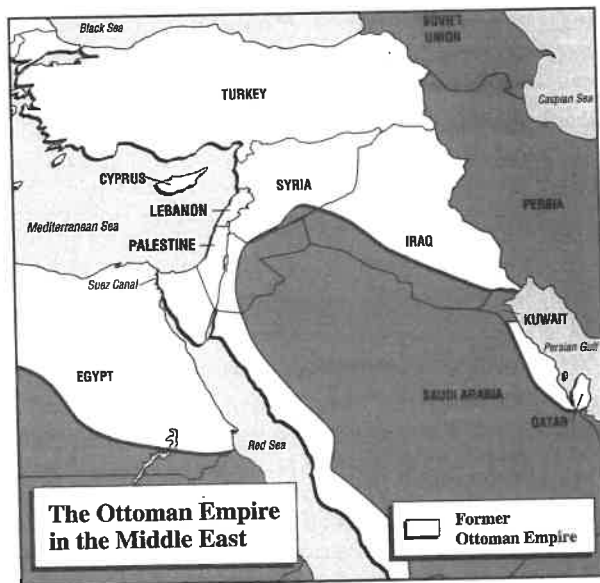


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## Roots of the Conflict

AT THE TURN of the century, most of the Arab Middle East was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, which was nearing collapse. Compared to western European nations, the Ottoman Empire was backward and undeveloped, and lacked modern industry. The European states of Great Britain, Germany, France, and Russia looked greedily at the fading empire. All these nations had important



trading interests in the Middle East and Far East, and they hoped to expand their military and economic power by taking control of the Ottoman Empire. Great Britain was especially interested in the Middle East because it was so near Britain's most prized possession, India. Both France and Britain had already gained control of regions around the Suez Canal, an important shipping passage that halved the time required to transport goods to Europe from the Far East. These two nations would play an important role in the conflict that was brewing between Arabs and Jews.



### Zionism

For centuries, the Jewish people had a religious and cultural identity but no formalized nation. Throughout the centuries, they had been subject to persecution and to anti-Semitism (discrimination based on their identity as Jews), especially in Europe. They had been kept on the margins of society, refused the right to practice many trades and professions. They had been the target of pogroms (organized massacres and persecutions) in which tens of thousands had been murdered. They had been driven from their homes and their property had been confiscated.

In response to these circumstances, a Hungarian newspaperman named Theodor Herzl founded a movement called Zionism in the late 1800s. Herzl was convinced that the only way for Jews to be safe from anti-Semitism was to live in a Jewish state. He and his followers believed the Jewish state should be located in the ancient Promised Land of Palestine. Zionist leaders adopted this position in the platform of their 1897 congress: "The aim of Zionism is to create for the Jewish people a home in Palestine secured by public law."

A small minority of Jews had been living in Palestine for centuries, but now European Jews began immigrating

*Theodor Herzl founded the Zionist movement in the late 1800s. Zionists hoped to establish an independent Jewish state in Palestine.*

to the area. They bought land and established farms and settlements. Following World War I, this immigration increased, causing serious conflicts.

The majority of people inhabiting Palestine were Arabs who resented the influx of Jewish settlers. In 1918, Arabs in Palestine numbered about seven hundred thousand. Only fifty-six thousand were Jews. Arabs were concerned that the influx of Jews would derail their own plans for an independent Arab state. The Arabs had been under Ottoman rule for centuries, and like the Jews, wanted a state under their own political control. Both the Arabs and the Jews hoped to make Palestine the site of their independent states. Palestine would soon become a battleground of these conflicting interests as the world powers moved toward war.

### World War I

When World War I broke out, Great Britain exploited the enmity between the Arabs and the Ottoman Turks by enlisting the Arabs as allies in its fight against the Ottoman Turks. In 1915, in return for an Arab rebellion against the Turks, Britain agreed to support an independent Arab state that would encompass the land from the Persian Gulf westward to the Mediterranean. In a letter to Sharif Hussein, the Arab ruler of the holy city of Mecca, British official Sir Henry McMahon wrote: "Great Britain is prepared to recognize and support the independence of the Arabs in all regions within the limits demanded by the Sharif of Mecca."

