percent of the population that was Jewish 30 percent of the seats that did not go to Britons, Samuel’s formulation granted legal sanction to the division of the Arab population based on religion.

Many historians point to another way in which the social organization of the Arab community of Palestine frustrated the creation of a unified nationalist movement. As we saw in Chapter 2, a new class of urban notables rose to prominence in Palestine during the nineteenth century. These urban notables derived their wealth from landownership (made possible by the 1858 land code) and their political influence from their membership in newly established municipal, district, and provincial councils. Urban notables forged ties of patronage with urban nonelites and peasants in the villages they owned. The notables intervened with the Ottoman government and performed other services on behalf of their clients. They also lent their urban and rural clients money and supplied peasants with seed and other supplies. In return they gained economic benefit, prestige, or both from their clients. And it did not hurt that notables could use their ties to the urban crowd when they needed to employ a little muscle. But the very links that connected notables to their clients put them in competition with each other: There were just so many clients to go around. This competition naturally made it difficult for notables to act in concert.

Inter-elite rivalries did not abate after the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the imposition of the mandates system. No notable was willing to join a nationalist club or party that enhanced the power and prestige of a rival and his allies. If the Husaynis of Jerusalem founded a branch of the Arab Club, the Nashashibis of Jerusalem would just have to found a branch of another nationalist organization, the Literary

Society. And if, in the years to follow, the Nashashibis were able to acquire position and prestige by cooperating with the British, you could bet that the Husaynis would assume the most uncompromising nationalist stance possible and dismiss their rivals as collaborators.

All too often, however, historians have overestimated the effects of inter-elite rivalries on the evolution of nationalism in Palestine. The competition among rival groups of notables might have created insurmountable hurdles for a nationalist movement to overcome if ties of patronage represented the totality of social relations in Palestinian society. They did not. And over time, the importance and prestige of the notables in society declined. There are two reasons for this. First, the very logic of nationalism runs counter to the logic of a social system built on patronage networks. Nationalisms accentuate the horizontal bonds that unite citizens with each other. Not only were the ties uniting Palestinian notables with their clients arranged vertically, they dissociated the clients of different notables from one another. This ran counter to the ideals of a population increasingly acclimated to the culture of nationalism.

Economic and social changes further undermined the authority held by notables in Palestinian society. What, after all, could urban-based landowners be expected to do for a population that lived in a society defined by market relations, labor migration, Zionist immigration, and foreign control – a society in which notables might sell land to Zionist settlers while large numbers of peasants were losing theirs and being forced into faceless cities to sell their labor? No wonder Palestinian peasants and townsmen increasingly looked to new forms of political organization that addressed their concerns, that enlisted members by appeals to ideology, not ties of patronage, and that engaged them in direct action rather than treating them as bit players in the nationalist drama. The notables and the organizations they sponsored did not disappear from the political scene, but, as we shall see in the next section, they increasingly had to share the stage with mobilized nonelites and mass-based, populist organizations.

THE GREAT REVOLT

At the end of 1935, British officials in Jaffa uncovered a large shipment of arms and ammunition destined for the Zionist community. For many

Palestinians, this could only mean one thing: The Zionist community was arming itself and preparing for war. At around the same time, a popular preacher, 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam, took to the hills with a band of followers to launch a guerrilla war against the British and the Zionists. The British caught up with the band and killed al-Qassam in a firefight. In the wake of both incidents, Palestine exploded into rebellion. The Great Revolt lasted for three years. It marks a turning point in the history of the struggle between the indigenous inhabitants of Palestine and the Zionists.

While every conflagration like the Great Revolt might be traced to one or more precipitating incidents like the ones just recounted, ascribing the Great Revolt to the discovery of an arms shipment and the killing of a popular preacher would be akin to ascribing the outbreak of World War I to the assassination of the heir to the throne of a fading power. In both instances, the roots of the conflict go much deeper. In the case of the Great Revolt, those roots might be found in the economic peripheralization and growing impoverishment of the indigenous population and the increasing size and intrusiveness of the Zionist community.

