



## The Development of Zionism Until the Founding of the State of Israel

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**This article traces the history of European-shaped Zionism during and after the First World War until the founding of Israel in 1948. Its primary aim is to show how the emerging project of the Jewish settlement of Palestine could withstand external and internal difficulties both under the British mandate and in the shadow of Nazism. From the beginning, political Zionism has been characterized by a triad of controversial partition plans, recurring "civil wars" and terrorism. This constellation gives an idea of why the State of Israel – regardless of some diplomatic successes – has failed, especially in the Middle East, to achieve lasting legitimacy either in a historical-political sense or according to international law.**

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Jewish Palestine at the Beginning of the First World War

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### Jewish Palestine at the Beginning of the First World War

Compared to the more than two million Eastern-European Jewish immigrants who had reached the North American continent since the 1890s, the Jewish immigration to Palestine, which was at the time part of the Ottoman province of Damascus, was at first quite modest. Between 1882 and 1903, the period of the first Zionist immigration wave, about 20,000 to 30,000 people came to the country located between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River, called the "Holy Land" in the European Christian Occident. If the first *Aliyah*<sup>[1]</sup> was still largely dominated by the economic interplay between private capitalist plantation owners and Arab agricultural workers, the second *Aliyah* (1904–1914) took place in the context of completely different ideological conditions: many of the approximately 35,000–40,000 immigrants were motivated by a romantic blend of Zionist and socialist ideas. Among the leading anti-capitalist thinkers of this Jewish labour movement were such diverse protagonists as Ber Borochov (1881–1917)<sup>[2]</sup>, co-founder of the Russian Jewish Social Democratic Labour Party in Palestine (*Poale Zion*), and the eco-religious socialist Aharon David Gordon (1856–1922)<sup>[3]</sup> who was a follower of the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) and focused on the practical aspects of Zionism. Disappointed by the failed Russian revolution of 1905–1907, which did not put an end to the bloody pogroms, immigrants, especially those that came from the petty-bourgeois milieu of the Eastern European Jewries, were particularly open to the ideas of Zionism. With the kind of determination only imaginable in a conflict charged with utopian and revolutionary zeal, the young pioneers (*halutzim*) began with Palestine's agricultural development. Their goal was to "normalize" the social structure of the Jewish community so that the Jews would become a people like any other. Under the slogan "conquest of labour", the development of cooperative production and marketing structures – in particular the establishment of collective farming villages (*kibbutzim*) – formed the economic basis of socialist Zionism in Palestine. Since the pioneers worked as a co-operative on the lands acquired systematically by the Jewish National Fund since 1909, they managed to avoid any form of the disdained capitalist wage labour (and especially the cheaper Arab wage labour).

Between 1904 and 1914, the number of Jewish settlers and settlements doubled, although some of the immigrants left the country again or moved on to America given the difficult economic and sanitary conditions. The vast majority of the Jewish diaspora in Europe and America initially showed little interest in the Zionist project. Not Jewish nationalism and Zionism constituted the intellectual points of reference for the contemporary and increasingly secular cultural Judaism, but rather assimilation and integration into the respective nation states. On the other hand, private investors put 100 million francs into backward Palestine in this period, although lucrative financial opportunities in Palestine were as yet very rare. At the same time, small industrial enterprises and construction companies grew around the cooperative settlements. In 1908, the World Zionist Organization (WZO) set up a so-called Palestine Office under the leadership of Arthur Ruppin (1876–1943). Between 1907 and 1912, ambitious plans were undertaken by the German-Jewish

philanthropist Paul Nathan (1857–1927), director of the non-Zionist *Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden* (Aid Society of German Jews), for building a technological institute (Technion) in Haifa.<sup>[4]</sup> The seriousness of the immigrants' aim to "return" to the land of their forefathers was demonstrated in 1909 on the dunes of the Mediterranean, as the city of Tel Aviv ("Spring Mound") was born – it was the first Jewish establishment of an urban centre in the modern era.

### The First World War and the Balfour Declaration of 1917

When the Ottoman Empire took the side of Germany and Austria-Hungary at an early stage of the First World War (29 October 1914), the struggle between the major powers for hegemony in the Middle East came to a head. Contrary to expectations, the Ottoman Empire (the "sick man of Europe") did not fall apart, but rather – with German support – pushed on to the Suez Canal. In this situation, Great Britain employed a dual strategy by feeding the hopes of both Jewish-Zionist and Arab aspirations. To encourage the Arabs to revolt against the Turkish Sultan, the high commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry Arthur McMahon (1862–1949), sent a letter in 1915 to the Sharif of Hejaz and Mecca, H<sup>?</sup>usayn ibn Ali (1853–1931). In it, the British promised the independence of the eastern Arab territories as part of a great Arab empire, once the Ottoman Empire was destroyed. "Von Palästina war freilich nicht ausdrücklich – oder ausdrücklich nicht? – die Rede gewesen."<sup>[5]</sup> It is thus still disputed today whether the "not purely Arab district(s)" in the west indicated in McMahon's letter, which were excluded from his promise, included Palestine. Despite the letter's pro-Arab rhetoric – but also contrary to the pro-Zionist Balfour Declaration of 1917<sup>[6]</sup> – Great Britain and France continued to collude in old-colonial style, leading to the so-called Sykes-Picot Agreement (16 May 1916). In it they divided up the territories from what is now Iraq, Syria, Jordan and Palestine that were promised to the Arabs into spheres of influence. The core areas of Palestine with the holy sites of Christianity were supposed to be internationalized.