McMahon's promise later became a source of controversy, with the British claiming that they did not intend the region of Palestine to be included in their promise. The confusion over what land was promised to the Arabs was further complicated by a document called the Balfour Declaration. In 1917 another British official, Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour, promised Britain's Lord Rothschild, member of the Zionist Federation, that

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 the existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.

Thus, the British seemed to be making two mutually exclusive promises. The British desire to support a Jewish homeland may have been motivated by anti-Semitism in Britain. Jewish refugees were migrating to England to escape increasing persecution in eastern Europe. By the end of the nineteenth century, Londoners were rioting and demonstrating against the Jewish refugees. Whatever Britain's motives, the Balfour Declaration became a source of hope for Zionists throughout the world and a source of anger and frustration for Arabs in Palestine and other areas of the Middle East.

The Arabs insisted that Palestine was part of the land promised to them. When they complained to the British, they were told that Jewish settlement in Palestine would be allowed only "insofar as would be consistent with the . . . freedom of the Arab population." The British seemed

*European Jews heeded the Zionist philosophy and immigrated to Palestine in the early 1900s. These pioneers established Jewish settlements and farms, which opened the floodgates for other Jews eager to find refuge in Palestine.*



to be assuring the Arabs that the British would honor their commitment to independent Arab states.

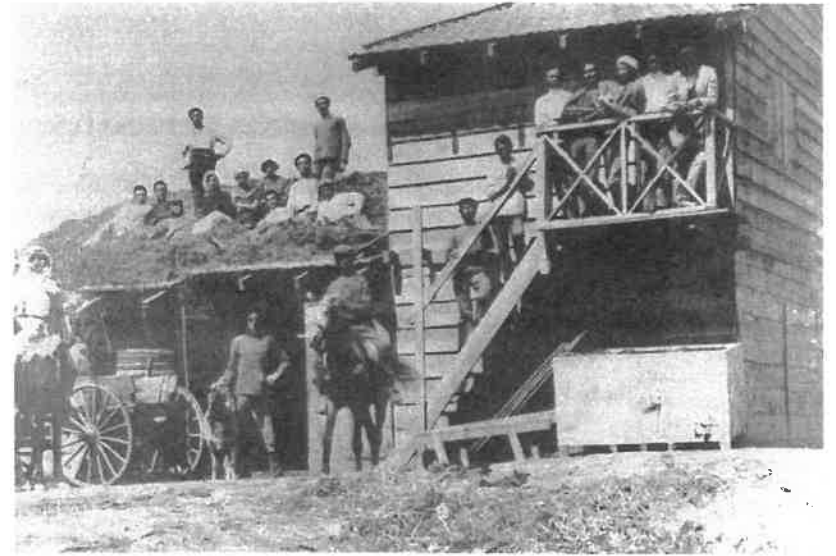
### The British Rule

At the end of the war in 1918, the League of Nations granted Great Britain the right to rule Palestine and Iraq, and France the right to rule Syria and Lebanon. The British divided Palestine into two parts: The area east of the Jordan River was called Transjordan (now Jordan), where the British installed an Arab ruler. The balance of Palestine was retained under British rule, with the intention of creating a Jewish homeland. To Arab nationalists—those seeking an independent Arab nation—this League of Nations arrangement simply exchanged one foreign ruler (the Ottomans) for another (the British and French). Arab nationalists wanted to bring all Arab regions under Arab rule, including Palestine, where Zionist settlers were seen as one more foreign influence that ruled Arab lands.

Thus two opposing forces were sharply divided—Arabs who wanted an independent Arab state that included Palestine and who were by far the largest percentage of the population in Palestine, and Jews who had been promised an independent Jewish state in the area of Palestine. Although it was the intent of the foreign powers, Britain and France, to create several independent Arab states plus one independent Jewish state, the Arabs believed that they were entitled to all of the land. Further, they believed that the region of Palestine had been promised to them as part of their agreement to fight against the Turks.

