

Why Blame Israel?

The Facts Behind the Headlines

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ICON BOOKS

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Introduction

Josiah Bartlet, the fictional President in the US television drama, *The West Wing*, recounts a story to his Chief of Staff of a dialogue between a distinguished professor and his student about the intractability of the Middle East conflict. The professor argues that there is endless conflict in the region due to centuries-old disputes over religion and land. No, says the student, it's because it's hot, and there isn't enough water.¹ For those keen to go beyond the narrow parameters of the professor's explanation and to discover just how complex – and often hijacked by other issues and events – the Arab–Israeli conflict and Israeli history have become, then read on. Yes, to some degree, the dispute is about two conflicting ancient claims on a single piece of land. To non-Jews or non-Muslims, however, such claims of legitimacy to ownership of the land dating back to ancient times do not constitute sufficient grounds for favouring one claim over the other. In reality, the conflict is dominated by questions of power (both political and economic), military might, the international order of the day, and yes – even water.

It is often said that when an effective Israeli leader speaks he does so using all three tenses at once: past, present and future. In doing this he is relating Jewish events in the past to the present – often seeking legitimacy for his government's actions and policies – while keeping an eye on the future problems and challenges that lie ahead for the state.² Any history of Israel must do likewise in terms of using the past to understand the present and exploring the ways in which the past and present are likely to shape the

future. Accordingly, the last chapter is devoted to highlighting past mistakes and summarising the lessons that need to be learnt if Israel and the Arabs are to move towards some state of peaceful co-existence in the foreseeable future.

The Arab–Israeli conflict is also often referred to as the battle of the maps; from maps purporting to show when the first Jewish community in a particular area was established (and did it pre-date any Arab village there?) to the more sophisticated attempts of the international powers to divide the lands in various ways and using various criteria. The latter was particularly significant during the period of British rule over what was then termed Palestine, when first Britain and France effectively carved up the Middle East between them with the Sykes–Picot Agreement, and during the subsequent British attempts to divide or sub-divide Palestine between its Zionist and Arab populations (see maps 1–4). Israel, it should be remembered, has never enjoyed secure borders, and consequently the map of Israel has evolved as the direct result of wars. Today, with Israel’s borders unchanged since the return of the Sinai Desert to Egypt over twenty years ago, two highly related maps dominate the political agenda: the map of Israeli settlement in the Disputed Territories (or the ‘map with the red dots’) and the Oslo Redeployment map (known as the ‘scrambled egg map’ – see map 11).³

Alongside the map, the visual image – either television or photograph – has come to play a central role in legitimising Israel’s existence, its borders and its conflict with the Arabs. In recent years, two images have come to characterise Israel and the Disputed Territories. The first is of a badly mangled bus with only its basic structure intact – the latest target of the now terrifyingly routine strategy of suicide bombing. Such attacks have turned Israeli cities into war zones, reducing everyday life in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem to a perverse game of Russian roulette (or the ‘odds game’ as some Israelis prefer to term it).⁴ The second image is of an Israeli soldier firing on a Palestinian, and the wounded Palestinian being carried to a waiting ambulance. Both images are brutal, and help stoke the embers of hatred in the region. No matter how tragic, however, they merely reflect news

editors' obsession with the humanistic story over the developing of a deeper understanding of the complex arguments. Somewhere along the line, the deep-lying arguments over Israel and its fight for its existence have been lost in the rush to play the blame game or the 'who's right, who's wrong' set of arguments.

Sadly, nowadays it would appear that most images are used in conjunction with largely ill-informed reporting. The reports are shown by television companies dominated by a left-of-centre political culture, to reinforce stereotypical perceptions such as the notion of the Palestinians as victims and the Israelis as oppressors. Coverage of the alleged massacre of Palestinians by the Israeli army in the refugee camp at Jenin in 2002 illustrates this in-built political correctness. Many television companies were quick to act as judge and jury and convict Israel of perpetrating a terrible crime against the Palestinians, relying on accounts by local Palestinians and second-hand accounts by aid workers in the area. As we now know, no such massacre took place and when the area was opened up to the international press, revised versions of events had to be put out by the news networks, who had in effect broken codes of practice in reporting such events. Once more, the humanistic story with pieces to camera by clearly anti-Israeli reporters had replaced hard facts. A specific difficulty with the BBC's coverage has been their refusal to label Palestinian suicide bombers as terrorists. To be fair, this policy has left many senior BBC journalists feeling uncomfortable, but the directive came from senior management in London, and reflects deep contradictions in the BBC's use of the term.⁵

Looking further afield, any quick glance at the Arab media reveals a more radical lexis of vocabulary than its Western counterparts. 'Occupation', 'Zionist entity', 'forces of repression', 'military might', 'curfew' and, yes, even 'Nazi' are commonplace. There is a strong tendency in editorials to talk of the injustice of the current situation, and an over-concentration on the past at the expense of analysing attempts to solve the conflict. Until the Oslo Accords of 1993, the majority of the Arabic media made no distinction between the two major political parties in Israel – the Labour Party and the Likud – or between a hard-liner and a

moderate. There was little awareness of the internal dynamics that govern Israeli politics, and little in the way of cultural awareness. Clearly, the media need to focus on looking behind the headlines and at the key arguments and developments within Israel, which today remains a democratic odyssey in a region where civil society and political culture remain very much locked in the past.

