

Britain in Palestine – 100 years of intervention



For centuries Palestine was part of the Ottoman Empire, which comprised most of the Middle East and North Africa. Its rural population lived in hundreds of small towns and villages, producing olive oil, fruit, cereals, cotton, wool, leather and soap, while cities like Jerusalem, Nablus, Hebron and Haifa were hubs of trade and the centres of the social and intellectual fabric of Palestinian life. Palestinians were guardians of many of the holy places in Jerusalem and Bethlehem.



Harvesting oranges in Jaffa

Although the Palestinians had demanded their independence from the Ottoman Empire throughout the nineteenth century, their calls became stronger and more organised from the very beginning of the twentieth century. In 1908 Palestinian newspapers voiced their call for recognition of their rights and opposition to Zionist colonisation of Palestine.¹

Whilst Jews in Europe, especially in Poland and Russia, faced murderous pogroms, the Middle East had long been a place where they had lived side by side with other ethnic and religious groups. In Palestine, by the onset of the First World War Muslims formed about 84%, Christians about 11% and Jews less than 6% of the population.

Britain, France and the Balfour Declaration

As the Ottoman Empire weakened, Britain and France discussed how its lands might be divided: the secret **Sykes-Picot Agreement**, signed in **1916**, determined Britain should take most of Palestine, Jordan, Iraq and the Gulf, to safeguard sea routes to its colonial possessions and the overland route of a planned oil pipeline from Iraq to the port of Haifa. Britain was especially concerned to control the Suez Canal, the vital link to its colonies in India and East Africa.

At the same time Britain was promising Arab leaders complete autonomy after the war if they rebelled against the Turks, who were supporting Germany. Britain guaranteed:

“the complete and final liberation of the peoples who have for so long been oppressed by the Turks, and the setting up of national governments and administrations deriving their authority from the free exercise of the initiative and choice of the indigenous populations.”²

The Arabs agreed, and helped to effect an allied victory. However, when the war was going badly in 1917, the British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour wrote to leading British Zionists in the hopes of securing Jewish support for the allies, especially in the US. He had been strongly influenced in this by Chaim Weizmann, a Russian Jew who came to Britain in 1904 and who became a leading figure in the Zionist movement. The letter, which became known as the **Balfour Declaration**, made a promise which was to form the basis of future British policy in the region:

*“His Majesty’s government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, **it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.**” (Emphasis added)*

Neither the rights of the indigenous people of the region nor the promises made to Arab leaders were to be respected.

Dividing the spoils

In 1917 Britain invaded and occupied Palestine and with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War its territory was duly divided between France

and Britain. In 1920 Britain consolidated its occupation by extracting from the newly formed League of Nations a Mandate to rule Palestine. The Mandate included the commitments given in the Balfour Declaration. In theory, therefore, the British were committed to “safeguarding the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine”; but Weizmann was clear that “Palestine should be as Jewish as England is English”.³

Deeply suspicious of British intentions and witnessing the special privileges being allowed to Zionist immigrants (the first High Commissioner, Herbert Samuel, was a Zionist Jew), the Palestinians objected strongly to the new regime and tensions mounted between them and the British and the growing influx of Zionist settlers.

Repression and resistance

The essentially colonial administration of Palestine was funded from taxes paid by the indigenous population, with only the military presence being funded by the British. There were municipal elections but Palestinians were denied the right to self-determination.

British government policies favoured the expansion of colonial settlements and promoted companies which supported the Zionist goal. Palestinian farmers were increasingly being evicted as absentee landlords profited by selling their lands to Zionists. Zionist organisations like the Histadrut campaigned against the employment of Palestinian workers by Jewish employers. Increasingly, new Palestinian political parties and the embryonic trade unions organised boycotts, non-cooperation and demonstrations against the British administration and Zionist influence.



The British disperse a demonstration, Jaffa 1933

The British-organised Palestine Police Force often had difficulty in containing the demonstrations and riots that took place in the major cities. The holy sites in Jerusalem were particular flash-points. At one demonstration in Jaffa 26 Palestinians and one policeman were killed.

In a famous speech in the House of Commons in 1930 Herbert Samuel actually spoke up against the increasingly aggressive policies of the Zionists in Palestine:

“The Jews themselves have suffered through centuries from oppression and it is inconceivable that they should have learnt nothing from that oppression except how to inflict it, and that they should apply to others the injustices which they have abhorred in their own history.”

Such sentiments cut little ice either with the British or with the Zionist leaders.

The ‘Arab Uprising’ and British clamp-down

With the rise of Nazism in Germany in the 1930s Jewish immigration to Palestine rose sharply, as countries around the world, including Canada, Australia, the US and in Europe, were reluctant to welcome the refugees fleeing fascism. The massive influx of immigrants exacerbated Palestinian fears that their national aspirations would be denied. A six-month General Strike in 1936 led to the Arab Uprising: rebels blocked roads and attacked police stations and the British lost control of whole areas of the country.

The British forces arrested and imprisoned or deported nationalist leaders and in 1937 martial law was imposed. The penalty for possessing arms was death by hanging – a price paid by 112 Palestinians. When by 1938 most of the country – including Jerusalem – was deemed by the British forces to be in rebel hands, General Montgomery was brought in with 25,000 additional troops.

He introduced the use of Palestinian ‘human shields’ to counter the rebels’ use of mines and operated a policy of collective punishment.

By 1939 there were 9,000 Palestinians in detention camps and the British army was using increasingly brutal methods, including torture, looting and dynamiting Palestinian homes. (An estimated 2,000 homes were destroyed in this way between 1936 and 1940.) Jewish settlers sometimes joined in these activities. By the end of the Uprising 5,000 Palestinians had been killed and the political leadership decimated.