The Russian origins of many Jewish immigrants provided the Turkish authorities with a pretext to bully these "enemy foreigners". Many of the approximately 18,000 expelled Jews sought refuge in the US, including the Zionist activists David Ben-Gurion (1886–1973) and Yitzhak Ben-Zvi (1884–1963) of the Poale Zion party. Even immigrants of Austrian origin suffered reprisals, having to perform forced labour in railroad construction. They were also effectively compelled to give up their horses and grain. A subsequent plague of locusts soon led to a famine.

The Ottoman pressure on immigrants contributed to the radicalization of the Jewish workers in Palestine. A minority faction around Vladimir Zeev Jabotinsky (1880–1940) and Joseph Trumpeldor (1880–1920) sympathized with terrorist forms of resistance and established, more or less covertly, a Jewish Legion. In the US, Ben-Gurion and Ben-Zvi lobbied for such an organization, but the British army was reluctant to accept the idea, and it was not until 1917 that the British government allowed the formation of a "first Jewish regiment", wearing a menorah (a seven-branched candelabrum) as its ensign.

The majority of workers responded to the Turkish reprisals "Zionistically", that is by practicing what Borochof defined in 1918 as practical Zionism: "Schafft Tatsachen, ... – das ist der Grundstein politischer Weisheit. Tatsachen überzeugen besser als Gedanken. Taten wirken nachhaltiger als Losungen. Opfer haben eine größere Werbekraft als Resolutionen. ... Ein gefallener Wächter hat an der Verwirklichung des Zionismus einen größeren Anteil als alle unsere Deklarationen."<sup>[7]</sup>

If the American Jews showed little interest or sympathy for Zionism before the war, the pogroms in Eastern Europe and Palestine awakened their solidarity and compassion. The International Actions Committee formed by Shmarya Levin (1867–1935) succeeded in acquiring Louis Dembitz Brandeis (1856–1941), a popular Jewish anti-corruption lawyer, as president. After US President Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924) had appointed the secular Brandeis Associate Justice of the Supreme Court in 1916, Brandeis intervened successfully in Constantinople and Berlin in favour of the Palestinian Jews. The Central Powers now began to have a moderating influence on the Turkish government.

The activists of the WZO and other Zionist "committees" solicited both the German and Austrian governments as well as those of the Entente Powers to support their territorial aspirations in Palestine. The German-Zionist circle under Max Bodenheimer (1865–1940) even went one step further by openly taking sides with the Central Powers. They placed their hopes in the liberation of the Russian Jews. With this stance, they were in conformity with the general attitude of German Jews, but the worldwide Zionist movement adopted a neutral position that was largely inspired by Max Nordau (1849–1923), who, as an "enemy Austrian", had been forced to leave Paris for Madrid.

During the war, the long-standing Zionist activist Chaim Weizmann (1874–1952), a chemist from Belarus, became a figurehead of Zionism in Great Britain. Weizmann, who began his scientific career in 1904 at the University of Manchester and attracted attention among the British political elites with new war-related chemical techniques, proceeded more determinedly and more systematically than his German Zionist counterparts. As early as 1907, he had campaigned at the Eighth Zionist Congress in The Hague for a combination of political and practical Zionism. Because he brought together political and diplomatic activities with the practical work of colonization in Palestine, his "synthetic Zionism" was widely embraced in the movement. Weizmann's ability to make Zionist interests compatible with Great Britain's imperialist foreign policy was especially effective. He had tried to win over Charles Prestwich Scott (1846–1932), editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, as early as 1915: "The Jews take over the country; the whole burden of organization falls on them, but for the next ten or fifteen years they work under a temporary British protectorate."<sup>[8]</sup> Weizmann became the leader of a network that included, among others, Lord Walter Rothschild (1868–1937), famous banker, zoologist and liberal politician, who was for some time also the president of the English Zionist Federation. In this way Zionism was accepted in British aristocratic circles by the second half of the war at the latest, and even became a popular topic of conversation.

Over the course of several months of informal negotiations with British officials – foremost among them the Secretary General of the War Cabinet, Mark Sykes (1879–1919) – Weizmann pushed for British recognition of the Zionist aspirations. His formula for a British declaration of sympathy contained the phrase "Reestablishment of Palestine as *the* national home for the Jewish people". In return, the British would be entrusted with the protectorate of Palestine as successors of the Turks, also driving back the French influence sanctioned by the Sykes-Picot agreement. The representatives of the assimilated British Jews presented difficulties for Weizmann. Although they had no objection in principle to the Zionist project, they rejected any formulation that implied the recognition of a Jewish "nation". The British government's representatives thus urged reducing the historical-metaphysical contention – "Reestablishment of Palestine as *the* national home" – to the more modest and pragmatic "establishment of Palestine as a national home". As a result of the negotiations, Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour (1848–1930) wrote to Walter Rothschild on 2 November 1917 the famous letter that went down in history as the "Balfour Declaration":

Dear Lord Rothschild,

I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet. "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." I should be grateful if you would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.<sup>[9]</sup>

Although this declaration was initially little more than a non-binding letter of intent, in regards to international law it constituted the first relevant basis for the Zionist project in Palestine. Contrary to a pervasive misunderstanding, the document did not foresee the formation of a state, but rather the creation of a national "home" – while taking into account the rights of non-Jewish communities. Nevertheless, engaged Zionists derived a wide range of interpretations from the declaration:

