The Origins of the Arab-Israeli Dispute

James Gelvin, Part 3, Ch. 14
notes by Denis Bašić
Some statistics

- Israel’s population is about 6.5 million, which is less than 10% of the population of Turkey, Iran or Egypt.

- There are approximately 3-3.5 million Palestinians in the occupied areas (roughly the population of Chicago).

- Estimates for total number of Palestinians in the world run as high as 9 million.

- Since 1948, wars between Israel and its neighbors have claimed upward of 150,000 casualties.

- As a comparison, during the Iraq-Iran war from 1980-88, there were 500,000-1 million deaths and 1-2 million wounded.
The essence of the dispute

- The so-called Arab-Israeli dispute has gone on for such a long time and has been a subject to so much heated debate that it is easy to lose sight of the fundamental issues involved.

- According to Gelvin, the dispute is, simply put, a real estate dispute.
Zionism

- ZIONISM is a national movement that defined a religious community - Jews - as a national community.

- The word "Zionism" itself is derived from the word "Zion" (Hebrew: ציון, Tziyyyon), one of the names of Jerusalem, as mentioned in the Bible. It was coined as a term for Jewish nationalism by Austrian Jewish publisher Nathan Birnbaum in his journal Self-Emancipation in 1890.
... is perhaps the most important figure in the early history of Zionism.

Herzl received a secular education and acquired doctorate in law.

As a journalist for a Viennese paper, he went to Paris to work there as a correspondent and to report on the Dreyfus Affair, which captured attention of Europeans in 1894.
Dreyfus Affair

- was a political scandal which divided France during the 1890s and early 1900s. It involved the wrongful conviction of Jewish military officer Alfred Dreyfus for treason.
- Dreyfus was put on trial in 1894 and was accused of espionage, found guilty and sentenced to life in prison on Devil's Island. In September of 1899, he was offered a pardon from the president of France, which he declined.
- It was not until 1906 that Dreyfus was exonerated of the charges and readmitted into the army. He was also made a knight in the Legion of Honor.
- He served his nation with distinction beyond his natural retirement age.
The Dreyfus Affair demonstrated to Herzl that if France could play host to virulent anti-Jewish sentiments, Jews could not be secure anywhere.

Though initially an anti-Zionist, after the Dreyfus Affair, Herzl himself started advocating that Jews needed a homeland of their own in which they would form a majority of citizens.

He imagined this “Jewish home” (not yet state) in Argentina or in the western United States.

Other Zionists were not so ambivalent and wanted the Jewish national home to be built in Palestine, the place remembered in Jewish holy texts and rituals.
World Zionist Organization

- In 1897, Herzl organized the first Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland.

- The Zionist Congress created the World Zionist Organization (WZO), which continues to speak for the World Zionist Movement.

- Herzl became the first president of the WZO.

- The Congress also issued the Basel Program, which not only called for the establishment of a “Jewish home” in Palestine, but specified the tactic to achieve the goal.

- The Basel Program stipulated that that goal should be achieved through diplomacy.
While Herzl and other tried to achieve the support from a variety of powers (including the Ottoman Empire), the Zionist movement achieved its first real success in 1917 when the British issued the Balfour declaration.

The Balfour declaration stated, in part,

“His Majesty’s Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors 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.”
The British government and the Balfour Declaration

Historians disagree as to **why the British would give the promise they gave in the Balfour Declaration** (see Gelvin, ch.11, p. 179):

1. **Some assert that the British did so for strategic reasons.** Because the Jewish settlers in Palestine would far outnumbered by the Muslim Arabs, they would remain dependent on the British and be more than willing to help the British preserve the security of the nearby Suez Canal.

2. **Others attribute the Balfour Declaration to a British overestimation of Jewish power in the U.S. and Russia.** Britain wanted to maintain support in the U.S. for the Entente side. It also wanted to keep Russia, which had just experienced a revolution, in the war. Thinking that Jews had a great deal of influence over the American president, Woodrow Wilson, and within the Bolshevik movement, the British figured that they had nothing to lose. As we know, the British underestimated the effects of the Balfour Declaration. Their wartime promise had consequences far beyond those they anticipated at the time.
Faysal-Weizmann Agreement

- Chaim Weizmann’s greatest achievements, as a president of the WZO, is the Balfour Declaration in 1917.