There is an old joke that many a Middle Eastern expert has used to break the ice with audiences. So familiar are the various sides in the Arab–Israel dispute with the central arguments – the joke goes – that in negotiations they should merely shout out numbers at each other, followed by another number for the counter-argument. Such a methodology would save much time and wasted breath. In truth, when we look at Israel we cannot ignore such questions as the right to the land and the counter-arguments that the Arabs put forward. By simply agreeing, however, that both sides have merits to their arguments, we can help avoid the tortuous debate of the blame game that has characterised the conflict since its conception. It should be noted, though, that many Arabs argue that by taking this stand of starting from a level playing field we are, in effect, providing legitimacy for the current position of Israeli political, economic and military dominance in the region.

A survey conducted in the United States in the year 2000, and published widely in the American media, found that Israel topped the poll in two categories among the sample group of Americans questioned: the most popular country and the most disliked country. This seeming contradiction says much about the continuing polarisation of opinion about Israel as it enters the 21st century, and its 56th year of existence. Throughout its brief history there has been such a disproportionate interest in Israel from the media, academics, diplomats and politicians that it is important to remind oneself that Israel's population is only 6.5 million – a size comparable to the population of Scotland. In terms of impact, however, there can be few other recently created states that can match Israel. It is almost impossible to turn on the television news without hearing about the latest development in

the peace process or the latest twists and turns in Israel's often turbulent but rarely dull domestic politics. Indeed, with the exception of the United States, Israel takes up more news hours than any other country in the world. Israeli leaders are recognised the world over, and in recent years have appeared to spend as much time abroad as at home during their period in office.

Since its creation in 1948, Israel has been in a state of conflict with the Arab world and has fought five major wars against Arab states (1948, 1956, 1967, 1973 and 1982). Throughout this time, Israel has remained engaged in a complex conflict with the Palestinians. Even during times of so-called tranquillity in the Arab–Israeli conflict there have been incidents, attacks and retaliations that have created the impression of a permanent state of war. As a region of great strategic importance, the Middle East as a whole has to a degree been shaped by its contacts with the external powers: the Turks, the British and French, and, following the Second World War, the USA and the Soviet Union. Israel's conflict with the Arabs has, at various times, and to varying degrees, been complicated by the intervention of one or more of these external powers. As Bernard Lewis points out, the intrusion of these powers has meant that there has been no clear resolution of the Arab–Israeli conflict, as no one side has been allowed to secure a total victory over the other.⁶ The conflict has therefore taken the form of a series of relatively short wars that have been ended by the intervention of the key powers of the day before a tactical victory could be turned into a major strategic victory. As a result, the unintended consequence of international intervention has been to prolong rather than resolve the conflict.

Israel has had to endure economic boycott imposed by the Arab states both on Israeli goods and on companies that conducted business with it. At times, Israeli shipping has been excluded from using key waterways. As a result, Israel has remained to all intents and purposes isolated in the Middle East region, and has developed ties with European countries and the USA rather than its neighbours. In recent years, there have been signs of progress towards the ending of the Arab–Israeli conflict. Israel signed peace deals with Egypt in 1977 and Jordan in 1994,

and deals have also been signed between Israel and the Palestinians, starting with the Oslo Accords in 1993. But at the start of the 21st century it is difficult to foresee an end to the conflict. Indeed, there has been a marked return to violence following the breakdown of the Oslo Accords and the start of the self-titled Palestinian Al-Aqsa Intifada in October 2000.

In writing *Why Blame Israel? The Facts Behind the Headlines*, the aim has been to present a clear and concise outline of the arguments that surround the birth and development of Israel rather than to present a comprehensive chronological account of the events and personalities. Given the heated debate that still surrounds Israel, this has been no easy task. Historians – Jewish/Israeli and Arab – strongly disagree on key events in Israeli history. As researcher and author of this work I do not claim to be totally objective. I am, however, neither Jewish nor Arab, and nor do I have any particular axe to grind.

