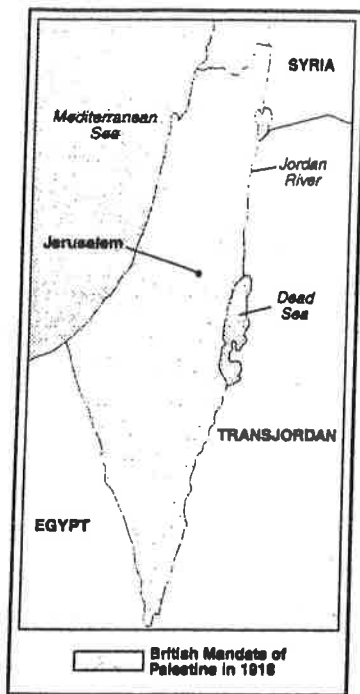


Jews and Palestinians: Two Claims to Palestine



Ancient Palestine The diverse land of historic Palestine, the ancient homeland of both the Jews and Palestinians, ranges from a lush coastal plain in the west to the drier Jordan River valley in the east. The Jordan River flows south and empties into the Dead Sea, which lies north of the Negev Desert. The original Jews, a Semitic people related to the Arabs, came to Palestine around the twelfth century B.C. from southern Mesopotamia in present-day Iraq. Initially settling in the hilly interior, the Jews believed the land had been given to them by their God in exchange for a promise to live according to their God's laws. The original Palestinians, called Philistines, were people of Greek origin who initially settled on the coastal plain around the same time.

Kingdom of Israel and the Diaspora About 200 years after the two groups settled in Palestine, the Jews established a kingdom called Israel, derived from *Bnei Israel* (sons of Israel), the term they called themselves. At times, the kingdom of Israel covered all of Palestine and beyond. In A.D. 73, the Roman Empire conquered Palestine and put down a Jewish uprising, causing the *diaspora*, an event in which the majority of Jews left Palestine and scattered throughout the Middle East and Mediterranean. The Palestinians remained in the region and intermixed with other local peoples, most notably the Arabs, who had arrived in Palestine in the seventh century A.D. After the Arab arrival, the majority of Palestinians converted to Islam.

Zionism From the time of the diaspora, most Jews dreamed of a return to their ancestral homeland in the region of Palestine. In the nineteenth century, European Jews began organizing political movements aimed at moving back to Palestine, which was then ruled by the Ottoman Empire and occupied by Palestinians. This movement became known as *Zionism* (Zion is a hill of great religious and historical importance for Jews in their holiest city, Jerusalem). In western Europe, many Jews were angered by anti-Jewish sentiment. In eastern Europe, Jews suffered much more serious persecution, particularly in Russia and Russian-controlled Poland. Russian and Polish Jews were killed, their villages were burned, and their property was confiscated as part of organized *pogroms*, or attacks. Eastern European Jews became the driving force behind Zionism. Early Zionists sought to create a secular (nonreligious) Jewish state in Palestine.



Jewish settlers building a fence around land in Palestine in 1946

among Palestinian Muslims as well, especially peasants who were directly affected by the sale of the land they farmed but did not own.

The British Mandate of Palestine In 1916, Britain and France signed a secret agreement called the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which called for the partition of Ottoman Empire lands in the Middle East after World War I. According to this agreement, Britain would take control of Palestine. During this time, Zionist leaders lobbied the British to allow for a Jewish state in Palestine. In 1917, the British government issued the Balfour Declaration, which expressed British support for the “establishment in Palestine of a National Home for the Jewish people.” The British did not consult Palestinian Arabs, who made up almost 85 percent of the population, and Palestinians opposed the declaration as a violation of their rights. The declaration was seen as a great diplomatic victory for Zionism, and Jewish immigration into Palestine increased. When the Ottoman Empire fell at the end of the war in 1918, the British officially took control of Palestine as a *mandate* (similar to a colony). Palestinian Arabs were outraged that although they comprised the large majority of the population Britain had not allowed them to determine how Palestine would be governed. As Jewish immigration continued, Arab-Jewish tensions rose, and by 1929 riots and attacks had left 133 Jews and 116 Arabs dead.



Arab prisoners being escorted through Jerusalem by British troops in 1938

Increasing Arab-Jewish Tensions While most Jewish immigrants initially were poor, over time their situation improved as they settled the land and formed collective communities known as *kibbutzim*. However, Arabs who had been displaced from their land as a result of these settlements moved into overcrowded cities and became increasingly impoverished. When a British commission found that Jewish immigration and land purchases were the main sources of conflict in the mandate, they decided to reconsider their policy toward Jewish immigration into Palestine. Though the British considered making Jewish immigration subject to approval by the majority Arab population, Zionist diplomatic

pressure eventually convinced the British to maintain support for Zionist goals. Arab-Jewish tensions erupted again in 1936 and lasted for three years in a violent conflict called the Arab Revolt. During the revolt, the British government drew up a plan intended to solve the problem by calling for the partition of Palestine into two states, one Jewish and one Arab. While Zionist leaders tentatively accepted the plan, Arab leaders strongly denounced any plan that called for the division of their homeland. As the Arab Revolt raged on, the British withdrew the plan.



Jews protesting in favor of immigration to Palestine in front of the British Consulate in 1946

The British Mandate Ends World War II significantly changed the nature of Zionism in Palestine. During the Holocaust, over six million Jews were murdered by the Nazis. The Holocaust increased world interest in and sympathy for the Zionist movement. After World War II, thousands of Jews fled Europe and sought refuge in Palestine, despite continued British-enforced limits on immigration. Zionist terrorist groups formed, and began attacking the British. Their goal was to force the British to meet Zionist demands of unlimited Jewish immigration and the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. In 1947, with international

pressure mounting and British soldiers tired of fighting Zionists and policing Arab-Jewish violence, the British government turned over the Mandate of Palestine to the newly created United Nations. At this time, there were 1,300,000 Palestinians and 600,000 Jews living in Palestine. As the majority population that had lived there for thousands of years, Palestinians believed they had the right to govern all of Palestine. Many Jews favored a division of Palestine and they pointed to the Balfour Declaration and persecution in Europe as evidence that they should have their own homeland.

