

THE FIRST INTIFADA



Demonstrating Arabs being charged by British troops in Jaffa, November 1933.

Rebellion in Palestine, 1936-39

JERUSALEM WAS SURELY ONE OF THE glittering prizes of the Great War, won by the 'stout hearts and sharp swords' which Lord Birkenhead would later commend to the undergraduates of Glasgow University. When General Allenby captured the city in December 1917, he dispelled much of the gloom of the war's grimest year. The humility of his entry into the old city through the Jaffa gate, on foot, trumped the earlier gaudy processions of European emperors for whom the wall had been barbarously breached. Allenby was a Christian conqueror, and though he was to prove a sage governor in Egypt after the war, the salient fact for Palestine of his march

Palestinian revolt – not in Israel today but under the British mandate fifty years ago. Charles Townshend traces its impact and discusses its character.

to Damascus was conquest. Britain occupied Palestine by force of arms and exercised a conqueror's rights.

The chief of these was the distribution of the conquered – or, as the leaders of the Arab national movement hoped, liberated – territory. The discrepancy between conquest

and liberation was ultimately to prove disastrous. For the Arab fighters who advanced out of the Hejaz with T.E. Lawrence, the goal was Syria. Palestine as a concept scarcely figured in their mental map of the new Arab state. Though Jerusalem was one of the three most sacred sites of Islam, negotiations between the Arabs and the British centred on the great Syrian cities, Aleppo, Hama, Homs and Damascus. Sherif Hussein almost casually agreed to the exclusion of 'portions of Syria lying to the west of' these cities from the planned kingdom.

It was Britain which, in trying to limit the French sphere of influence in the Levant, and to protect the Suez

Canal, created modern Palestine. First, Britain detached the Holy Land from the French zone by declaring it an area of 'international' responsibility. Next, it secured control of the area on both banks of the Jordan as a League of Nations Mandate. Finally it divided the Mandate into two, Palestine on the west bank and Transjordan on the east. Simultaneously it confirmed the special status of Palestine through the policy announced in the Balfour Declaration, of using Britain's 'best endeavours to facilitate the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people'. The motives for this fateful undertaking, and the ambiguity of its terms, have been ceaselessly debated ever since; what is certain is that the British government believed that it had the power as well as the right to carry it out. It saw Palestine as a *tabula rasa*, ready to be made new. In adding its equally resonant proviso, that 'nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine', it plainly discounted the possibility that such rights might come to include that of Palestinian national identity.

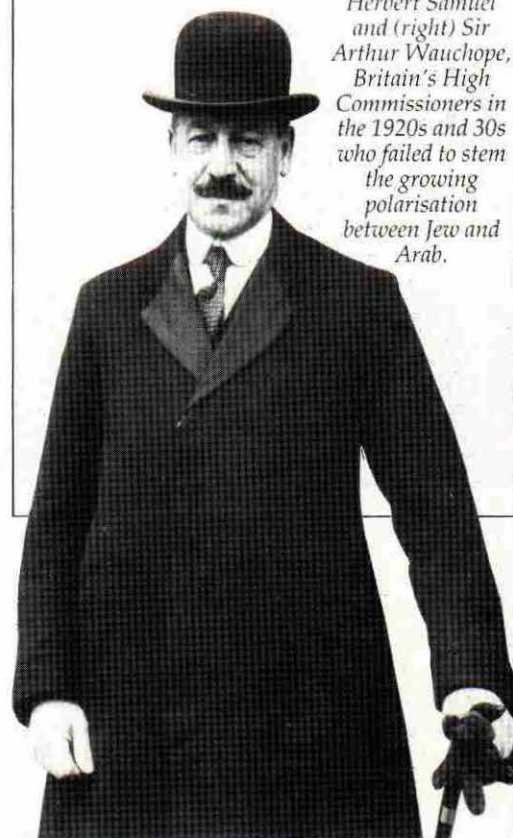
What baffled and finally broke the British endeavour to implement the Mandate was precisely the emergence of Palestinian nationalism. Why, one is driven to ask, did Britain fail to recognise what seems so obvious with hindsight? The answer is that the emergence of national consciousness was an erratic process. The fury of Arab hostility to Zionism, taking shape in the alarming riots of 1920 and 1921, and spreading almost into general civil war in 1929, now look like clear enough indications. Yet at the time they were not unmistakable. Arab resistance was sporadic, incoherent, and negative. As Britain constructed Palestine, so it created Palestinian nationalism. Palestinian identity was forged in fear of the Jewish domination implied by the Mandate. The process was accelerated, ironically, by the very caution with which the Mandatory power treated any possible infringement of Arab rights – caution which Jews saw as anti-Zionist, if not anti-Semitic. There was indeed a striking shift from the wild leap of the Balfour Declaration to the circumspection with which the government trod thereafter. Here was an imperial power which had become acutely sensitive to the religious prejudices of its fifty million Moslem subjects. This sensitivity did not, of course,