While most of the world was reeling from the effects of the Great Depression during the 1930s, the economy of Palestine was actually expanding. According to historian Roger Owen, economic activity in Palestine more than quadrupled during the period between 1922 and 1935. A number of factors contributed to this growth. The fourth and fifth aliyot (1924–8, 1929–39) brought close to 280,000 new immigrants to the Jewish community. Many of these immigrants were highly skilled refugees fleeing the anti-Semitic persecution that would culminate in the Holocaust. As the population of the Yishuv grew to nearly 30 percent of the population of Palestine as a whole, the economy of the Yishuv reached the requisite size and differentiation for what economists like to call an economic "takeoff." British investment in infrastructure provided the foundation for further growth. For example, after the British dredged a deep-water harbor in Haifa and the Iraq Petroleum Company made the city the terminus for an oil pipeline stretching from the oilfields of Mosul to the Mediterranean, Haifa attracted other industrial installations – an Iraq Petroleum Company refinery, the central facilities of the Palestine Railroad – and gained prominence as the industrial center of Palestine. During the first ten years of the British mandate, the population of the city doubled. Even the agricultural



11. Jewish immigrants being processed at the Port of Jaffa, ca. 1930s. (Source: From the collection of the author)



12. Tel Aviv, 1937. By the 1930s, Tel Aviv was a showcase for modernist trends in architecture and urban planning, reflecting the Zionist quest to build an "outpost of civilization" in Palestine. (Source: From the collection of the author)

economy of Palestine seemed to prosper during the 1930s, as more land came under cultivation and landowners turned to citrus production to offset declining prices for staples.

But the overall statistics for the Palestine economy are deceptive. Economic growth was not evenly distributed across the two communities. Most of the indigenous inhabitants of Palestine were cultivators, and the Great Depression hit them hard. As with farmers everywhere, collapsing prices for most agricultural commodities increased their indebtedness. But unlike farmers in other places, there was little their government could do to alleviate the crisis: The terms of the mandate prohibited Britain from imposing tariffs that would protect them. As a result, Palestine became a dumping ground for the agricultural products of others. Large numbers of farmers, who carried enormous debts anyway (the going interest rate in rural Palestine at the time was 30 to 200 percent), lost their land as a result of foreclosure. By the outbreak of the Great Revolt, about half of all rural male Palestinians had to engage in labor outside their villages to make ends meet. Some found work in seasonal agricultural labor or on infrastructural projects such as road construction. Others emigrated to cities, where they were often relegated to the lowest rungs of the economic ladder and dwelt in shantytowns.

The upsurge in Zionist immigration aggravated the problem of landlessness. As more and more Jews entered Palestine, Zionist agents bought more and more land. The price of rural real estate skyrocketed, and more than a few urban-based landowners decided to make a killing by selling their holdings to the Jewish National Fund. As large estates available for purchase became scarcer, Zionist land agents began buying up smaller plots, both directly and by buying markers from usurers. In the process, they came in contact with ever greater numbers of Palestinians living on the margins of subsistence. By 1931, Zionist land purchases had led to the expulsion of approximately twenty thousand peasant families from their lands. Over the course of the next several years, approximately 30 percent of Palestinian farmers had become totally landless. Another 75 to 80 percent did not have enough land to support themselves. Zionism, which had been an abstract concept for many of the indigenous inhabitants of Palestine, now had become a tangible presence.