Though the Arab–Israeli conflict dominates the history of Israel, there are other areas that are no less emotive or divisive to Israelis. These include the absorption of immigrants, divisions between Ashkenazi and Oriental Jews, the secular–religious debate, and disputes over the distribution of the national economic cake. This book, as a result, also highlights the major arguments surrounding these areas that have been at the centre of the development of the state of Israel.

CHAPTER ONE

The Setting: Three Men Searching for a Political Lifeboat

In the summer of 2000, three men and their respective advisers sat in a log cabin at the US Presidential retreat of Camp David and attempted to resolve one of the most intractable conflicts of the 20th century. In truth, their meeting was born more out of personal desperation than any political rationality. An American President, Bill Clinton, led the cast list, in the twilight of his term of office and desperately seeking a place in the history books for his peace-making activities rather than his sexual deeds. To President Clinton's right during the pre-summit photo op was Ehud Barak, Israel's most decorated soldier and now its Prime Minister, leader of a crumbling coalition government that had failed to address the most pressing issues of the day for the Jewish state: peace and the economy. To the President's left stood the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who had been leader of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) when President Johnson was in office in the 1960s, and had seen six US Presidents come and go since that time. Arafat now headed the politically troubled and economically cash-strapped Palestinian Authority, a quasi-governing body which had been set up as a result of the Oslo Peace Accords he had signed with Yitzhak Rabin in September 1993.

After two weeks of tense and often acrimonious negotiations, the talks broke up without any agreement being reached. President Clinton could barely contain his frustration as he faced the world's media for the debriefing session. Unlike previous occasions, in which a failure to bridge the gap had been met with

statements of cautious US optimism for the longer term chances of success, this time there was little attempt by the President to mask his disappointment. When Arafat telephoned Clinton following the failure at Camp David to praise his peace-making efforts, the President responded: 'I am a colossal failure because of you.'¹ Though Clinton may have said it partly in irony, the message was clear. Hillary Clinton was equally damning of Arafat: 'Unfortunately, while Barak came to Camp David to make peace, Arafat did not ... Arafat was never ready to make the hard choices necessary to reach an agreement.'²

Camp David was the swansong for the process that had become generally known as the Oslo peace process. The term itself is somewhat misleading, as it refers to a series of agreements signed by the Israeli government and the PLO. The first of these had been negotiated in secret in Oslo during late 1992 and early 1993. It was this agreement that produced the famous handshake between Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat on the White House lawn. This was followed by several other increasingly detailed agreements signed in Cairo and Washington, collectively known as the Oslo Agreements.

Putting aside all the detail and political history of the accords, the central philosophical feature of the process was an attempt to solve the core of the Arab–Israeli conflict, the Israeli–Palestinian dispute, by means of creating two states with a degree of open borders between them. This was considered to be important, as to a large extent the economic viability of the Palestinian state depended on large parts of its labour force being able to enter the Israeli jobs market and earn wages that they would subsequently spend back in the Palestinian state. This was no one-way dependency. For many years, Israel had been chronically short of cheap labour, and the Palestinians, many of whom worked without proper papers or employee national insurance contributions, filled an important gap, especially in the construction industry and domestic sectors.

The failure at Camp David put an end to all this. From here onwards there is a new set of terminology: separation, physical barriers and fences replace the vocabulary of co-operation,

mutual dependency and integration. This marks a return to the peace-making strategies of the era of the late 1940s, when the United Nations General Assembly voted in 1947 to divide what was then Palestine into two states: one for the Jews and the other for the Arabs (see map 5). Under the UN proposals, the states were to be fully independent, with Jerusalem made an international city. The events of the next 50 years stem from two brutal facts: the Zionist leadership accepted the partition plan, while the Arab leadership of the local Palestinian population rejected the concept of partition in any form and moved to defeat the Zionists on the battlefield. Elie Kedourie makes the additional charge that not only did the leadership of the Palestinian Arabs oppose Zionism, they called in the Arab and Muslim worlds in order to help their cause. By doing this they took a local limited conflict and widened and raised its importance.³ The wider Arab world took a similarly hostile view towards the Zionists, whom they regarded as little more than colonial settlers or ‘outsiders’ who would be only temporary residents of the region.

Before looking at who these Zionist immigrants were and where they came from, it is important to sketch the history of Palestine and the basic origins of Zionism. A word of caution here: both the history of Palestine and the development of Zionism lend themselves to separate comprehensive studies in their own right. Central to all this is the question: why Palestine?

Here, a brief look at key points in the history of Jerusalem and Palestine helps to illustrate the linkage between the Jews and the land.