reflect empathy with Islam: rather the reverse, fear of the latent fanaticism of Moslem peoples and their propensity to mass violence or *jihad*.

By the time Sir Herbert Samuel was installed as the First High Commissioner in 1920, the strict limits on Britain's room for political manoeuvre were already evident. Samuel looked to be an inspired choice: the very fact of his being Jewish must, it was thought, reassure the Zionists of Britain's goodwill, while his unimpeachable probity as a British administrator must reassure the Arabs that they would be treated fairly. But Samuel found that the communities were already so polarised that his reputation was not enough for the second task, which seemed after the 1920 riots to be the overriding priority. Within a year of his arrival, still more serious riots impelled him to announce restrictions on Jewish immigration, henceforth to be governed by the 'economic absorptive capacity' of Palestine – a fruitful seed of future contention.

The attempt envisaged in the Mandate to create bi-ethnic administrative and legislative institutions nonetheless failed. There was no Arab equivalent to the Jewish Agency, the officially recognised body which fostered the economic, educational and medical infrastructure of the Jewish community in Palestine (*Yishuv*). Arab leaders refused to accept the implication that



Herbert Samuel and (right) Sir Arthur Wauchoppe, Britain's High Commissioners in the 1920s and 30s who failed to stem the growing polarisation between Jew and Arab.

the Arabs, as the majority, should be equated with the Jewish minority. The Supreme Moslem Council, which was established after the 1921 riots as a conciliatory gesture, bore no resemblance to the Arab Agency which Samuel had hoped to institute. Arabs joined the British administration and police, but could never reach the highest ranks. By contrast,

the Jewish Agency quickly developed into a virtual state apparatus, giving the *Yishuv* organisational capacities which the Arabs were never able to match.

The precarious balancing act between promoting Jewish aspirations and protecting Arab rights paralysed the government in face of the worst crisis of the 1920s, the conflict over the 'Wailing Wall' in Jerusalem in 1929. Communal violence reached catastrophic proportions. Yet even then, the British belief in the necessity and longevity of their presence in Palestine was scarcely if at all undermined. Like India, Palestine fascinated its European rulers. 'There is no promotion after Jerusalem', wrote its first British governor, Ronald Storrs, later sleepwalking as governor of Cyprus in the 1930s. For Storrs it was

'who does it with his head not his feet', Wauchope was an ardent believer in the possibility of consensus in Palestine. Though earlier efforts to construct a bi-ethnic constitution had failed, he persevered with the aim of giving the Arabs a real measure of the self-government promised by the League of Nations.

In 1934 he set up municipal councils in the larger towns, and in 1935 he launched his greatest project, a legislative council with an Arab majority. The ignominious fate of this initiative was to be rejected not only by both communities in Palestine, but also by the House of Commons in London. This last rejection was fatal to the scheme itself, and also to the credibility of the Palestine government, already undermined by frequent policy reversals over Jewish

prospect. The fact that the Mufti, who was by far the most influential Arab political figure, derived his authority from religious sources, clearly showed that Arab politics were not following the British pattern.