### Tensions grow

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Jews continued to settle in Palestine in greater numbers. Jewish settlers bought farmland from absentee Arab owners and set up independent farming settlements called kibbutzim, often displacing Arab farmers who rented the land from its previous Arab owners. This new wave of immigrants was more militant than earlier Jewish settlers. Many believed they



should use force against the Arabs if necessary to establish a Jewish majority in Palestine. When in 1921 riots between Jews and Arabs killed 120 Arabs and 200 Jews, the Zionists organized a militia, the Haganah (Hebrew for “defense”). As the number of Jewish settlers and their landholdings increased, Arabs grew increasingly angry and frustrated. By 1929 more than 150,000 Jews lived in Palestine. That year the Jewish National Fund bought land in Palestine, evicting about 2,500 Arab farmers. The resulting Arab riots in Jerusalem and Hebron were put down by the British, but the British refused to halt Jewish immigration and land acquisition. The British did allow Iraq to gain its independence in 1932, but tensions in the region continued to grow.

In 1936 a full-scale Arab rebellion broke out. Armed bands of Arabs from Palestine, joined by Arab volunteers from Syria and Iraq, attacked both the British and the Jews. Finally, a British Royal Commission investigated the grievances of the Arabs and found that the conflict

*Founders of Degania, Palestine's first kibbutz, pose for a photograph at their primitive farming settlement. Arab farmers were often displaced when Jewish settlers purchased land to build their kibbutzim.*

inspired all Arabs with the hope of reviving in a free and united Arab world the traditions of the Arab golden age. The Jews similarly are inspired by their historic past. They mean to show what the Jewish nation can achieve when restored to the land of its birth. National assimilation between Arabs and Jews is thus ruled out.

Having decided that Jews and Arabs could not share the same land peacefully, the commission recommended partition—dividing the region of Palestine into an Arab state and a Jewish state. The Zionists accepted the idea, but the Arabs rejected it.

The Arab rebellion against the British was not put down until 1938, after 101 British soldiers, 463 Jews, and an estimated 5,000 Arabs had been killed and the commission's plan for partition had been dropped. An uneasy quiet followed.

*Palestinian snipers are arrested and taken into custody by British police officers during the 1938 Arab rebellion. Arabs used sniping to protest both the British rule and Jewish immigration.*



## World War II

By 1939 it was clear that war in Europe was again imminent. Keeping peace in Palestine meant a large commitment of British troops, something the British could not afford while fighting a war. Further, the British wanted to avoid antagonizing other Arab states who might support Germany. After a failed attempt to negotiate peace between the Arabs and Jews in Palestine, Britain decided to back down on the promises it made in the Balfour Declaration of a Jewish state in Palestine. In 1939, Britain issued a government policy statement declaring 1) that Palestine would not be a Jewish state, 2) that Jewish immigration to Palestine would be strictly limited, and 3) that Jewish immigration would be stopped completely after five years. The British further announced that in ten years they would create an independent state of Palestine as a whole, with Jews and Arabs enjoying equal rights.

The Zionists saw the British declaration as a betrayal. Limiting Jewish immigration meant that Jews would remain a small minority in an Arab-controlled Palestine. The Jews would still be at the mercy of a non-Jewish government and a non-Jewish majority population—a condition that had existed in Europe for centuries.

Nevertheless, the Palestinian Jews fought alongside the British against the Nazis. By 1944 the Nazi defeat was inevitable, and the Jews were ready to again take up their fight for a Jewish state. Menachem Begin, who was then the head of a radical underground military group called the Irgun, an offshoot of the Haganah, called for an end to British occupation of Palestine:

There is no longer any armistice between the Jewish people and the British Administration in [the land of Israel] which hands our brothers over to Hitler. . . . This, then is our demand: immediate transfer of power in Eretz Israel to a Provisional Hebrew government.