Poster published in the 1930s by the Tourist Association of Palestine, a Zionist development agency

A people apart

The Jewish National Fund was set up in 1903 to buy land for Jewish settlers and helped establish collective farms and kibbutzim. Under the patronage of the British, in particular from the 1920s onwards, the Jewish community organised itself as a semi-autonomous entity with its own economic, educational and political structures, with the Jewish Agency in overall control. (The foreign affairs department had its headquarters in London.)

Israeli activist Uri Avnery recalls:

"...it was like a state within a state; a government within a government; there was a very strong national discipline – and very strong national institutions that could impose their will on anyone here, because they were in complete control of the labour market, of the health system."

Tel Aviv was founded as a Jewish city next to Jaffa. Haifa and Jerusalem also attracted large numbers of immigrants, most of whom were from urban backgrounds in Europe. The Zionist segregationist policy of employing only Jewish labour meant that contact between Jews and Palestinians was limited and the scope for tension and friction considerable.

Zionists against Britain

Faced with a polarising situation provoked by Zionist separatism the British government tried to construct a solution that would allow it to extricate itself from Palestine. Various proposals to divide the country were put forward; none of them recognised the right of the Palestinians to self-determination and all implied seizing Palestinian lands and expelling their inhabitants. Britain



Bombing of the King David Hotel

had attempted to assuage Palestinian fears by promising to limit Jewish immigration and the acquisition of land, but this was vehemently opposed by the Zionist leadership and paramilitary groups.

The Hagana, a secret militia, had been set up when the British Mandate was established. The Irgun was formed in 1936, partly as a response to the Arab Uprising. It was responsible for over 400 Palestinian deaths in the run-up to the Nakba or 'War of Independence', as the Zionists saw it. But most attacks were, in the latter part of the Mandate, directed against the British. The most notorious incident was the bombing of the British headquarters in the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1946 in which 91 people were killed and 46 injured – mainly civilians.

The aftermath of the Second World War brought shiploads of Jewish refugees to Palestine; some were turned away by the British, some allowed entry, some ended up in detention camps in Cyprus or elsewhere. The Jewish Agency fought hard to alert the world to the plight of the refugees, and was backed by the Americans (although they opposed Jewish immigration to the US).

Partition

Exhausted and impoverished by the Second World War and unable to resolve a conflict of its own making, Britain sought an escape route from its responsibilities in Palestine.

The newly established United Nations – largely western powers, as so many nations were yet to emerge from their colonial status – was approached by Britain in 1947. After sending a Special Committee to the region, the UN came up with a partition plan that gave the minority Jewish population (by this time about a third of the total), more than half the territory, although they owned only 6% of the land. After feverish lobbying, threats and bribery at the UN, the plan was passed in November 1947, by a narrow majority. The British announced they would leave Palestine in May 1948.

The Zionist leadership had for years planned the wholesale 'transfer' of the indigenous population. Joseph Weitz, head of the Zionist Transfer Committee [sic] wrote in 1940: *'There is no room for both peoples in this country [...] The only solution is Eretz Israel, without Arabs... We must not leave a single village, a single tribe'*, while in 1941 Ben-Gurion stated clearly: *'It is impossible to imagine general evacuation without compulsion, and brutal compulsion'*.

Withdrawal

The withdrawal by the British turned out to be shambolic. The Palestinian population was unprepared and the League of Arab States was in disarray. Behind the backs of the Palestinians, King Abdullah of Jordan had entered into a secret agreement with Zionist leaders and Britain to carve up Palestine after the British had left: he would take the West Bank and leave the rest to the newly formed Jewish state.

The Palestinians had been virtually disarmed by the British, whereas members of the Hagana had trained and worked with the British army during the war and a supply of arms had been established from Europe, including fighter aircraft from Czechoslovakia.⁴

In the disastrous Suez campaign of 1956 Britain formed an alliance with France and Israel to regain Western control of the Suez Canal and to remove Nasser from power in Egypt.

In the 1950s and 1960s both Britain and France contributed to Israel's development of nuclear weapons.

Britain is currently engaged in a lucrative arms trade with Israel, and promotes Israel's ever-closer economic ties with the EU and military involvement with NATO.

All people of conscience, and especially British citizens, have an obligation to the people of Palestine to recognise the injustices they have suffered and to work for reparation.



Refugees in 1948

The 'Dalet' Plan, exposed by Israeli historians as a blueprint for ethnic cleansing, was put into operation.⁵ Massacres were carried out at Tantura, Safad, Deir Yassin and numerous other Palestinian towns. The British did nothing whilst these atrocities took place, focusing on evacuation of their forces with minimal losses.

What you can do:

- Ensure your MP and MEP are informed on the issues
- Express your views to the media
- Join PSC and get involved in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign

For further details of the Nakba and the fate of the Palestinian refugees, and the development of Israel's weapons of mass destruction, see other PSC fact sheets, available online:
www.palestinecampaign.org

Continuing support

Practically all subsequent British governments have tacitly or openly supported Israel's policies of continuing expansion and dispossession of the indigenous population.

PSC is indebted to the work of Karl Sabbagh, Anne Lineen and others in mounting the exhibition 'Britain in Palestine' in London 2012; see the book of that name, Skyscraper Publications 2012.

1 Muhammad Y. Muslih, *The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p.78.
 2 The Anglo-French Declaration, November 7, 1918
 3 The Paris Peace Conference, 1919.
 4 Israeli Fighter Squadron History: <http://101squadron.com/101real/spitfires.html>
 5 Ilan Pappé: *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, 2006

Get involved!

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