These, then, were the circumstances under which someone like 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam could emerge as a champion of the marginalized and dispossessed and as a symbol of resistance. 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam was born in Latakia, on the coast of present-day Syria, in about 1880. His father and grandfather had been ulama (Muslim religious scholars) and belonged to the Qadariyya sufi order. Although it is common to associate sufism with mysticism, many sufi orders had moved away from mysticism during the nineteenth century. They did this under pressure from their own followers, who sought to use the orders to help them deal with nineteenth-century conditions, and under pressure from the Ottoman government, which used the orders to spread a standardized Islamic orthodoxy. The most prominent Qadiri leader in nineteenth-century Syria had been 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza'iri. 'Abd al-Qadir had led the resistance against the French occupation of Algeria before he was exiled to Damascus. While in Damascus, he preached the lessons he had learned during that resistance: Muslims not only had to use Islamic law to guide them in their daily lives but had to apply the principles of reason to make that law compatible with modern conditions. Furthermore, Muslims had to assimilate Western scientific and technological practices. The ideas 'Abd al-Qadir preached were commonplace in the Middle East during al-Qassam's youth. Al-Qassam's association with like-minded members of other sufi orders in Syria and "modernist"

ulama at the Islamic university of al-Azhar in Cairo further reinforced these ideas.

As soon as he returned to Syria from Cairo, al-Qassam began applying the lessons he had learned. In 1911, he collected weapons and supplies for the inhabitants of Tripolitania (in present-day Libya), who were fighting an Italian invasion and occupation, and he even tried to join their resistance with a band of his devotees. After World War I, he joined one of the guerrilla groups associated with the committees of national defense fighting against the French in Syria. When the French seized Damascus, al-Qassam fled to Haifa, where he shared lodgings and pursued scholarly endeavors with the former head of the Higher National Committee. In Haifa, al-Qassam became a popular preacher and registrar of marriages in the surrounding countryside. He used both positions as a pulpit to preach against the British and Zionists. By the time of his ill-fated campaign, he may have had upwards of a thousand followers recruited from among Haifa's casual workers, artisans, peddlers, stevedores, and rail and postal workers.

Al-Qassam's death galvanized anti-British, anti-Zionist resistance among townsmen and peasants. His funeral was the largest in Palestinian history, and he was eulogized in poetry and songs, such as the following:

Who would imitate Qassam as Islam's ideal soldier
Follows, if he wishes release from his inherited humiliation,
the best master;
For he forsook words and the weakling's idle chatter.
Our leaders have stuffed our ears to bursting with talk!
We believed true what they wrote, but it was only a delusion.²

There are two aspects of this eulogy that are worth examining. First, "Qassam as Islam's ideal soldier." Islam has played a role in popular Palestinian nationalism since the inception of popular Palestinian nationalism. Although that role has varied over time (and we shall discuss contemporary Islamic political movements, which use their interpretation of Islam as both a roadmap for the reconstruction of society and the grounds for nationalist struggle, in Chapter 9), what concerns

² Nels Johnson, *Islam and the Politics of Meaning in Palestinian Nationalism* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1982), 45.

us here is the way in which Islam has provided imagery and vocabulary for the nationalist cause. Sometimes nationalists gleaned words from the vocabulary of religion simply because nationalism was a recent import to the Arab world and a vocabulary of nationalism did not exist in Arabic. Rather than adopting Western terms, they chose the closest approximation. Hence, the use of the word *umma*, which originally referred to the Islamic community of believers, to mean nation. Words that are particularly evocative are the ones that last: Palestinians who die in battle are still referred to as *shuhada'* (martyrs), and Palestinians still sometimes refer to their struggle or those who fight in that struggle with some variant of the word *jihad*. All these terms, of course, predate the nationalist era.

The use of religious imagery and vocabulary in nationalist rhetoric is hardly restricted to the Palestinian case: Nationalisms have commonly taken terms that originated in other settings and transformed their meaning through recontextualization. Think about how the word "martyr" has been applied to Abraham Lincoln or John F. Kennedy, or about how American presidents from Woodrow Wilson to Dwight Eisenhower to George W. Bush have transformed the word "crusade" in their rhetoric from its original meaning – a religiously inspired reconquest of the Holy Land – to signify America's "crusadelike" mission in the world. Americans like to think of the war on terrorism as a "righteous" cause. So, apparently, did a Palestinian rebel leader who made use of a similar rhetorical flourish in the "Proclamation from the General Leadership of the Arab Revolt in Southern Syria-Palestine," issued in 1936:

Palestine summons us to fight in the Path of God so that the world might bear witness to the unity of the nation. . . . We are called to battle for freedom, independence, and hope, and see the rebellion against oppression as a religious duty.³

But why does religious imagery and vocabulary so readily lend itself to adoption by nationalism? The answer lies in the fact that in many places where nationalism and nation-states found a home, religion took on a new meaning and social function. Take the case of Islam in the

³ Nels Johnson, *Islam and the Politics of Meaning in Palestinian Nationalism* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1982), 55.