Jerusalem’s origins are said to date back some 4,000 years. In the beginning, around 1000 BC, King David captured the city and declared it the capital of the Israelites. Subsequently, David’s son, King Solomon, built the First Temple there. Following Solomon’s death in around 928 BC, his kingdom split into two: Jerusalem remained the capital of Judah (the southern part of the empire). Later, around 587 BC, the Babylonians conquered Judah and destroyed the First Temple, taking many Jews to Babylonia as prisoners. In 538 BC, however, after he conquered the Babylonians, Cyrus the Great, King of Persia, decided to

allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem, and it was these returning Jews who built what became known as the Second Temple.

The period of Roman rule was marked by a major Jewish revolt that started in AD 66 and resulted in the seizing of the city by the Jews, until the Romans eventually retook it in AD 70. Subsequently, the Romans destroyed the Second Temple and much of the rest of the city's fortifications. Many Jews died during the Roman siege of the city and the ensuing battles, and those surviving Jews who weren't either executed or enslaved were sent into exile. Today, the Western Wall represents the only surviving part of the Second Temple.

Following the destruction of the Second Temple, Jews who have gone into exile have always desired to return to Zion (one of the biblical names for Jerusalem). Every year the traditional Passover meal, which commemorates the exodus from ancient Egypt, concludes with the phrase 'next year in Jerusalem'. For centuries, however, this desire was only a fantasy, and Jews living in the Diaspora adapted to their new countries. Zion, which had been under Muslim rule since the 7th century, remained possible for only a small number of Jews able to make the tortuous journey and to have a means of existence once there.⁴

At the start of the 19th century, the population of Palestine was less than 300,000, of which around only 5,000 were Jewish. Palestine itself was a small part of the Ottoman Empire that encompassed much of the Middle East and had been ruled by various Turkish dynasties since 1517. By the mid-19th century, the Jewish population had doubled, but still stood at around only 10,000. Jerusalem itself, however, was becoming a centre of international activity, due to the arrival of an increasing number of missionaries of various faiths.⁵ These groups, to some degree, were encouraged to settle in Palestine by national governments that were seeking a pretext to gain a foothold in the city and the surrounding area. The British, for example, sought to protect the Protestants, the Russians the Greek and Russian Orthodox, and the French the Roman Catholics.⁶ The Jews, however, had no national patron – either in Jerusalem or for the small pockets of Jewish communities outside the city. As a result, individuals came

to play a more prominent role in the development and protection of the Jewish community in Palestine. One of the first to intervene in support of the Jews was Sir Moses Montefiore. During 1838, Montefiore tried – and failed – to negotiate a charter for land in Palestine where Jews would be able to live without interference. Unfortunately for Montefiore, his negotiating partner Muhammed Ali, the Viceroy of Egypt (and Palestine and Syria), was overthrown in 1841, and this helped put an end to the possibility of securing such a charter.

During the second half of the 19th century, the movement for national revival and independence of the Jewish people in Eretz Yisrael – Zionism – was born. The Jewish writer Nathan Birnbaum first used the actual term ‘Zionism’ in 1892.⁷ A religious desire to return to the land of Eretz Yisrael had existed ever since the unsuccessful revolt against the Romans. This yearning was closely linked to the notions of messianic beliefs. The new Zionist movement, however, differed from the previous desire to return to Zion in its mainly secular content. Zionism did not develop in a laboratory.⁸ The fierce anti-Semitism that swept through Europe at the time helped to shape Zionism’s intellectual and political development. European nationalist and socialist doctrines influenced Jewish thinkers. In other words, the original Zionist thinkers were very much a product of their age.

The first major Zionist thinkers were actually predated by several of what can be termed pre-Zionist thinkers. Three figures warrant attention: Moses Hess, Rabbi Kalischer and Rabbi Alkalai. Moses Hess (1812–75), a German Jewish socialist, in his book *Rome and Jerusalem* – published in 1862 – argued that the establishment of a state by the Jews, based on socialist principles, would lead to a social and economic normalisation of the Jewish people. Central to the thinking of Rabbi Kalischer (1795–1874) was that the Messiah would come only after a large number of Jews had settled in Eretz Yisrael. Rabbi Alkalai (1798–1878) published a work in 1839 entitled *Pleasant Paths*, in which he also argued the need for Jewish colonies to be set up in the Holy Land as a condition for the return of the Messiah. There is also evidence of some basic Jewish nationalist thinking in the works of

Alkalai. Before his death in 1878, Alkalai had organised several groups of followers and had moved to Palestine himself to help with the development of Jewish settlement.