Ich erklärte, dass wir unter einer jüdischen nationalen Heimstätte die Schaffung solcher Bedingungen in Palästina verstünden, die es uns ermöglichten, 50.000 bis 60.000 Juden jährlich ins Land zu bringen und sie dort anzusiedeln, unsere Institutionen, unsere Schulen und die hebräische Sprache zu entwickeln und schließlich solche Bedingungen zu schaffen, dass Palästina genau so jüdisch sei, wie Amerika amerikanisch und England englisch sei.[\[10\]](#)

### Consolidation and Upswing: the Zionist-Socialist Project Under the British Mandate

On 9 December 1917, British troops marched into Jerusalem under General Edmund Henry Hyndman Allenby (1861–1936). In September 1918, they managed to take the last Ottoman bastions in Palestine. With the British invasion of Palestine and other Arab regions, and in collaboration with French troops, the four-hundred-year reign of the Turks in the Middle East was brought to an end.

At the Paris Peace Conference of January 1919 there was the hope that a Jewish-Arab understanding might be reached. In a treaty of friendship with Chaim Weizmann, Emir Feisal (ca. 1885–1933), a son of Sharif H?usayn of Mecca, accepted the Jewish immigration to Palestine under the direction of a Zionist "entity". Feisal and Weizmann explicitly referred to the Balfour Declaration in their agreement. In a handwritten note, however, Feisal only gave his permission under the condition that Arab independence would be realized in the Arabian Peninsula and Syria.[\[11\]](#)

Nonetheless, because the French insisted on the observance of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, the British withdrew from Lebanon in December 1919 to be immediately replaced by French troops. An explosive atmosphere spread among the Arabs: in March 1920, the "Syrian National Congress" proclaimed Emir Feisal king – on the condition, however, that he distance himself from the agreement with Weizmann. Feisal relented and the Arabs of Palestine were now also hit by a wave of national fervour: they demanded that Palestine should not only not be Jewish, but – just as with Lebanon – it should be integrated into the southern province of Arab Syria. On 4 April 1920, fanatical Muslims invaded the Jewish quarter of Jerusalem with cries of "Death to the Jews!" and "Long live Feisal!" Seven Jews were killed and 200 injured (some seriously) in front of the British soldiers who did nothing to stop the pogrom.

In April 1920, at the Conference of San Remo, the victors of the war prepared a political restructuring of the Middle East that would disappoint Arab expectations: Syria and Lebanon were to become a French "mandate" and already on 20 July 1920, French troops drove King Faisal from Damascus. Great Britain was given control over Palestine – an area which at that time also included what is now Jordan and the Golan Heights – and was also awarded Iraq. The Allies not only incorporated the Balfour Declaration into the peace treaty with Turkey, but also into the League of Nations mandate for Iraq and Palestine, which was transferred to the British on 25 April 1920 by the Supreme Council of the Allies. On 24 July 1922, the Council of the League of Nations officially entrusted the British with the mandate for Palestine, which was to remain in force until the country gained its vaguely anticipated independence.

In 1920, Great Britain sent a "High Commissioner" to Palestine, the Jewish-born liberal politician and diplomat Herbert Louis Samuel (1870–1963). Samuel arrived on 1 July in Jaffa. He was the first Jew to govern Palestine, the historic "Land of Israel", in 2,000 years. From the beginning, he strove to balance the interests of Jews and Arabs. Bloody rioting did in fact break out in Jaffa



between both ethnic groups on 21 May 1921 and 47 Jews were murdered. There were also bloody clashes in Haifa, Hadera, Petah Tikva, Rehovot and Jerusalem – an Arab response to the provocative May demonstrations of socialist Zionists, who, because of their communist-atheist ideas, were perceived by the feudalistic Arabs as social and political troublemakers. Samuel, nevertheless, was fairly successful in easing tensions in the parallel societies of Palestine in the first half of the 1920s. The high commissioner temporarily imposed restrictions on Jewish immigration. He also appointed the radical Islamic religious leader Mohammed Amin al-Husseini (1893–1974) Grand Mufti of Jerusalem.

When Winston Spencer Churchill (1874–1965), then Secretary of State for the Colonies, visited Palestine in 1921, it was his declared intention to protect British interests. On the one hand, Churchill made no secret of his sympathy for Zionism. On the other, he recognized the need to accommodate the Arabs in view of their disappointed political aims. Surprisingly, he proposed the country's partition. In 1922/1923, all areas east of the Jordan river – four-fifths of Palestine – were split off and converted into a semi-autonomous territory under the rule of Emir Abdullah I. (1882–1951), eldest son of H<sup>u</sup>sayn. "Transjordan" remained formally part of Palestine according to the mandate provisions of the League of Nations,<sup>[12]</sup> but politically it was now a quasi-independent entity.<sup>[13]</sup> Another change was introduced by the British in 1923 when they assigned the Golan Heights to the French authorities in Syria. Additionally, the British limited immigration: in a policy statement (Churchill White Paper) from June 1922, they declared that from now on Jewish immigration would be adjusted to the country's economic capacities and that their ultimate goal was to establish a bi-national "Arab-Jewish Palestine".<sup>[14]</sup> At the same time, however, the British affirmed their desire to maintain a policy of Jewish-Arab reconciliation.

