

Arab-Israeli Relations 1917-1970

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Eugene L. Rogan.

Middle East Centre, St Anthony's College, University of Oxford.

"His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people....". With these eighteen words, Arthur James Balfour, British foreign secretary, bound his country to a policy that would both confirm British rule in Palestine and ensure the failure of the Palestine Mandate.

The **Balfour Declaration**, issued in the form of a letter to Lord Rothschild on 2nd November 1917, was not the first expression of British interests in Palestine. Indeed, British interests multiplied in Palestine in the course of the nineteenth century: consular offices were opened in Jerusalem in 1838, an Anglican bishopric was established in Jerusalem in 1841, the Palestine Exploration Fund opened its doors in 1865 to promote archaeology, exploration, mapping and surveying of Palestine up to the outbreak of World War I.

With the outbreak of World War I, and the Ottoman entry on Germany's side, the Entente Powers began to consider the disposition of Ottoman territories in the event of an Entente victory. With General Allenby's entry into Jerusalem in December 1917, the partition of Ottoman domains was no longer a theoretical matter. The British Government's decision to support Zionist aspirations in Palestine can be traced to many causes, though the end result was to justify Britain's claims to Palestine in the post-war settlement. Thus the Balfour Declaration was Britain's first formal claim on Palestine — and a natural starting point for this collection of British documents on Palestine and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

No subject commands more interest in the Middle East than the Arab-Israeli conflict. The bibliography on Palestine and Israel is vast and growing. No source has been more essential to historians of Palestine and the Arab-Israeli conflict than the Public Record Office (PRO) in Kew. This series places before scholars of Palestine and the Arab-Israeli conflict, for the first time, the widest range of original source material from the Foreign Office, Colonial Office and Cabinet Papers preserved at the PRO, from the Balfour Declaration through to the **Black September War of 1970-1**. This closing date is imposed on us by following the thirty year rule governing the release of government records in Britain.

The documents, filmed at the PRO, are presented as filed without editorial intervention. Readers will find every document from a given file, exactly as they would in the reading room of the PRO. Here the major policy statements are set out in their fullest context, the minor documents and marginalia revealing the workings of colonial administration and, following the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, British diplomacy towards Israel and the Arab states. The collection represents more than 200,000 pages of text on the politics, administration, wars and diplomacy of the Palestine Mandate and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The Palestine Mandate

Britain ruled Palestine for over thirty years. Between 1922 and 1948 British colonial rule in Palestine was overseen by the League of Nations in a novel structure known as a **mandate**. The League of Nations awarded mandates over the former colonial territories of Germany in Africa, Asia and Polynesia, and of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire, to Britain and France. While Britain and France treated these territories very much as colonies in the old sense of the term, the mandate system was defined more in keeping with Wilsonian principles of national self-determination. The mandatory power was to instruct these newly emerging nations in statecraft and oversee the introduction of institutions of self-rule. The League recognised two categories of mandates; the less advanced 'class B' mandates for whom a longer period of trusteeship was envisaged, and the more advanced 'class A' mandates for countries judged to have "reached a stage of development where their existence as independent nations can be provisionally recognised subject to the rendering of administrative advice and assistance by a mandatory power until such time as they are able to stand alone". The Arab lands of the former Ottoman Empire, including Palestine, were defined as such 'class A' mandates.

In retrospect, the British Mandate in Palestine was an unqualified disaster for all involved. The twice-promised land proved an expensive colony. Attempts to establish the instruments of self-rule foundered on Palestinian rejection of the terms of the Mandate calling for the creation of a **Jewish National Home**. Palestinians refused to validate proposed bi-communal structures through participation, thus stymieing all attempts to pass the business of government to the local population. Tensions between the indigenous Palestinian Arabs and the Zionist immigrants led to violence almost from the outset, requiring the deployment of a large police force and the dispatch of British troops to keep the peace. Much of British policy in Palestine was dictated by the need to contain communal tensions. **The Passfield White Paper** which followed the 1929 riots, the outbreak of the **Arab Revolt** in 1936 and the Peel Commission report in 1937 recommending partition, the **1939 White Paper** recommending restrictions on Zionist immigration to Palestine and the rise of Jewish terrorist attacks on the British are the main milestones on the Mandate's road to failure. The ultimate recognition of that failure came in 1947 when Great Britain asked the United Nations to resolve the situation in advance of a **British withdrawal** set for 15 May 1948.

The documents selected for this project cover the whole of Britain's colonial experience in Palestine. The selection begins with the origins of British rule in Palestine, from the politics behind the Balfour Declaration and Britain's military occupation of Jerusalem at the end of 1917 to the ratification of the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine on 24 July 1922. It includes the complete **Palestine Sessional Papers** spanning the years 1924–48, files showing the workings of the Mandate from 1922 and the escalating crises leading to the first partition plans in 1937-8. Subsequent selections focus on the emerging Arab and Jewish organisations over the later years of the Mandate (1937–46); documents relating to the end of the Mandate; the Anglo-American Committee of **Enquiry and Report (1946)**; the rise of **Jewish attacks** on the British (1946-8); and the United Nations resolution to **partition** Palestine in November 1947.

The Palestine War, 1947–9

The Palestine War lasted less than twenty months, from the United Nations resolution recommending the partition of Palestine to the final armistice agreement signed between Israel and Syria in July 1949. Those months transformed the political landscape of the Middle East. Indeed, 1948 may be taken as a defining moment for the region as a whole. Arab Palestine was destroyed and the new state of Israel

established. Egypt, Syria and Lebanon suffered outright defeat, Iraq held its lines, and Transjordan won at best a pyrrhic victory.