On April 15th, 1936, two Jews were murdered by Arab 'bandits' (the official term) on the road between Tulkarm and Nablus. Next day two Arabs were killed near the Jewish town of Petah Tikvah. The funeral of the Jews in Tel Aviv on April 17th produced, as such events often did, serious violence, and in neighbouring Jaffa two days later dozens of Jews were attacked in the streets. Nine were beaten, stoned or stabbed to death, and killings continued over the following days. Police had to open fire to keep an Arab crowd out of Tel Aviv, and armoured cars were brought in. The situation was grim, but it did not yet seem unprecedented: indeed, it seemed all too familiar. A new kind of Arab organisation was, however, emerging. A 'National Committee' met in Nablus on the 20th and declared a general strike. The strike call was repeated by national committees in other towns, and finally by a Higher Arab Committee in Jerusalem on the 25th.

The Higher Committee spelled out the Arab demands: stoppage of Jewish immigration, prohibition of land sales to Jews, and establishment of representative government. The strike rapidly solidified; the port of Jaffa ceased to function, road transport seized up (though rail workers did not strike), and a tax boycott began. Violence became more systematic: Jewish buildings, crops and plantations were special targets. Most ominously, in May and June armed bands appeared in the hills of Samaria and started to carry out bigger ambushes and attacks.

The question for the government, and also for the *Yishuv*, was how to react to this Arab activity. Was it a genuine national movement, or a series of local disturbances, fomented by agitators and criminal bandits? Zionist leaders divided on this: David Ben-Gurion took the former view, Berl Katznelson the latter. The British view was also confused from the start. Sympathy with Arab fears of Zionist domination went along with paternalistic assumptions of Arab incapacity. Plentiful evidence of intimidation could be found to confirm the instinctive belief that the strike was not spontaneous. The culprits were as usual 'fanatics', 'criminals', and 'professional agitators'. The British

(Left) Lord Balfour (in glasses), author of the 1917 Declaration, with Jerusalem's British governor, Ronald Storrs, on a 1925 visit. (Right) Archibald (later Lord) Wavell – commander of the British forces 1937-38 – whose efforts to control the Arab rebellion met with only limited success.



immigration. Local resistance might have been overcome by a more resolute policy. Arabs at first refused to countenance the proposal, because the legislative council would have no power to question the terms of the Mandate; but their attitude softened as the extent of Zionist hostility to it became clear. The scheme plainly offered Arab leaders a basis for creating a national political structure, and for containing Zionism. Its collapse left them in a state of unorganised arousal. A latent power struggle between the representatives of the two leading Arab families, Raghib Bey Nashashibi (former Mayor of Jerusalem) and Hajj Amin al-Husseini (Mufti of Jerusalem and president of the Supreme Moslem Council) showed that unity was still a distant

an enchanted city, whose awakening into the twentieth century he oversaw with a devotion and success unequalled until the reign of Mayor Kollek after 1967. For the rest of the administration, the enchantment persisted; above all in the person of Sir Arthur Wauchope, High Commissioner from 1931 to 1938. Appointed by Ramsay MacDonald as a general

found it hard to accept that such undesirables might represent popular sentiment. Moslem 'fanaticism' was an especially alien threat which seems to have poisoned, in British eyes, the cause with which it was inextricably linked.

The result was a complacency which is astonishing in retrospect. Though emergency powers (the 1931 Palestine (Defence) Order in Council) were invoked across the whole country as early as April 19th, Wauchope consistently refused to permit military action against the armed bands. Troops were called in as guards or to replace the British contingent of the police, who were relieved of their ordinary duties – which often involved an irksome subordination to Arab officers – so that they could pursue the rebels, without noticeable effect. The bands continued to multiply throughout the summer, and their activities increasingly resembled guerrilla warfare. The term 'rebellion' was often used within the administration to describe what was going on, but quite casually: more often the violence was fragmented – sniping, assault, abduction, arson, and so on – and loosely lumped together as 'disorders' or 'disturbances'. This negative view governed the official response until September 1936, with one spectacular exception.