The Zionists were disappointed by these developments, as they saw both their historical claims as well as their territorial and demographic hopes dwindle. Last but not least, they were concerned about the long-term prospects of the Jewish "home", which included a secure water supply. The leading pioneers, however, were not discouraged by the new limitations, and instead concentrated their efforts on the consolidation and institutionalization of their project. Already in 1920 they had founded the Jewish Federation of Trade Unions (*Histadrut*). In 1921, in the face of the Arab riots, they called into existence the *Haganah*, an underground military organization that challenged the British monopoly on the use of force. With British approval, culturally minded representatives of the *Yishuv* (the Jewish community in Palestine) founded the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Haifa's Technical University Technion in 1924/1925.

In the third *Aliyah* between 1919 and 1923, about 37,000 Eastern European Jews had poured into the country. Many of them had already been active in their home countries in socialist-Zionist youth organizations: "Der Einwanderer von 1919 war ein Kind des revolutionären Zeitalters und daher wahrscheinlich ungeduldiger, außerdem hatte die Balfour-Deklaration die Verwirklichung des Traumes viel näher gerückt. Er war im Denken radikaler und neigte weniger zu Kompromissen."<sup>[15]</sup> Indeed, this was the last generation of immigrants that wanted to turn Palestine into a model homogeneous socialist society. Many of the pioneers had already acquired agricultural education in Europe in Jewish labour cooperatives. The members of this so-called *Hakhshara* movement were as inspired by socialist concepts as by the ideas of the youth movement. Enthused by the principles of shared property and social equality, the revolutionaries were determined to use their skills for the Jewish-socialist project in Palestine. Among the new immigrants were also the first members of *Hashomer Hatzair* ("The Youth Guard"), a youth movement formed in Galicia that aimed at leading a revolutionary existence, free from familial or other social bonds. Its intellectual mentors were Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), but also Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844–1900) and Martin Buber (1878–1965). In 1930, the *Hashomer Hatzair* counted 34,000 members worldwide and as a leading Jewish youth movement developed the kibbutz idea to its most radical economic and social expression.

With an immigration barrier imposed in 1924 in the US – which was still the preferred destination

for Jewish immigrants at the time – tens of thousands of Polish Jews, who were less influenced by Zionism than by utilitarian aims, flooded into the country in the fourth *Aliyah*. Many wanted to escape the anti-Semitic harassments in Poland and were not idealistic pioneers, but members of the middle class. They proved to be crucial to the *Yishuv*'s industrial, commercial and cultural upsurge. Between 1921 and 1925, Tel Aviv alone swelled from 3,600 to 40,000 inhabitants. At the same time, bourgeois right-wing parties also gained in influence. The revisionists under Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky (1880–1940) and especially their youth organization Beitar, which wanted to "reverse" the British decision concerning the separation of Transjordan, took a hard line against the Arabs. Never again, so their credo went, should Jews be left defenceless against their tormenters.

At a superficial glance, it seemed as though the situation between the Jews and the Arabs would remain quiet. Even when, in 1927, emigration temporarily exceeded immigration during the economic crisis of 1926/1928, nothing occurred to change this state of affairs. But in the autumn of 1928, the Grand Mufti increasingly became a focus of the Arab-Jewish rivalry. The *Yishuv*'s economic recovery caused a growing fear among the Arabs that the Zionist project was here to stay. The Grand Mufti thus instigated violent assaults and Jews praying at the area around the Western Wall of Herod's Temple – the so-called Wailing Wall – were verbally harassed and got stones thrown at them. When Beitar members marched to the Wailing Wall in the summer of 1929, demonstratively waving flags and singing the Zionist anthem *Hatikvah* ("The Hope"), the situation escalated. Just a week later, Muslims and Jews engaged in fierce battles, while the British police backed away from the violence on the street. In Hebron, where a rumour circulated among the Arabs that "the Jews" had taken control of the Islamic holy sites in Jerusalem, Muslims killed 67 men, women and children. The survivors of the massacre, who had partly found refuge with Arab neighbours, abandoned the centuries-old Jewish quarter of Hebron in their hasty retreat from the city.

The Zionist side was shocked by the violence. The revisionists advocated anti-terrorist measures for curbing attacks and maintained that in the long run a Jewish state in Palestine would have to be established no matter what. On the far left of the Zionist spectrum, however, idealistic academics and left-wing socialists founded an "alliance of peace" which advocated the development of Jewish and Arab "cantons" as part of a bi-national state. Neither position was able to receive the majority support of the *Yishuv* at the time. The majority of the socialist-oriented movements disregarded both unfettered violence and illusory dreams of peace and argued instead in favour of moderation and stopping the spiralling violence, without endangering the Zionist project as a whole. As a result, the Realpolitik of David Ben-Gurion and his followers now prevailed. They believed that although the aims of Jews and Arabs were incompatible it was still possible to negotiate. This dialogue should not be subject to illusions but should always be pursued in the hope of discovering room to manoeuvre and restricting or defusing the conflict.

In response to the Nazis' seizure of power in Germany, approximately 38,000 immigrants arrived in 1933 alone. Between 1932 and 1939, the *Histadrut* gained 73,000 new members, which made organized labour increasingly important for the socio-economic and political development of the *Yishuv*. Palestine's Zionist infrastructure, including the economic, political, scientific, educational and cultural institutions that generally characterise a community, expanded and consolidated more and more.