Arab public opinion, unprepared for defeat, let alone a defeat of this magnitude, showed that faith in its politicians was lost. Within three years of the end of the Palestine War, the Prime Ministers of Egypt and Lebanon and the King of Jordan had been assassinated, and the President of Syria and the King of Egypt overthrown by military coups.

No event has marked Arab politics in the second half of the twentieth century more profoundly. The Arab-Israeli wars, the Cold War in the Middle East, the rise of the Palestinian armed struggle and the politics of peace making in all their complexity are a direct consequence of the Palestine War. It is thus not surprising that the Palestine War is central to the documents in this collection.

Files have been selected which cover the aftermath of the UN Partition Resolution, the 'civil war' that erupted between Jewish combatants and Palestinian urban centres, resulting in the Haganah's conquest of Tiberias, Haifa, Safad and Jaffa, the termination of the British Mandate and the proclamation of the State of Israel on 15 May 1948. Documentation covering the course of the war in 1948 and the armistice agreements of 1949, as well as regional consequences of the war, such as the **coup** led by Colonel Husni al-Za'im against the Syrian government of President Shukri al-Quwwatli in March 1949 has also been selected.

The Arab-Israeli Conflict

Britain's role changed dramatically following the end of its Mandate in Palestine. No longer the colonial power, Britain had to establish diplomatic ties with the new Jewish state. Britain was relatively slow to give recognition to Israel, unlike the United States and Soviet Union who granted almost immediate recognition. Britain's early relations with Israel were strained when the Jewish state renewed hostilities with Egypt in December 1948 and five British reconnaissance airplanes were shot down above Sinai by the Israeli Air Force in January 1949. Open conflict between Israel and Britain was narrowly averted, and *de facto* recognition granted on 30 January 1949.

Britain's relations with the Arab world were strained by the role it had played in the loss of Arab Palestine. This posed particular problems for Britain's allies in the region most directly involved in the Palestine War – Egypt, Transjordan, and to a lesser extent, Iraq. The Egyptian government had been gravely weakened by the military's performance in Palestine. Its troops, widely expected by the Egyptian public to deliver Palestine from the Zionist threat, managed to retain only a finger of land called the Gaza Strip on the southern coastline of Palestine. The army of Transjordan, the Arab Legion, had fared better in the war, holding off Jewish attempts to take Jerusalem and retaining the West Bank. Yet the Hashemite kingdom was widely suspected of harbouring territorial ambitions in Palestine – suspicions that seemed to be confirmed when Transjordan annexed Jerusalem and the West Bank. Britain's Arab allies were tarnished by their association with the old colonial power.

The new borders of the Jewish state, particularly with Egypt and Jordan, were vulnerable to infiltration as thousands of refugees crossed back to recover property from abandoned homes, to tend farms and to vent their fury on the occupiers of their land. Relations between Israel and its Arab neighbours

between 1949 and 1956 were characterised by these 'border wars'. The regional instability following the fall of Palestine was marked by the assassination of the Lebanese Premier Riyadh al-Solh (Jordan, 1951), the assassination of King Abdullah of Jordan (Jerusalem, 1951) and files on the Free Officers' Coup in July 1952. The Egyptian monarchy was overthrown and the young Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser rose to lead both Egypt and the Arab Nationalist cause generally. Central to the Arab Nationalist agenda was the liberation of Palestine, a cause to which Nasser, a veteran of the Israeli siege of Faluja in 1948, dedicated much of his charged rhetoric. Files also cover the on-going border disputes between 1952 and 1954 and the Cold War during 1955.

These trends were taking place as the pattern of geo-politics was shifting from the old colonial order of the inter-war years to the new order of the Cold War. The power of Britain and the European states was eclipsed by the rival superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. The crossroad was reached at Suez in 1956, when Britain and France colluded with Israel to wage war on Nasser's Egypt over the Suez Canal. One of the defining moments of the end of the British Empire in the Middle East, the Suez Crisis is covered by the inclusion of Foreign Office and War Office files.

The later 1950s and the 1960s marked the point of highest activity in the Cold War in the Middle East. The Arab-Israeli conflict became a proxy theatre of the superpower rivalry, in which American support for Israel was matched by Soviet support for Syria and Egypt. This was most apparent in the June War of 1967, when the armies of Egypt, Syria and Jordan were shattered by surprise Israeli attacks. Israel swept through the Gaza Strip, Sinai Peninsula, Jerusalem and the West Bank, and the Golan Heights in the six days of the war. The defeat proved the undoing of 'Nasserism', though it inspired Palestinians to take the initiative in seeking to liberate their homeland. The PLO, founded in 1964 with Nasser's encouragement, embarked on its own course after 1967. The Palestinian armed struggle resulted in the fragmentation of the movement among inimical factions and confused the liberation of the Palestinians' homeland with a more general ambition to social revolution in the Arab world. The contradictions of the Palestinian armed struggle were made most apparent in the Black September War of 1970-1 in Jordan, which saw the displacement of Palestinian combatants from Jordan to Lebanon.

The thousands of documents selected for this collection reflect on the key developments of Palestine and the Arab-Israeli conflict over the years 1917-71. Although they represent but a fraction of the millions of documents on Palestine and Israel held in the PRO the careful selection process used in compiling this collection seeks to provide the most comprehensive coverage of issues that bedevilled the British authorities who ruled Palestine and their successors in Israel and the Arab world.