In the last fortnight of June the

army blasted its way into the old city of Jaffa, the epicentre of the rebellion, with a massive series of demolitions. Two wide roads were driven through the 'rabbit warren' of narrow streets and blind-walled houses so typical of middle-eastern cities and so hostile to western notions of order. There was almost no resistance: after some sniping had been silenced by a deluge of gunfire, the population watched the demolitions with evident incomprehension or fatalism, and Jaffa remained quiet for several months. This crushing operation followed a long tussle between the civil and military authorities about the need for firm measures to restore public security. The army's view was that government must assert itself to win public confidence. The government conceded, but contrived to wriggle out of the military posture by disingenuously attributing the demolitions to public health requirements. This compromise was to persist as the months of conflict dragged into years.

Jaffa foreshadowed the rough military methods which were finally to be used when the rebellion reached its peak in autumn 1938. Even then, however, martial law was never formally declared, and the relationship between the civil and military authorities was never wholly harmonious. Aversion to military rule

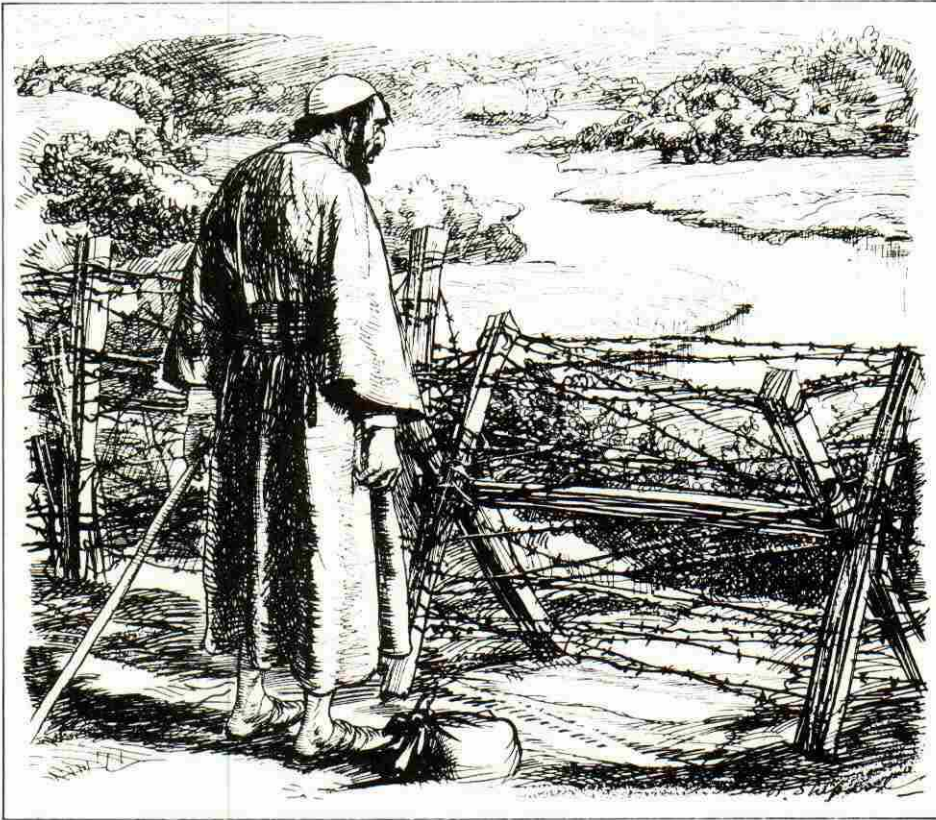
was, of course, part of British political culture – albeit less evident in the colonies – but it seems to have been most pronounced in Palestine. Wauchope's dominance as High Commissioner was heightened by the fact that as a general he outranked all the military staff in Palestine, even after the London government forced the issue in September by announcing the imminent proclamation of martial law, and despatching Major-General John Dill with a full division of troops to enforce it.

Dill left England believing that he was to be military governor of Palestine; he arrived to find that the threat of martial law, coupled with the promise of a royal commission to investigate Arab grievances, had enabled Wauchope to negotiate a compromise. The strike was called off, but the armed bands did not surrender themselves or their weapons: they simply dispersed. Dill's fury was barely controlled. He castigated the squeamishness of the Jerusalem government which, he believed, had allowed the rebellion to spread and which now refused to face the reality of an intolerable situation. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff fumed privately that the High Commissioner's methods were 'entirely ineffective': 'unfettered military control should have been exercised from the first'.