### **Under the Shadow of National Socialism: Jewish Mass Immigration, Arab Insurgency and the Second World War**

Shortly after seizing power in January 1933, the Nazis began their programme of systematic discrimination and persecution against Germany's Jewish citizens. German Jews left their country in droves and were soon followed by many refugees from Poland. During the fifth *Aliyah*, a total of 197,000 Jews poured into Palestine, most of whom were neither Zionists nor socialists, many belonged to the middle or even upper classes. Since other potential refuge countries like the

United States remained largely closed to them, they saw no other alternative but to settle in hot and underdeveloped Palestine. While the German refugees (*Jeckes*) were of a more liberal-democratic orientation, the Polish-Jewish immigrants reinforced the revisionist tendencies in the Zionist political spectrum. After their traumatic experiences in Poland, they were no longer willing to accept political and social heteronomy. Hoping to secure their new-found collective autonomy they insisted on taking a harder line against the Palestinian Arabs.

Tel Aviv and other cities on the Mediterranean began to develop rapidly. Store fronts, beach promenades and cafes, theatres and cinemas and, not least, the burgeoning Bauhaus architecture emerging at the desert's edge unmistakably revealed the German and Central European roots of their builders and operators.

In August 1933, Zionist representatives under Chaim Arlosoroff (1899–1933) concluded a capital-transfer agreement with the German ministry of economics to expedite the emigration of German Jews to Palestine. Although the respective actors' motivations could not have been more different, their overlapping interests led to a limited cooperation. The so-called *Haavara* Agreement allowed Jewish refugees to transfer part of their capital assets to their new home. The transfer was linked to the import of German goods to Palestine. With the proceeds from the transfer of goods, even destitute Jews could raise the necessary *Vorzeigegeld* (proof of funds) imposed by the British: 1,000 Palestinian pounds (approx. 15,000 *Reichsmark*). The agreement was controversial for a variety of reasons. While critics suspected that the agreement would circumvent the boycott against Nazi Germany and raise much needed foreign currency for the Nazis, Nazi officials for their part feared that it would subsidize Zionist aspirations in Palestine. From 1937 onward, the Nazi regime limited the scope and the modalities of capital transfers, while simultaneously increasing the persecution of the Jewish minority. Even so, more than 50,000 German Jews were able to immigrate to Palestine as part of the *Haavara* Agreement until 1939. They managed to rescue assets in the amount of approximately 140 million *Reichsmark*, corresponding to an average transfer rate per immigrant of 2,800 *Reichsmark*.<sup>[16]</sup> The agreement was officially abandoned only in 1941, even though no capital transfers had taken place since the beginning of the Second World War. The objective of the Nazis had long since shifted and become more radical: the expulsion of the Jews was no longer on the agenda, but rather their systematic, factory-style extermination.

As the Jewish population of Palestine doubled between 1932 and 1935 and the Jewish land purchases caused a sense of increasing alienation among the Palestinian Arabs, the Palestinian national movement became embroiled in a process of radicalization that was accompanied by pan-Islamic tendencies. Moreover, a brief pro-Zionist turn in British-Palestine policy, intended to supplant the pro-Arab White Paper policy of October 1930, left the impression of an inconsistent British foreign policy. In December 1931, the first Islamic World Congress was held in Jerusalem under the direction of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem. The unanimous call to defend the "sanctity of the Wall" (according to the Arabic narrative the wall was built by the Jebusites, while, actually, the Wailing or Western Wall is part of the remains of the Herodian Temple) and to establish an Al-Aqsa Mosque university also alerted Muslims outside of Palestine to the role of Jerusalem.

Simultaneously, Arab paramilitary youth organizations mutated into terrorist underground militias with the knowledge and approval of the Grand Mufti. In Judaea, Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni (1908–1948), a cousin of the Grand Mufti, founded the "Organization for Holy Struggle". In Haifa and Galilee, a terrorist group began to operate under Sheik Is ad-Din al-Kassam (ca. 1880–ca. 1935). Both leaders are still revered today by Palestinian organizations as "martyrs" and their groups formed the organizational backbone of the Arab revolt against the British and the Jews, which began in April 1931, flared up again in 1936 and reached a climax between the autumn of 1937 and the autumn of 1939. A general strike, accompanied by unprecedented violence, extended temporarily to all of Palestine. The uprising led to the massacres of Jews and the looting and destruction of fields, plantations, shops and factories. In contrast to the more defensive Haganah, the semi-official underground army of the *Yishuv*, revisionist militias carried out anti-



terrorist measures, especially after 1938. Ultimately, however, it were the fierce operations of British military forces, on the one hand, and the disagreements among the insurgents, on the other, that put an end to the unrest.

The Arab Revolt had unexpected consequences: Paradoxically it facilitated the Zionist project. Aims that Zionists had previously only aspired to – the disintegration of the Palestinian economy along ethnic-national and religious lines – were now becoming a reality. Although Jewish workers were traditionally more expensive than Arab workers, the *Yishuv* job market lost its Arab competition within a short period of time. When the Arabs denied the Jews to use the port of Jaffa, the Jews built their own port in Tel Aviv, larger and more modern than the one in Jaffa. Before the uprising, the Zionists had to hide their paramilitary ambitions from the British. Now the Zionist militias were allowed to professionalize and they openly acknowledged their defensive efforts by developing their villages and cities into "military settlements". More than ever, the Jewish *kibbutznik* was not simply a farmer, but at the same time a soldier, always ready for combat.