The first major Zionist thinkers were Yehuda Leib Pinsker (1821–91) and Theodor Herzl (1860–1904). In 1882, Pinsker published his book *Auto-Emancipation*, which argued in short that the emancipation granted by others would not solve the problems of the Jewish people. Only territorial concentration and sovereignty would lead to normalisation for the Jews. The most significant figure in the growth of Zionism during the 19th century, however, was Theodor Herzl. Born in Budapest, he was brought up in a liberal (reform) Jewish family. It was, however, not until he attended the University of Vienna, where he studied law, that his interest in Jewish affairs – and in particular the growing number of anti-Semitic incidents in Europe – took root. In 1896, he published his book *The Jewish State: an Attempt at a Modern Solution to the Jewish Question*. The basic central argument of the book was the contention that Europe's hatred of the Jews was unavoidable. The Jews, as a result, would be victimised and persecuted as long as they remained a vulnerable and unassimilated minority. The only solution, Herzl concluded, was the creation of a Jewish homeland.

In the following year the development of Zionism took a significant step forward from theory to reality when the World Zionist Organisation was created. In August 1897, it held its first congress in Basle, Switzerland. Following the Basle Congress it was clear that Zionism as a national movement had two inter-related aims. The first was the return of the Jews to the land by means of developing agricultural activities, and the revival of a national 'Jewish' life including social, cultural, economic and political elements. The second was to secure a national homeland for the Jews. More specifically, the Basle Programme stated that the aim of the Zionist movement was to create a homeland in Palestine for the Jewish people that was secured by public law. At Basle, Herzl stated that they were there to lay the foundation stone of the house that was to shelter the Jewish nation. In addition to holding its congress, the organisation started to lobby

the relevant powers – the Ottoman Empire and Germany – for support for a Jewish homeland.

The second Zionist Congress meeting in 1898 passed a resolution that sanctioned efforts to gain a legal charter for Jewish settlement in Palestine. Herzl and the Zionist leaders initially approached Kaiser Wilhelm II, as Germany held some influence with the Ottoman Empire which controlled Palestine at the time. However, the Ottoman Sultan was against the idea, and the Kaiser was said not to wish to support the Zionists over his ally.

In 1903, Herzl's attention shifted to what became known as the Ugandan option. Central to this was the question of whether only Palestine (Eretz Yisrael) should be considered as the homeland for the Jews, or whether other areas should be discussed. The then British Colonial Secretary, Neville Chamberlain, suggested that there was a chance that the Zionists might be granted a homeland for the Jews in British East Africa. Herzl, although preferring Palestine, argued that some territory was better than none.

At the sixth Zionist Congress meeting in 1903, a map of East Africa – not Palestine – hung for all to see. After a stormy debate, Herzl won the day when a proposal to consider Uganda as a possible Jewish homeland was passed by 295 votes to 177, with 100 abstentions. Herzl, however, died in 1904, at the relatively young age of 44, robbing Zionism of one of its most important early leaders. One year after his death, the seventh Zionist Congress finally rejected the so-called 'Uganda Plan'. This vote caused a split in the movement, with some Zionists leaving the World Zionist Organisation. Some of these dissenters argued that the Jewish people needed an uninhabited territory, and that sadly Palestine did not meet this requirement. Others argued that the need for a homeland was so pressing that any land offered should be accepted. For the vast majority of Zionism, the vote in 1905 marked the end of the consideration of any land but Palestine for the Jewish homeland.

At the time of Herzl's death it was clear that two distinct groupings had emerged within the Zionist movement. The first of these, the cultural Zionists, were more interested in the development

of Hebrew and Jewish culture such as language, arts identity and religion, than with the potential establishment of a state. They, in effect, saw Zionism as a solution to the problems of Judaism and they were associated with the thinking of the writer Asher Ginsberg (1856–1927). The second grouping, the political Zionists, argued that the need for territory was the most important requirement of the Zionist movement. Indeed, Herzl's pragmatic reaction to the proposals for the Ugandan option was a clear illustration of the aim of the political Zionists. As the Zionist movement as a whole grew, so more and more people started to emigrate to Palestine. These new immigrants expanded existing Jewish colonies and founded new ones. In 1909, the first Kibbutz was started by the Sea of Galilee, called 'Kibbutz Degania', and in the same year Tel Aviv was founded along the shoreline from Jaffa.

These settlement activities in Palestine represented the practical approach to Zionism, and this combined with political Zionism to form what was termed 'synthetic Zionism', which became closely associated with Chaim Weizman (1874–1952). Born in Russia, Weizman played a central role in the development of the Zionist movement and was to become Israel's first president. In 1904, Weizman emigrated from Russia to Britain, where he lobbied for the Zionist cause and played an influential role in winning some degree of British recognition for a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Along with David Ben-Gurion, Weizman became one of the central figures of the pre-state Zionist movement, serving as President of the World Zionist Organisation during 1921–31 and 1935–46.