Ottoman Empire. During the nineteenth century, many in the empire had come to view Islam in the same way that Italians or Frenchmen had come to view the Italian or French language. Just as Italian or French was held up as the characteristic that differentiated Italians or Frenchmen from their neighbors, Islam was held up as the characteristic that differentiated Ottomans from their adversaries in the West. This should not be surprising: As we saw above, as the population of the Middle East came to live their lives in a world of nations and nationalism, they came to live their Islam in the same world. The semiofficial newspaper of the Ottoman Empire once put it this way: "Islam is not only a religion, it is a nationality."

For those living in Palestine during the interwar period, it was not a stretch to do the same. After all, the characteristic that Zionists used to differentiate themselves from the people among whom they settled was their Jewishness. And once Islam had become more than a code of conduct and system of belief and had become a cultural attribute, even non-Muslims could cede to Islam an important role in defining the culture and history of their nation. Thus, the use of Islam in Palestinian nationalism came to parallel the use of Judaism in Zionism.

The second aspect of the eulogy that bears scrutiny are the phrases, "Our leaders have stuffed our ears to bursting with talk! We believed true what they wrote, but it was only a delusion." These lines underscore the social cleavages that affected the course and outcome of the rebellion – and indeed the course of subsequent Palestinian nationalism as well. The Great Revolt broke out in April 1936 in the wake of the murder of two Jews in Nablus. The murders provoked retaliation, and retaliation provoked counterretaliation. The escalating violence prompted two responses in the Palestinian community, one by notables and their allies among the various nationalist parties they dominated, another by nonelites.

Leading notables and their allies decided they had to bury the hatchet and unite their political forces. They formed the Arab Higher Committee, with the Hajj Amin al-Husayni as its leader. The Hajj Amin was born in Jerusalem in 1893, the scion of one of the most influential notable families of Jerusalem. Nationalist hagiographers have credited the Hajj Amin with being an implacable foe of Zionism and the British. Actually, this is only partly correct. Although it is true that the Husayni

family still enjoys a reputation among Palestinians as one of the few notable families that never sold land to the Zionists, the Husayni family actually enjoyed the favor of the British during the immediate post-World War I period. The Hajj Amin even served as president of the Supreme Muslim Council, a body established to administer Islamic law courts and religious endowments, and as grand mufti (an official who interprets Islamic law) of Jerusalem. Both the council and the position of grand mufti of Jerusalem were British inventions.

The British refused to extend their patronage exclusively to the Husayni family, however. After a bloody anti-Zionist riot in Jerusalem in 1920, the British dismissed the mayor, Musa Kazim al-Husayni, from his post and replaced him with (God forbid!) a member of the rival Nashashibi clan. The British action was certainly an affront to the Husayni family, but it was the position of the family in Palestinian society and the logic of interfamilial competition that virtually compelled its members to take a militant stance toward the mandatory power: The British refused to endorse Husayni claims to preeminence, and since the prestige accorded notable families was directly related to their ability to attract a following, one can imagine the Husaynis thinking, in the words of the anonymous French politician, "I must see where my people are going so I can lead them," no matter what their feelings about the British and Zionists. It was perhaps inevitable, therefore, that a firebrand member of the most influential family of Jerusalem would become head of the Arab Higher Committee.