Since 1933, many Arabs sympathized with German National Socialism, which was perceived as a model of national liberation and of anti-Jewish struggle. In 1937, while the Arab riots still continued, Jerusalem's Grand Mufti put before the Nazi regime the draft of a cooperation agreement asking for weapons and other relief supplies for his nationalists. In return, he offered to disseminate Nazi propaganda in the Islamic world, even in the event of war. He was of the opinion that Jewish trade needed to be boycotted, that the "terror" in the mandate countries must be accelerated and that the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine had to be averted "by any means". At the end of 1941, Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) announced in a personal encounter with the Grand Mufti that he wanted to "solve" the Jewish question in the territory under British mandate. SS Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler (1900–1945) told the Grand Mufti in mid-1943: " Bis jetzt haben wir etwa drei Millionen Juden vernichtet."[\[17\]](#)

In the summer of 1942, the *Yishuv* saw itself exposed to a dangerous encirclement. The German army advanced toward Palestine from the Caucasus and from Egypt. With Great Britain's consent and sporadic support, the elite units (*Palmach*) of *Haganah* prepared their defence and practiced guerrilla warfare against the approaching German-Italian Africa corps under field marshal Erwin Rommel (1891–1944). As part of a Jewish brigade, *Palmach* units also directly participated in the war against Nazi Germany in other places. In late 1942 British troops succeeded in stopping the advance of the "Desert Fox" in the Egyptian city of El-Alamein, thus averting the danger of a holocaust taking place in the Middle East.

When news about the mass crimes in Germany intensified, Zionist politicians issued dramatic appeals to the American and the British governments to bomb the death camps – without any success. In May 1942 several hundred American, European and Palestinian representatives of Zionist organizations demanded in New York the "founding of a Jewish Commonwealth" and the opening of Palestine's borders for refugees as part of the so-called Biltmore Program.[\[18\]](#)

The majority of the Zionist parties supported the British in the struggle against Nazi Germany. But when the Allies were able to turn the tide of war in their favour in early 1944, Menachem Begin (1913–1992), commander of the militant *Ezel* group, called for a "revolt" against the British occupiers of Palestine. Jewish terrorists tried using brute force to bomb the British out of the country. As a result, left-wing Zionists organized in *Haganah* hunted down renegade *Ezel* fighters that threatened the moral reputation of Zionism. However, when Germany surrendered to the allies in the spring of 1945, *Haganah* aligned itself with the *Ezel* organization and the small terrorist splinter group *Lehi* to create a united "Jewish resistance movement" and joined the armed struggle against the British. The *Ezel* group also attracted attention through spectacular attacks. In July 1946, a terrorist commando blew up the British military command headquarters in the south wing of the Jerusalem luxury hotel "King David", leaving 91 people dead. As a result *Haganah* ended its alliance with the *Ezel* group.

## Partition Plans and the Path Towards the State of Israel

Over the course of the mandate period, the British were increasingly confronted with the fact that the Jewish immigration west of the Jordan river was being met with fierce Arab resistance. In order to take control of the situation, the British government imposed drastic immigration restrictions on Jewish refugees in 1936. At the same time, the British considered looking for a political-diplomatic solution to this conflict of nationalities. But what could such a solution look like? Both population groups had valid grounds for their claims.

A commission was assembled in November 1936 under the chairmanship of Lord William Robert Wellesley Peel (1867–1937) to analyse the conflict. They interviewed 120 Arab and Jewish witnesses and presented a report in July 1937 recommending that western Palestine be partitioned into a Jewish and an Arab state. They allotted about 20 per cent of the area to the Jews and 80 per cent to the Arabs. The British claimed for themselves a corridor connecting Jaffa and Jerusalem:

An irrepressible conflict has arisen between two national communities within the narrow bounds of one small country. There is no common ground between them. ... There can be no question of fusion or assimilation between Jewish and Arab cultures. ...

For Partition means that neither will get all it wants. It means that the Arabs must acquiesce in the exclusion from their sovereignty of a piece of territory, long occupied and once ruled by them. It means that the Jews must be content with less than the Land of Israel they once ruled and have hoped to rule again. But it seems possible that on reflection both parties will come to realize that the drawbacks of Partition are outweighed by its advantages.[\[19\]](#)

The Arab world rejected the partition plan, albeit with varying degrees of intensity. Internal differences were caused by competing interests: while Transjordan's Abdullah welcomed the expansion of his territory, as recommended by the Peel Commission, the "Arab Higher Committee" particularly protested against the proposed incorporation of Arabic Galilee into the Jewish state. Already in September 1937, a pan-Arab congress in Syria called for military resistance against "world Jewry" and the Zionist movement.

The Jewish side was also uneasy about the Peel Plan. Its terms were met with disappointment, especially since not a few Jewish immigrants had believed that the "people without a land" had come to a "land without a people".[\[20\]](#) But pragmatism was stronger than any insistence on ideological principles. Thus, at the Zionist Congress in Zurich on 20 August 1937 a majority – especially from the left-wing circles of Labour Zionism – was ready to accept a compromise. Of course, the "revisionist" minority rejected any discussion of territorial concessions. Not "land for peace" but "peace for peace" was their slogan, since, according to the right-wing Zionist camp, the historic land of Israel amounted in fact to all of Palestine, encompassing both banks of the Jordan river. In the eyes of the revisionists, the establishment of the kingdom of Transjordan (with its large Palestinian Arab population), already anticipated the historical compromise.