Military strictures did indeed appear to be justified when, after a year of relative calm, the insurgency took still more formidable shape in the autumn of 1937. During the six months of the rebellion's first phase, 16 police and 21 soldiers had been killed, 102 police and 104 soldiers wounded. Amongst civilians, 89 Jews and 195 Arabs were reported killed, and some 300 Jews and 800 Arabs wounded, though the figures for Arab casualties were conjectural, and well over 500 may have died. These totals would have been even larger but for the policy of non-retaliation (*havlaga*) adopted by the Jewish Agency. In themselves they give at best a crude indication of the collapse of public security engendered by the insurrection. When the second phase of the rebellion began, with the assassination of the District Commissioner for Galilee, Lewis Andrews, in Nazareth on September 27th, the governmental catastrophe was even more complete. Armed bands reappeared in greater numbers than ever before, and in addition to guerrilla activities began to exert systematic intimidation of local communities. Rebel

Exodus? Chaim Weizmann, (second from left) president of the World Zionist Movement, with other leading Zionists in Plymouth, 1921.





courts were established, 'taxes' levied, decrees enforced (such as the abandonment of traditional urban Palestinian headgear in favour of the desert *kaffiyah*), and the British administration paralysed.

The first official reaction was more aggressive than in the previous year. The Arab Higher Committee and the National Committees were proscribed; the Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Husseini – the most influential Arab political figure, widely regarded as the instigator of the rebellion – was dismissed from his official posts as President of the Supreme Moslem Council and Chairman of the General Wakf Committee (which had given him extensive funds and pow-

'Homeless' – Punch of July 1938 characterises the 'problem for Europe' in resettlement posed by the Fascist and Nazi persecution of the Jews.

ers of patronage); and more stringent emergency powers were taken. Wauchope's early retirement was announced, opening the way to a tougher line. The army occupied the old city of Jerusalem, and widespread arrests were made, though

A convoy of British troops on the Jenin-Nablus road in the 1930s.



the Mufti escaped from the Haram-ash-Sharif, which troops were forbidden to enter. Yet these measures had little effect. Within six months Wauchope's successor, Sir Harold MacMichael, was reporting that 'the situation in the rebel areas is steadily deteriorating, and unless remedial measures can be taken, the drift will be toward rebellion'. By July 1938 there was a noticeable 'increase in the number and size of the armed gangs, [which] were enjoying increasing support from the villagers'. In September the disturbances, he confessed, 'more than ever before assumed the character of open rebellion'.

In fact, the reference to 'rebel areas' in May revealed that even then some parts of Palestine were beyond the government's control. Refusal to admit the reality of rebellion while there was still a chance of containing it in the hills of Samaria accelerated the slide into catastrophe. By the time Dill left the country in August 1937, to be replaced by Archibald Wavell, the military garrison had been halved – two brigades instead of two divisions. Wavell tried to meet the renewed insurgency with mobile columns: he had neither the strength nor the authority to attempt an intensive combing-out of the rebel heartland, small though it was (the notorious 'triangle' between Nablus, Tul-karm and Jenin measured barely thirty kilometres on each side). Despite official optimism, the results were disappointing. Violence trickled down across the whole country over the summer of 1938; a celebrated Iraqi guerrilla leader, Fauzi al-Kaukji, succeeded in giving a new degree of cohesion to the actions of the armed bands; whilst a specially ominous aspect of this virtual civil war was the



increase in terrorist attacks on Arabs by Jewish revisionist groups, later to explode into the British consciousness as the 'Stern gang' and the Irgun. These had already drawn the conclusion that Arab violence had caused the British to renege on the Balfour declaration, and that only violence could now establish *Eretz Israel*.