Although the Arab Higher Committee attempted to provide overall direction during the initial stages of the rebellion, true command belonged to local committees, known confusingly as "national committees," that emerged simultaneously in Jerusalem, Nablus, Jaffa, Tulkarm, and elsewhere. These popularly based committees coordinated a general strike and enforced the boycott of Jewish businesses – two tactics endorsed by the Arab Higher Committee. To minimize the damage their tactics inflicted on Palestinians, the national committees established "nourishment and supply committees" in urban quarters. Financed through a combination of voluntary and involuntary donations, assessments on the salaries of those who continued to work, and contributions from sympathizers throughout the Arab world, these committees furnished the urban quarters with necessities and provided

stipends to the families of striking workers. Years later, an elderly Palestinian woman recalled the popular mobilization in these words:

When I was [young], I was with the young students in demonstrations. We would say, "Down with immigration. Down with Balfour." But I didn't know what Balfour was, or what was meant by immigration. I knew that Jews were coming and that we wanted to stop them and that we didn't want them to take our land. . . .

During the strike, my father was one of the committee that collected dry food, wheat, and gave it to the poor whose work stopped during the strike. Once, I remember, British soldiers pushed their way into the house and made a long line to take bags of flour and throw them in the well. My father started to shout, because we used the water. . . . They went on with what they were doing and my father, a huge man, fell to the floor. I and my sister started to shout and the neighbors came and they carried him to his bed and we called the doctor. It won't go from my eyes. Until now, I can't forget.⁴

British counterinsurgency, while provocative, was effective in quelling the rebellion in the cities. So were the tactics of general strike and boycott chosen by resistance leaders. Mandatory authorities and Jewish employers were more than willing to replace Arab employees who honored the strike with Jewish workers, and the boycott only served to further the economic division between the two communities – a goal the Yishuv leadership advocated anyway. The strike and boycott drained the urban Palestinian population, while the extortion of money and jewelry from richer Palestinians divided the movement along class lines. By July 1936, the revolt in the cities had effectively ended (although the general strike lingered on for another three months). Within a year, the Hajj Amin al-Husayni was on the lam, and the Arab Higher Committee had ceased to function as a body.

With the cities pacified, the site of the rebellion moved to the countryside. Our informant describes it thus:

I used to see the English people helping the Jews in the war. Our men, the Palestinians in the mountains, had to fight against both the British army and the Jews. These men in the mountains had to get their guns from the people. Every family had to collect money and buy a gun for them.

⁴ Staughton Lynd, Sam Bahour, and Alice Lynd, *Homeland: Oral Histories of Palestine and Palestinians* (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1994), 27–8.



13. During the Great Revolt, British counterinsurgency took a heavy toll on rebels and Palestinian society alike. Rebel prisoners from Jenin area. (Source: Hulton-Deutsch Collection/Corbis)

These mujahadin, the fighters, would come to a village for a week. The whole village would give them food, cook for them, and clean their weapons for them. When the fighters were in the mountains, someone from the village would go up to the mountains carrying a white flag. This flag would be pointed to the right or to the left and would tell the fedayin whether to stay or to leave. Sometimes while they were eating, the flag would tell them to leave. They would leave the food and flee. This was the life that my people used to live.

By the autumn of 1937, 9,000 to 10,000 Palestinian and non-Palestinian Arab fighters – or mujahidin, as our informant calls them – roamed the countryside, attacking British forces and Zionist settlements and generally wreaking havoc. Whether they were motivated more by nationalist zeal or the promise of loot is anyone's guess. Although our informant would have us believe the former, her words – “Every family *had* to collect money and buy a gun for them” – seem to tell a different story. Whatever their motivation, the rebels hardly swam like fish in the sea. Their appropriation of peasant surplus and whatever

valuables they could find filled their ranks with peasants who now, too, had to depend on brigandage to survive. Thus was created an economy of plunder that, in the end, did as much damage to the Palestinian countryside as the attacks launched by the rebels did to the British and Zionists. To pacify the countryside, the British imported an army of 20,000, which worked in tandem with Zionist “special night squads” and “peace bands” organized by the ever-willing Nashashibi family. Employing all the usual tactics of counterinsurgency, including those all too familiar to Palestinians today – the collective punishment of villages, targeted assassinations, mass arrests, deportations, dynamiting homes of suspected guerrillas and sympathizers – the British and their allies eventually snuffed out the rebellion.