On the recommendation of a new commission, the Woodhead Commission, the British had already decided in January 1938 to distance themselves from the partition plan, but with the Second World War a completely new situation arose. The British now decided that even the Balfour Declaration had been a "mistake" and decided to drastically restrict Jewish immigration to Palestine. For tactical reasons, the Cabinet's decision was initially kept secret. The British government increasingly found Zionism to be a political burden. In the strategic fight against the ostensible pro-Arab Axis powers Germany and Italy, they now attempted to curry favour with the Arabs. In May

1939, a British White Paper was published stating that Palestine would be an independent state within ten years. For the period between 1939 and 1945, the White Paper suggested that Palestine should only admit a total of 75,000 Jews. After this, immigration should be stopped completely. In addition, it called for prohibiting selling Arab land to Jews.[\[21\]](#)

This development marked a major setback for the Zionist cause. Taking into account the intensifying persecution of the Jews, the White Paper was like a death sentence for many Jews. After the US even forced a Jewish refugee ship – the "St. Louis" – to return to Germany, the Zionists' executive branch announced that it would intervene at any price to permit the "illegal" admission of Jewish refugees into Palestine. David Ben-Gurion, head of the social democratic Mapai party and executive chairman of the Jewish Agency that was responsible for the Jewish side of immigration to Palestine, famously remarked: "We need to help the English in the war as if there were no 'White Paper,' and we need to oppose the 'White Paper' as if there is no war."[\[22\]](#)

Despite the pro-Arab policy of the British White Paper, the leading Arab forces – with the exception of the Emir of Transjordan – sympathized with Nazi Germany and its allies. The Palestinian leadership under the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem even aligned itself openly with the Nazi regime,[\[23\]](#) a decision that was also directed against British colonial policy.

All the same, after the war, the British did not at first change their Palestine policy. Motivated by colonial politics and oil, they continued their pro-Arab policy and immigration restrictions closing the country of even for the so-called "displaced persons" – survivors of the Shoah who were stranded in Germany. In response, the Zionists intensified their efforts to smuggle refugees into Palestine. The world heard heart-breaking reports about violent rejections of Holocaust survivors in search of a new home. The two new superpowers, the USA and the Soviet Union, now increasingly demanded a change in British Palestine policy. In particular, the American public and parts of the political establishment put pressure on the economically dependent British. In April 1947, the Soviet UN Ambassador Andrei Gromyko (1909–1989) gave a fiery speech that appeared to express sympathy for Zionism.[\[24\]](#) Global outrage was triggered when the British navy captured the barely seaworthy Jewish refugee ship "Exodus" off the coast of Palestine in July 1947. After overpowering its passengers and crew, the vessel was conducted to the port of Haifa in order to send the passengers back to a German detention centre. Only at this point did the British begin to yield, they were, in fact, gradually losing control of their confused relations to the independence seeking Jews and Arabs. What the British had not been able to achieve in the nearly 30-year mandate period – a permanent solution to the Palestinian problem – was passed on to the newly established United Nations (UN).

At any rate, the intransigence between the two sides started to loosen, as the world community could or would no longer ignore that Nazi Germany had systematically killed six million European Jews. On the recommendation of the Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), the UN General Assembly consequently decided on 29 November 1947 by a two-thirds majority that the land between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean should be divided into a Jewish and an Arab state. The two countries should each consist of three major enclaves that were to be connected by extra-territorial roads and an economic union. The plan also foresaw placing the cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem under international administration due to their religious importance.[\[25\]](#)

In allocating the territories, the UN paid attention to the fact that both the Jews and the Arabs would form majorities in their respective states. In reality, the Jewish immigration authority estimated that the Jewish state (56 per cent of Western Palestine) would have had a population of 498,000 Jews and 407,000 non-Jews (especially Arabs), whereas the Arab state would have had 725,000 non-Jews and 10,000 Jews. In the international zone there would have lived 105,000 non-Jews and 100,000 Jews.[\[26\]](#)

The constellation that had prevented compromise as early as 1937, however, emerged once again.

The Arab world rejected more vehemently than ever the international plan to partition Palestine into two states. Abdur Rahman Assam Pasha (1893–1976), secretary general of the Arab League threatened that the establishment of a Jewish state would result in a "massacre that would one day be talked about like the Mongolian massacres and the Crusades".<sup>[27]</sup> By contrast, while the parties of the *Yishuv* had hoped for a more favourable piece of the territorial pie, a majority of them ultimately recognized their unique historical opportunity to form a Jewish nation state. Shortly after the UN vote, celebrations broke out in the Jewish towns and villages and an endless number of dancing people were lining the streets.<sup>[28]</sup>

### Civil War and Terror: Harbingers of the Mutual Israeli-Palestinian Relationship of Violence

Immediately after the UN resolution, the Arabs rose up in arms against the Jewish-Zionist presence in Palestine. They wanted to stop the establishment of a Jewish state at all costs. Particularly menacingly, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem had already declared in October 1947: "... As soon as the British armed forces have withdrawn, the Arabs should jointly attack the Jews and destroy them."<sup>[29]</sup> In early 1948, the Palestinian Arabs were supported by volunteer militiamen from Syria, Transjordan and Iraq. In the so-called "war of the streets", they blocked many transport routes between the Jewish settlements and besieged Jerusalem. The British were caught in the middle. Increasingly they sought for a possibility to withdraw undamaged from the mandate area. After the British had left their army camps, police stations and government buildings, the battles focused on these now-abandoned symbols of control. The Zionists won this "civil war", although they had remained mostly on the defensive until the beginning of April 1948. The *Yishuv* could stand its ground because the Jewish community in Palestine had long had state-like structures and armed militias at its disposal. In the months preceding the founding of Israel, *Haganah* had already had a general staff that was responsible for the whole area. By the end of 1947, *Haganah* had access to artillery and possessed the nuclei of an air force and a navy. From January 1948 onward, the Zionists bought weapons in Czechoslovakia including thousands of guns and bombs as well as dozens of fighter planes.