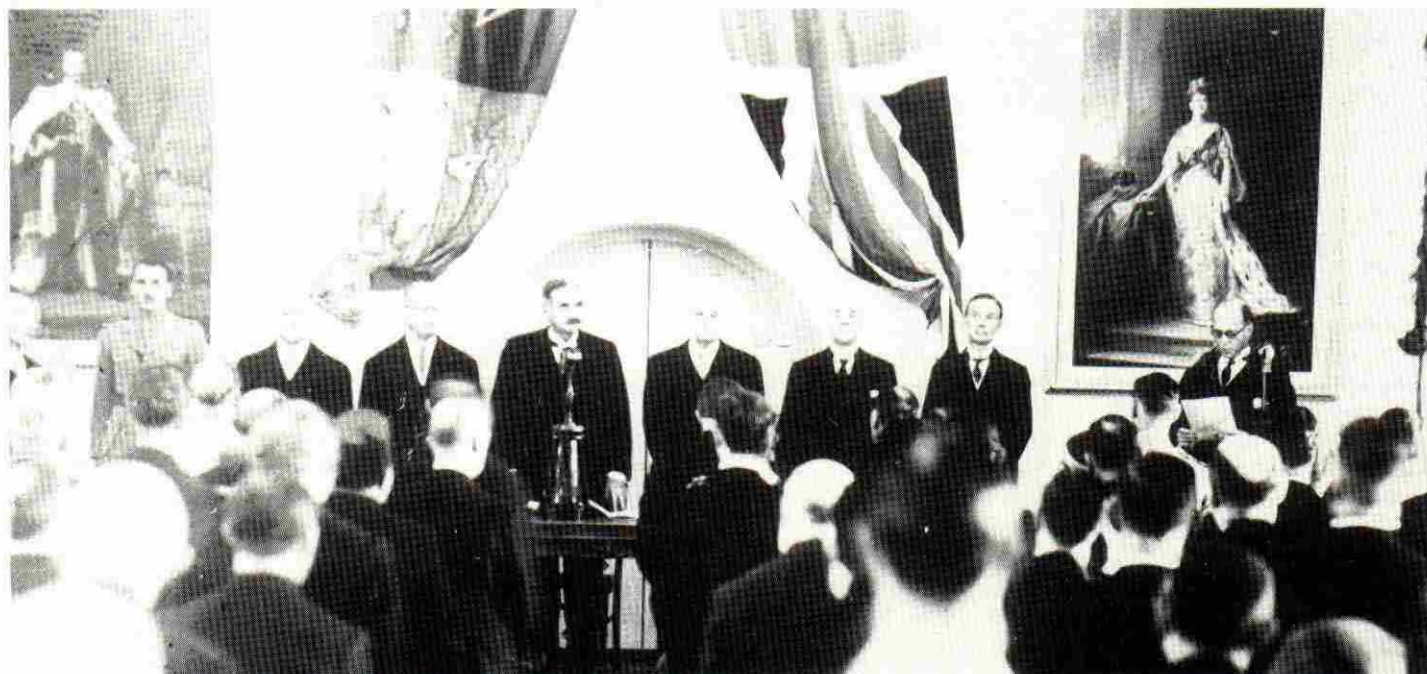
Well might Major-General Ironside, visiting Palestine in October, report that 'civil government has completely broken down, and civil administration is only in operation to a limited extent in certain towns'. He held that because civil administration 'restricts and causes delay to immediate action by troops so essential to dealing with any rebellion', 'any form of civil administration is unsuitable for an emergency such as this, and military control must be intro-

villages suspected of harbouring guerrilla fighters, were the only way of restoring control, and civil officials who saw such punishments as immoral when the government could not guarantee to protect villagers from intimidation. Haining privately accused the 'civil obstructionists' of watering down military measures and passing the buck for unpopular policies to the army. He regarded collective punishments as 'the only method of impressing the peaceful but terrorised majority that failure to assist law and order may in the long run be more unpleasant than submitting to intimidation'.

In the winter of 1938-39 a somewhat murky compromise, akin to the

Good intentions; the Royal Commission, set up by the British Government to investigate the troubles, meeting in Jerusalem in November 1936.