In historical terms, the period of population change in Palestine was quite short, starting only in the 1880s. Perhaps the greatest myth surrounding the arrival of the various waves of Jewish immigration to Palestine during this time (Aliyah) was the question of their motives for coming in the first place. The majority of the immigrants who came to Palestine did not do so for Zionist reasons. Rather, they came for a variety of reasons that involved both persecution in their country of origin and a lack of third country option. The latter became an increasingly

important factor when the United States closed its doors to Jewish immigration. Many who came to Palestine found life there to be too harsh and left. Emigration has been a constant problem for the Zionist movement, both in Palestine and subsequently in Israel. In both the Yishuv* and the subsequent state of Israel, there is clear linkage between immigration and security. In short, as much of the land as possible had to be settled in order to control it, and the only means of achieving this was by having a larger population to distribute around it.⁹ This concept in modern terms is known as ‘putting facts on the ground’.

In the early days of the first and second Aliyahs, the immigrants, most of whom came from Eastern European urban backgrounds, struggled with having to make the land fertile. It is here that one of the great dilemmas of the Zionist movement became apparent. Who should farm the land? The first immigrants took the view that local Arab labour was both better equipped to undertake this arduous task and also very cheap. The second wave of immigrants took the view that the state for the Jews would be built using Hebrew labour, and they clashed with the veteran immigrants over this question. Eventually, the second group carried the day, but the debate about using Arab or foreign labour never really went away. The fallout of the failed Camp David Summit of 2000 did not mean an end to the debate, only the replacement of the cheap Palestinian labour in Israel with foreign workers from Eastern Europe and Asia.

So how were the various waves of immigrants, with their different backgrounds and motivations for being in Palestine, shaped into a nation in waiting with a distinct political culture?

Here money talks. The majority, but by no means all, of the immigrants arrived in Palestine between 1880 and the mid-1960s with little in the way of capital and worldly possessions. Many had been forced to flee their country of origin at short notice,

* See Glossary on p. 232.

others – such as the Jews who escaped Germany under the Nazi regime – had seen their assets frozen or stolen. Upon entering Palestine they found a well-oiled and financed Zionist immigration absorption machine run by the Labour Zionist movement. The immigrants became highly dependent on this machine, run by the veteran immigrants and financed by world Jewry, for their everyday needs ranging from health care to education. Social and economic advancement was to be found through contacts with the Zionist organisations.

The leaders of the Zionist movement in Palestine were of course acutely aware of the dependency ties and used them effectively to ensure their leadership positions and support for their various political agendas. These strong dependency ties have played a pivotal role in Israeli society, with nearly all the newly arriving immigrants up to and including those who came from the ex-Soviet Union during the 1990s being heavily reliant on the immigrant absorption machine for their welfare. What is perhaps slightly different with the more recent immigrants is that their expectations of the absorption and integration process into Israel appear to be much greater than those of earlier immigrants. This has led to rapid disenchantment with Israeli governments from both sides of the political spectrum. The immigrants charge that governments prefer to protect the economic position of the veteran immigrants at the expense of the new ones.

The dependency ties meant that the vast majority of new immigrants accepted the rule of the leadership of the veteran immigrants. This leadership, which included such figures as David Ben-Gurion (Israel's first Prime Minister), was thus largely able to shape the newly arriving immigrants into its existing ideological and organisational structures. Dissent was not tolerated. Immigrants were expected to accept the existing social and economic structures. The increasing threat of Arab violence tended to reinforce these structures, with dissent being portrayed as close to treason. Consequently, even before the state of Israel was created, a strong, highly centralised élite had been formed that was transferred to the state of Israel in 1948 and came to characterise the first decades of Israel's existence.

To a large extent, external factors dictated the pace of development of Zionism in Palestine. Central to this was the attitude of the British authorities who ruled Palestine following the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the end of the First World War.¹⁰

What factors contributed to the developing British attitude towards Palestine, and how did it try to resolve the growing conflict between the Zionists and Arab populations?

The guiding light for British policy in Palestine was always national self-interest, defined here as shoring up British economic and political interests and checking those of perceived enemies – or as Gabriel Sheffer succinctly put it: ‘the maintenance of British rule over Palestine at minimal cost and for an indefinite period.’¹¹ British policy in Palestine was not unique – as some claim – but rather consistent with the overall goal of British policy in the era of Empire. This was characterised by an identification of key areas of strategic importance to Britain and a divide-and-rule policy with the ‘locals’. From this it is clear that there were instances where the British authorities clearly aimed to play Arab off against Zionist in order to avoid the British nightmare of both sides fighting together to remove Britain from Palestine.