- Weizmann also made an agreement with Amir Faysal in January 3, 1919, who was at that time the King of Hejaz.

- The agreement committed both parties to conducting all relations between the groups by the most cordial goodwill and understanding, to work together to encourage immigration of Jews into Palestine on a large scale while protecting the rights of the Arab peasants and tenant farmers, and to safeguard the free practice of religious observances. The Muslim Holy Places were to be under Muslim control.
Faysal-Weizmann Agreement

- The Zionist movement undertook to assist the Arab residents of Palestine and the future Arab state to develop their natural resources and establish a growing economy.

- The Kingdom of Hejaz undertook to support the Balfour Declaration of 1917 calling for a Jewish national home in Palestine.

- Disputes were to be submitted to the British Government for arbitration.
Faysal conditioned his acceptance on the fulfillment of British wartime promises to the Arabs, who had hoped for independence in a vast part of the Ottoman Empire. He appended to the typed document a hand-written statement:

"Provided the Arabs obtain their independence as demanded in my [forthcoming] Memorandum dated the 4th of January, 1919, to the Foreign Office of the Government of Great Britain, I shall concur in the above articles. But if the slightest modification or departure were to be made [regarding our demands], I shall not be then bound by a single word of the present Agreement which shall be deemed void and of no account or validity, and I shall not be answerable in any way whatsoever."
Palestinian Arabs &
the Balfour Declaration

- The Palestinian Arabs themselves had rejected the Balfour Declaration outright. According to Arthur Goldschmidt Jr. (author of A Concise History of the Middle East Westview Press, 1979), they made up over 90% of Palestine and refused to accept that a homeland be created for another people on their territory. Furthermore, they resented not being consulted by the British about a Declaration that neglected the political rights of the non-Jewish majority in Palestine.
The Faysal-Weizmann agreement survived only a few months. The outcome of the peace conference itself did not provide the vast Arab state that Faysal desired mainly because the British and French had struck their own secret Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 dividing the Middle East between their own spheres of influence, and soon Faysal began to express doubts about cooperation with the Zionist movement. Within a year he was calling on Britain to grant the Arabs of Palestine their political rights as part of his Syrian Kingdom.
Weizmann called Palestinians "treacherous", "arrogant", "uneducated", and "greedy" and complained to the British that the system in Palestine did "not take into account the fact that there is a fundamental qualitative difference between Jew and Arab".


After his meeting with Faysal, Weizmann reported that Faysal was "contemptuous of the Palestinian Arabs whom he doesn't even regard as Arabs".*

Chaim Weizmann to Vera Weizmann, ibid, p210.

(* Palestinians considered themselves either Palestinians, Syrians, or Ottomans.)
In preparation for Faysal-Weizmann meeting, the British had written to Faysal that "we know that the Arabs despise, condemn and hate the Jews", but that the Jewish race is "universal, all-powerful, and cannot be put down".

In 1917 Weizmann worked with Lord Balfour on the Balfour Declaration. Although the Balfour Declaration stipulated that "nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of the existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine", Weizmann said, “with regard to the Arab question - the British told us that there are several hundred thousand Negroes there, but this is a matter of no consequence.”
As a result of the Balfour Declaration, the British, as mandatories in Palestine, allowed the immigration of Jews into the country.

However, Jewish immigrations to Palestine started before the Balfour Declaration.

The first immigration “aliya” (pl. aliyot) started in the time of Baron de Rotschild’s initiative in 1882 as he tried to create a settler plantation colony in Palestine, similar to the French settler plantation colonies in Algeria.

During the second and third “aliyot”, which took place during 1904-1914 and 1918-1923, 65,000 Jews immigrated to Palestine from Europe.
Moshavot & Kibbutzim

- Influenced by socialist and romantic back-to-the-land ideas that were then popular in Germany, these new immigrants established agricultural settlements including collective farms - moshavot (sg. moshav) and communal farms - kibbutzim (sg. kibbutz).