On 1 April 1948, *Haganah* went on the offensive with "Plan Dalet". The primary objective was to secure with military force all the areas that the UN had allocated to the Jews and, if possible, even the outlying Jewish settlements. Beyond this, the Zionists wanted to open the traffic lines between their settlements and to force entry into Jerusalem. There was especially heavy fighting on the road from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. On 8 April 1948, a division of the *Ezra* militia carried out a massacre in the Arab village of Deir Yassin (today Givat Shaul, a Jerusalem suburb). The *Lehi* spread fear and terror and increased the Arabs' mass flight from the Jewish-controlled areas. By the time of the founding of Israel, nearly all the goals of "Plan Dalet" had been achieved. These included establishing geographic cohesion and a viable defence of the Jewish-populated areas of Palestine within the borders of the United Nations partition plan.

The Arabs did not have any qualms about committing atrocities either – neither before nor after the founding of Israel. A trail of blood connects the massacre of the Jews in Hebron in 1929 with the attacks on Jewish settlements during the Arab revolt from 1936–1939 and with an assault in the middle of April 1948 on a convoy carrying Jewish wounded, doctors and nurses to Jerusalem, which left about 80 people dead.

### The Founding of the State of Israel

When the Palestine mandate expired without an amicable solution, the Jewish National Council declared the existence of the State of Israel on 14 May 1948 in Tel Aviv: "nicht in Europa – aber von Europa" (Dan Diner).<sup>[30]</sup> The civil strife now culminated in a major military conflict. On 15 May, five armies of the Arab League crossed the borders into Israel in order to wipe out the "Zionist creation". The Arab armies were more successful than is generally believed:



The Egyptians conquered the Gaza Strip and the Jordanians the West Bank, including East Jerusalem and its holy sites of Jews, Christians and Muslims. The young state was able to hold its own against its neighbours, however. The Israeli side was clearly the weaker one, both in regards to numbers as well as military equipment. But unlike the Arabs, who believed they had already won, the Israelis were aware of their perilous situation. In a confidential note, General Yigael Yadin (1917–1984), head of Israeli military operations, initially estimated the chances of Israel's survival at "fifty-fifty". The British field marshal Bernard Montgomery (1887–1976) gave Israel "three weeks" before it would be defeated. What's more, the Zionist intelligence services were completely in the dark: they did not know when or even if the Arabs would attack. It was not until the summer of 1948 that the Israelis were able to push back the Arab armies and expand the territory awarded to them by the United Nations. This partition line, known today as the "Green Line", was established in 1949 by the Rhodes armistice agreement. The Arabs, however, did not by any means recognize the State of Israel in these or any similarly defined boundaries. For them, it was merely an armistice line, which was only valid until the next armed conflict. This circumstance offers at least one explanation for why the Israelis have also dispensed with a definition of their borders until the present day.

In this first Arab-Israeli War in 1948/1949, 600,000–750,000 Arabs fled from their homes or were expelled. Time and again it has been discussed whether there was a Zionist "master plan" at the time that involved ethnic cleansing. Historical research shows that there was no governmental directive given for the expulsion of the Arabs.<sup>[31]</sup> David Ben-Gurion, who in the meantime had become Prime Minister of Israel, wavered between moral- and security-based considerations, and his advisors provided him with highly ambivalent recommendations. Based on a proposal by the ministry of agriculture,<sup>[32]</sup> the army instructed the Israeli troops to not carry out evictions beyond the immediate battle areas.<sup>[33]</sup> There was still local displacement, however. On the one hand, individual Jewish mayors and local commanders called on the Arabs to stay. On the other, about a third of the Arab refugees were expelled from the Jewish-controlled areas in the wake of the fighting. Another third of the Arabs panicked and fled the Israelis' psychological warfare. They were also frightened by the alarmist appeals from Arab notables. The last third of the refugees left the disputed territories more or less "voluntarily" (even though they did not live in the combat zones). They were victims of Arab propaganda, which convinced the refugees to "temporarily" leave their homes with the expectation of a glorious return "after the victory over the Zionists".

It is a little known fact that the Arabs also conducted ethnic cleansing in this war when they had the chance. On 13 May 1948, Arab Legion troops participated in a massacre at the kibbutz Kfar Etzion south of Jerusalem. More than 120 captive Jews were shot with machine guns and the four settlements of Gush Etzion between Jerusalem and Hebron were razed. At the end of May, the Arab Legion of Transjordan captured East Jerusalem, destroyed the Jewish Quarter of the historic centre, including all the synagogues, plundered and expelled the inhabitants and killed all the remaining Jews.

Given the fierce hostilities in Palestine, more than 600,000 Jews fled from Arab countries between 1945 and 1952 into the newly established Jewish state.<sup>[34]</sup> Within a few years, there was, numerically, an almost complete change of populations. When Israel offered the return of 100,000 Arab refugees in 1949 as part of a desired peace settlement, the Arab states rejected the proposal. Instead, Egypt and Syria decided to assimilate the expatriate Palestinians as disenfranchised stateless actors and use them in the fight against Israel as a "fifth column for the day of vengeance".<sup>[35]</sup> Jordan, however, dominated by a Palestinian majority, integrated the refugees and annexed the West Bank in 1950 which didn't cause any international outcry.

## [Appendix](#)

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