With the exception of the nakba of 1948, the Great Revolt marks the most significant turning point in modern Palestinian history. On the positive side of the balance sheet for Palestinians, the Great Revolt marks the point at which we can begin to discuss the phenomenon of a separate, mass-based Palestinian nationalism with confidence. The revolt engaged a broad sector of the indigenous population of Palestine in a programmatic and coordinated movement. The symbols around which the population rallied (such as the example of al-Qassam) were uniquely Palestinian, as was the enemy against which the Palestinians fought, the tactics the rebels employed, and the demands that the rebels made.

Long after its suppression, the Great Revolt continued to provide symbolic sustenance to the Palestinian national movement. It is, of course, true that the Arab Higher Committee, the self-proclaimed leadership of the revolt, all too quickly fell victim to repression and squabbling, that those who led the rebel gangs in the countryside resembled, more often than not, Afghan warlords rather than Robin Hoods, and that the revolt failed to come close to achieving its goal of dislodging the Yishuv. But while all this is true, none of it matters. Nationalist memory is selective. During the first intifada – the uprising against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip that broke out in 1987 – the United National Leadership of the Uprising, which coordinated the rebellion, called for a general strike on the anniversary of al-Qassam's death and issued communiqués such as the following:

O masses of our great Palestinian people. O masses of the people of stones and Molotov cocktails. O soldiers of justice who are participating in our

people's valiant uprising. . . . A greeting of reverence and admiration to these great people who recorded the most splendid epics of struggle; a greeting to those people who fulfilled the call of duty and shook the earth under the Zionists' feet last week . . . a greeting to you, O grandsons of al-Qassam.⁵

And during the second intifada, the Qassam Brigades of the Islamist organization Hamas have strapped Qassam-19 explosives on to the bodies of suicide bombers and have launched Qassam-2 missiles at Israeli settlements.

(The Great Revolt has also found its way into Israeli collective memory. Take the following editorial from the *Jerusalem Post*, called "Learning from the British." The editorial was written in December 2001, fifteen months after the outbreak of the second intifada. Written by Shlomo Gazit, former head of Israeli military intelligence, it argues that Israelis should draw a very different sort of lesson from the revolt:

Britain proved terrorism can be overcome by force: It established the northern battalion which prevented incursions, infiltrations, and the smuggling of weapons and people from Syria and Lebanon to Palestine. It created a network of police stations, which allowed control of the ground and roads. And mainly it applied massive force, which retook all the areas that had been taken by Arab gangs. Nobody stopped Britain from exercising full military force – not public opinion at home, nor the media, nor the Arab states which had yet to gain political significance, nor the international community.)⁶

Whatever the role the Great Revolt has played in the construction of a Palestinian identity and national narrative, any ledger recording its effects must also include entries on the debit side of the balance sheet. These entries are substantial. The revolt resulted in upwards of 3,000 rebel casualties and the exile or imprisonment of much of the nationalist leadership. Large swathes of the Palestinian countryside lay in ruins, from both rebel actions and British retaliation. Many of the best and brightest of Palestinian society, including a disproportionate number of the educated and wealthy, fled Palestine, some to escape the fighting, others to escape the exactions of the rebels. In all, the Great Revolt might be considered the first nakba of modern Palestinian history. Certainly, it paved the way for the one that followed, and it may even

have been the primary reason why 1948 turned out to be the disaster for the Palestinian community that it was.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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⁵ Zachary Lockman and Joel Beinin, eds., *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising against Israeli Occupation* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 331.

⁶ Shlomo Gazit, "Learning from the British," *Jerusalem Post*, 11 December 2001.