- The settlers also resurrected the Biblical language of Hebrew for use as their national language.

- The most important for the future of the region was, however, the new adopted labor policy, which is condensed in two slogans "conquest of land" and "conquest of labor".
Conquest of land

- The slogan “Conquest of land” refers to the need the Zionists felt to make their imprint on the land of Palestine by “taming the wilderness” though settlement activity.
Conquest of labor

- The slogan “Conquest of labor” refers to the need the Zionist felt to remake the Jewish people by having Jews fill all jobs in the economy.

- While in Europe, these Jews were allowed to participate only in certain urban occupations (trade, medicine, pharmacy, clerkship, academics, etc.)

- They believed that only by conquering the entire economy, Jews could become a true nation.
Conquest of labor cont’d.

- Although the idea of the “conquest of labor” initially had its utopian, socialist and romanticist roots, there were practical reasons for Jewish settlers to shun Arab labor.

- The Zionist slogan “a land without a people for a people without land” did not make much sense, for Arabs were there and they were willing to work on land for much lower wages than the new Jewish settlers.

- The expansion of the labor force to include low-wage workers would drive wages down and discourage the immigration of new settlers.
Well, Zionists felt that the success of their project depended on severing the economic links connecting the two communities.

Thus, after the Zionists bought land, often from absentee Ottoman landlords, they frequently displaced Palestinian farmers whose services were not longer required.
Arabs of the Ottoman Syria

- Before WWI most educated Palestinians viewed themselves as Ottomans.

- After WWI, when the Ottoman identity was no longer a viable option, some Palestinians were attached to Arab nationalism while others viewed themselves as Syrians.

- The Palestinian community was hardly as well organized and as unified as the Zionist community.

- Arab community of Palestine was traditionally divided into Muslim and Christian communities.
Furthermore, the Arabs of Syria, being under the French mandate used to get their education in France and felt in ease with the French culture while the Arabs of Palestine under the British mandate through their education in Britain came to regard the British institutions (not the French ones) as a model to be emulated.

In addition to that, the inhabitants of Palestine faced another problem that no other inhabitants of the former Ottoman Syria faced - Zionist settlements.

Thus, the Palestinian nationalism developed much later after Zionism and in a response to Zionism, however, that does not mean that it is any less legitimate than Zionism.
Escalation of tensions

- The escalation of tensions between the Palestinian and Jewish community happened during the late 1920’s and 1930’s.

- The escalation was due to the dramatically intensified Jewish immigration to Palestine during the rise of Nazism and Fascism in Europe.

- From **1931-1935** the Jewish population of Palestine rose from **175,000** to **400,000**.

- In other words it grew from 17% to 31% of the total population.
By 1931, Zionist land purchases had led to the ejection of approximately 20,000 Palestinian families from their land.

Close to 30% Palestinian farmers were landless.

Another 75-80% did not have enough land for subsistence.
Great Revolt - 1936

- In 1936 Palestine exploded in violence.

- This revolt Palestinians call the **Great Revolt** and it is the most traumatic event in modern Palestinian history after the 1948 war.

- To put down the revolt, the British launched a brutal counterinsurgency campaign employing tactics all too familiar to Palestinians today -

  collective punishment of villages, “targeted killings” (assassinations), mass arrests, deportations, and the dynamiting of homes of suspected guerrillas and the sympathizers.
The revolt and the British reaction to it ravaged the natural leadership of the Palestinian community and opened up new cleavages in that community.

Many wealthy Palestinians fled having faced the extortionate demands of rival Palestinian gangs.

Many wealthy Palestinians were imprisoned by the British or forced to exile.

The Palestinian society never recovered.

The roots of what Palestinians called the nakba (calamity) of 1948 can be found in the Great Revolt.
Hajj Muhammad Amin al-Husayni
(1895-1974)
Grand Mufti of Jerusalem
(1921-1948)
Hajj Muhammad Amin al-Husayni

... a member of the al-Husayni clan of Jerusalem, was a Palestinian and Arab nationalist and a Muslim leader in Palestine. Al-Husayni was also the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem over the period from 1921 to 1948.