More importantly, British policy was dominated by the question of which group was most useful to British interests at any given time. The Balfour Declaration, which gave support to the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, needs to be seen in this light, as do the various British proposals for resolving the conflict that as time went on came to reflect the British need to keep the Arabs on board. Charges of anti-Semitism in the British Colonial Office – and tales of the ‘Lawrence of Arabia complex’ (the alleged homosexual love affair between ex-public schoolboys and the Arabs) – may well hold some truth. Neither, however, was the main driving force in the formation of British policy towards Palestine.

At the start of the First World War in 1914 there were around 15,000 Jews living in Palestine. The war itself made the Suez

Canal and the area around it strategically important to the British, who had acquired it in 1875. This importance was increased by the fact that Turkey was part of the German–Austro-Hungarian Alliance – and the British did not want an ally of Germany to get too close to the canal. From this period on, the Arabs’ strategic importance to the British was clear. The British encouraged an Arab revolt against the Turks in 1916 with promises of recognition and support for Arab independence in all the regions, and while the Arabs and British fought the Turks, the representatives of the British and French governments met, in effect, to divide up the Middle East at the conclusion of the First World War. The resulting Sykes–Picot agreement of 1916 was reached with only minimal consultation with local leaders, and was eventually modified as, during the final years of the war, the British position was strengthened and the French position weakened. The British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, notified the French that they would have to accept a British protectorate over Palestine, as it was a strategic buffer to Egypt. The original agreement had called for much of Palestine to be ruled by a joint Allied condominium for political and religious reasons.

The First World War saw the British and Allied armies liberate Palestine from the Ottoman Empire and the period of the British Mandate (direct British rule) over Palestine commence. The initial signs for the Zionists were encouraging. In 1917, the British hoped that the support of world Jewry would help the war effort. There was also a fear that if the British did not attract the Jews, then the Germans would. Indeed, there is evidence that Kaiser Wilhelm II was preparing such a gesture to the Zionists with this very intention. It was against this background that on 2 November 1917 the British Foreign Secretary, James Balfour, wrote a letter to the President of the British Zionist Federation, Lord Rothschild. The letter contained so-called British support for the creation of a national home in Palestine for the Jews. In retrospect, the document reflected the penchant of the British civil service for framing proposals with a high degree of creative ambiguity that allowed for varying interpretations by each party.

The modern-day fictional head of the service, Sir Humphrey Appleby, would no doubt have been extremely satisfied with its wording.

The ambiguity of the Balfour Declaration, and subsequent failures of the Zionist movement to get the British to agree upon an interpretation of it or a redraft, led some Zionists to attempt to deal with the Arab leaders in Palestine directly. The concept of direct negotiations as providing the best opportunity to reach accommodation has been a consistent one in the conflict, and even the Oslo Accords for all their failings at least reflected a modern attempt at direct negotiations. Traditionally the problem has lain in finding a partner for negotiations. Ignoring the modern-day sound-bite culture of phrases like ‘partner for peace’, this nevertheless has always proved to be extremely difficult for the Zionists. Either their partner has been assassinated by opponents of a deal, or has deliberately reneged on the deal, or has been unable for a variety of reasons to keep their side of the bargain. Whatever the cause, the result is the same. Back in January 1919 we see an early example of this when Chaim Weizman, later to be the first President of Israel, signed a formal pact with Emir Feisal, who had been the leader of the 1916 Arab revolt against the Turks. The most important part of the agreement, signed on 3 January, concerned the guaranteeing to the Jews of the right of free immigration to Palestine and legal settlement of the land.¹² Conversely, it contained assurances that Arab tenant farmers would retain their own plots of land and be assisted in economic development. Opposition, however, from Arab nationalists and backtracking on what was agreed by Feisal doomed the chances of successfully implementing the agreement.¹³ Another precedent was set here: the difficulty of implementing agreements (often in the face of hostile opponents of the pact) is often greater than that of reaching the agreement in the first place. One wonders if, when left alone to think, President Clinton could have come to the same conclusion a little more quickly during the mid 1990s.

As British control over Palestine deepened, so resentment of the British presence grew. Between 1920 and 1922, tensions between

the Jews and Arabs increased. On the Jewish side, these frustrations were exacerbated by the publication of the White Paper in 1922 by Winston Churchill, the Colonial Secretary, which offered a more restrictive version of the Balfour Declaration. The central feature of the White Paper was that the whole of Palestine would not become the Jewish homeland. Worse was to follow for the Zionists. In 1922, the League of Nations awarded the British mandatory powers, which they had had, in effect, since the end of the First World War. The Mandate itself contained the text of the Balfour Declaration. This point was important, as it amounted to formal recognition by the British of the Zionist claims and the Zionist movement. Showing its true colours, however, as soon as Britain was formally awarded the mandatory powers, it partitioned Palestine into two territories: Palestine and TransJordan. The River Jordan divided these two new states. Jews were not allowed to settle to the east of the river. So from 1922 we start to talk about a partition of an already divided land.