doubtedly went unreported, but in 1939 at least it seems to have had a cumulative effect in isolating and breaking up the guerrilla bands. The use of Arab hostages ('minesweepers' in unofficial military parlance) immunised military patrols and convoys against rebel mines. The most striking successes were achieved by one of the army's most unconventional officers, Orde Wingate, who established the Special Night Squad, the only specialised counter-insurgency force then in existence. It was an odd and potentially explosive mixture of British army volunteers and members of the Jewish Agency's unofficial army, the *Hagana*, described none too decorously by the senior RAF officer in Palestine, Arthur Harris, as 'local toughs'. They were able to tap sources of information previously unreachable by the



duced and the country administered by a military governor'. It was a familiar military contention, driven by exasperation rather than ambition. As a War Office representative, Colonel Robert Haining had protested to the Colonial Office mandarins in 1936 that as long as the High Commissioner remained the arbiter of public safety, effective military action would be stymied. Now he succeeded Wavell as Commander-in-Chief. He was given greatly increased powers, including operational control over the police. But he still believed that friction between the military and civil authorities was a crippling handicap.

There was a straightforward conflict of view between soldiers who believed that drastic measures, including collective punishments on

Jaffa demolitions of 1936, was reached. The military were given a more or less free hand, but no open avowal of military rule was made. Formal emergency powers rested with the High Commissioner, codified in a sequence of Defence Regulations which were to continue in force through the Jewish insurgency after the Second World War and, indeed, have continued to be used by Israel in the 'occupied territories' since 1967. As during the *intifada* which broke out there in the winter of 1987, the army was left to find a rough-and-ready way of putting pressure on an alienated population. Some of the means were very rough; collective punishments often bore the hallmark of reprisals and involved, as now, casual brutality beyond official control. Much military violence un-

security forces, though their activities were suspected of straying across the fine line between prevention and pre-emption or counter-terrorism.

The impact of the SNS was considerable, but it was necessarily limited. General military pressure gradually broke up the larger guerrilla bands, though the smaller remnants proved much harder to eliminate. Many non-military observers thought that the rebellion died out largely because of the political concessions made in the 1939 White Paper which set final limits to Jewish immigration into Palestine. The appearance of 'peace bands' recruited from pro-government villagers around this time signalled the fracturing of the precarious Arab unity which had made a deep impression on the British Cabinet. The White Paper was



Night moves; Wingate's irregular Jewish fighters with (second from right) their British instructor – a successful but controversial response to the Arab insurgency.

certainly a dramatic policy shift, since it promised majority – therefore Arab – self-government after five years. Britain's attempt to justify at the League of Nations this redefinition of the Mandate involved recognising the rebellion as an upsurge of national consciousness: as the Colonial Secretary put it to the League's Permanent Mandates Committee,

'large numbers of Arabs have shown themselves prepared to lay down their lives in defence of their people'.

Major-General Bernard Montgomery, then a divisional commander in north Palestine, vigorously opposed this view. In his eyes the rebels remained mere gangs of criminals, professional bandits not national fighters; the agitation was the work of a

few 'young hotheads', while the majority of the people were 'in no way anti-British'. He believed that the authorities could win back the people by making clear that they would 'get a fair deal from us but be killed if they rebel'. The cardinal failure of the Palestine government was its inability to follow this simple policy. For all its attractive lack of complexity, this interpretation was probably wrong. Montgomery would have a second chance to test it, during the Jewish insurgency after 1945, when it looked even more inadequate. This, however, could provide little comfort to the civil government, faced with the wreck of the hopes and promises on which the Mandate had been founded.

FOR FURTHER READING:

J.S. Migdal, ed., *Palestinian Society and Politics* (Princeton University Press, 1980); A.M. Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine 1917-1939: the Frustration of a Nationalist Movement* (Cornell University Press, 1979); Y. Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: from Politics to Rebellion 1929-1939* (Frank Cass, 1977); N. Bethell, *The Palestine Triangle: the Struggle for the Holy Land 1935-48* (Putnam, 1979); M.J. Cohen, *Palestine: Retreat from the Mandate. The Making of British Policy 1936-45* (Elek, 1978); P. Mattar, *The Mufti of Jerusalem, Al-Hajj Amin al-Husseini and the Palestinian National Movement* (Columbia University Press, 1988); Charles Townshend, *Britain's Civil Wars: counter-insurgency in the Twentieth century* (Faber & Faber, 1986).

A rare glimpse of the actual insurgents – a group of Nur Ibrahim's fighters near Haifa (a photograph found on his body by a British ambush patrol).