Like many other Arab leaders of his time al-Husayni was known for his anti-Zionism and fought against the establishment of a National home for the Jewish people in the territory of the British Mandate of Palestine, particularly during the Great Arab Revolt. He fled Palestine in 1937 and took refuge in Nazi Germany during World War II and helped recruit Muslims for the Waffen-SS. In 1941 al-Husayni met Adolf Hitler in Berlin and asked him to oppose, as part of the Arab struggle for independence, the establishment of a Jewish state. During the 1948 Palestine War his faction was represented by the Army of the Holy War, which had been founded as a secret society by Jamal al-Husayni in 1936. He opposed King Abdullah's ambitions for the Palestinian territory captured by the Arabs during the war.

After being sidelined successively by the Arab Nationalist Movement and the Palestine Liberation Organization, he lost most of his remaining political influence. Al-Husayni died in Beirut, Lebanon in 1974.
Official German picture radioed from Berlin shows Adolf Hitler receiving Haj Amin Al-Husseini, Moslem leader, grand mufti of Jerusalem and British-hater. Mufti received conversations “important to Arabian nations.”
Grand mufti al-Husayni before the Guard of Honor of the 13th Waffen-SS-Division “Handschar”
The White Paper

- In the wake of the Great Revolt, in 1937, the British proposed dividing Palestine into two separate territories, one Zionist, one Palestinian.

- In 1939, they backed away from partition and issued a dubious document called the **White Paper**, which was not satisfactory to either side.

- The White Paper of 1939 advocated putting restrictions on (but not ending) Jewish immigration, closer supervision of (but not ending) land sales, and independence within 10 years.

- Both community rejected the document.
In the aftermath of WWII

- By 1947, at the time when India was about to achieve independence and the cold war was in its initial stages, the British had stationed more soldiers in Palestine than many thought prudent.

- Their soldiers and diplomats targeted by the Zionist splinter groups, their economy in shambles, the British decided to forward the Palestinian issue to the hands of newly established United Nations.

- The General Assembly of the UN voted to terminate the British mandate and partition Palestine between Zionist and Palestinian communities.
First Palestine War 1947-49

- In the wake of the UN vote to partition Palestine, a civil war broke out between the two communities.
- The civil war was followed by the intervention of surrounding Arab nations on behalf of the Palestinians.
- The First Palestine war became to be called the War of Independence by Israelis and Nakba (Calamity) by Palestinians.
The First Palestine War
Consequences for Israelis

- As a result of the war, the state of Israel was created and its borders corresponded to the ceasefire lines.
- Israel quickly received international recognition.
- No peace treaty was signed between Israel and its neighbors only armistice agreements.
- No Arab state recognized Israel until Egypt did in 1978.
The First Palestine War
Consequences for Palestinians

- About 720,000 Palestinians became refugees.

- Modern scholars agree that this refugee population emerged as a result of:
  - escape from war zones,
  - expulsions (particularly in the North), and frightening them with terror.

- In the case of the village of Dayr Yassin alone, upward of 240 men, women, and children were butchered and stuffed in the village well.

- Acts like this were hardly kept secret, for, as Lenin said, the purpose of terrorism is to terrorize.
Most Palestinian refugees ended up in the West Bank (of the Jordan river, which was occupied by Jordan until 1967), the Ghaza strip (which was occupied by Egypt until the same year), and neighboring Arab countries.

Those Arabs who remained in Israel were subject to martial law until 1966.
The First Palestine War
Influence on Arab states

- The Arab defeat in the First Palestine War came to symbolize a host of grievances the Egyptian, Syrian, and Iraqi military officers fueled against their government.

- They accused those governments of engaging the war half-heartedly (which they did) and blamed their defeat on the incompetence and corruption of their governments.

- They also equated their defeat with the inability or unwillingness of Arab governments to promote the sort of economic and social development that would have assured success of the battlefield as well.

- Taking matters into their own hands, these officers launched coup d’etat in Syria (1949), Egypt (1952), and Iraq (1958).