Throughout the 1920s and 30s, Palestine was run along the lines of a British colony. The British High Commissioner, Sir Herbert Samuel, had to deal with increasing anger from Arab residents over the continuing Jewish immigration. Hostility between the local Arab population and the Jews grew stronger with the resulting outbreaks of violence and general civil unrest. The British position reflected these difficulties, and as a result the British established a framework policy for limiting Jewish immigration to Palestine. Initially, the formula that was adopted in 1922 was based on an economic criterion. This allowed economically self-sufficient Jews, dependants of residents, and those with religious occupations to enter Palestine. On top of this, only what were termed as 'subsidised immigrants' were allowed to enter. The World Zionist Organisation had to guarantee the maintenance of these immigrants for at least one year, and this was later redefined as those who had a real prospect of finding employment. Even then, these immigrants were allowed to enter only up to a quota set by the authorities. The key to immigration lay in the award of labour certificates that were drawn up first by the Jewish Agency and agreed with the British

High Commissioner in Palestine. They were distributed along party lines, with each of the political parties receiving certificates in proportion to their political strength in the country. This fact further increased the dependency ties between the newly arriving immigrants and the Labour movement led by immigrants of the Second and Third Aliyah.

This pattern continued. As Arab hostility to the increasing pace of Jewish immigration grew even deeper, so the British reacted by severely limiting the numbers of Jews allowed to enter Palestine. For example, the Jewish Agency asked for 60,000 labour certificates in 1933 and 1934, but the British granted fewer than 18,000. In 1936, 10,695 were requested, but the British approved only 1,800. The British attempted to cap Jewish immigration, imposing an upper level set at 12,000 Jews per year. It was against the backdrop of spiralling violence that a Royal Commission of Inquiry led by the Earl of Peel was dispatched to Palestine on a fact-finding mission in November 1936. In July 1937, the Peel Commission published its report, which concluded that the competing claims of the Arabs and Jews over Palestine were irreconcilable. The situation, it argued in beautifully moralistic tones, was a fundamental conflict of right with right, and the only solution was to partition the land of Palestine into two states. This concept of right versus right here is important as it implies, correctly, that legitimate claims on the lands can be made by both sides. The solution to partition the land appears therefore logical. The proposal argued that the best solution was a Jewish state in one part of Palestine and an Arab state comprising the other part of Palestine and TransJordan, with the British continuing to control the city of Jerusalem and the areas surrounding it (see map 3). In truth, the Peel Report divided Zionists. Some argued that at least it represented a concrete proposal for a real state, while others opposed such a small geographic state. The Arabs rejected the plan and every subsequent proposal that would have led to the establishment of a Jewish state.

In 1938, the pattern of appeasing Arab violence continued when another Royal Commission – this time led by Sir John Woodhead – was dispatched to Palestine to examine partition

plans. The Woodhead Report was published on 9 November 1938. Its findings dealt a severe blow to the aspirations of the Zionists. The report argued that the recommendations of the Peel Report were unrealistic and its proposed lines of partition unreasonable. In its place, the Woodhead Report recommended a new partition plan that would create a much larger Arab state – and conversely a smaller Jewish state (see map 4). The new plan allowed the Jews a state that would comprise only around 5 per cent of West Palestine and less than 1 per cent of the original Mandate territory. The Zionist movement reacted angrily to such a plan, while the Arabs once more rejected any plan that would have created a Jewish state.

As the Second World War approached, the British were forced to openly concede that the Middle East was an area of great strategic importance to it, and in February 1939 the British Colonial Secretary Malcolm MacDonald met with both Arab and Zionist leaders. His conclusion said much about British thinking at the time. He argued that it was the priority of the British government to ensure that the Arab governments were not tempted to accept possible support from hostile powers (Germany). In effect, if the British had to make a choice between the Arabs and the Jews, the British needed Arab help more than Jewish support. In short, the Arabs were more strategically important to the British than the Jews. This position became clearer still with the publication of another White Paper in May 1939, which declared that the authors of the Mandate could not have intended Palestine to be converted into a Jewish state against the will of the Arab population. As a result, within a period of ten years the British would set up an independent Palestinian state (in addition to TransJordan).

This was not the only sweetener to the Arabs. The White Paper called for a limit to Jewish immigration to Palestine of 75,000 for the following five-year period, which would make the Jews a third of the total population of Palestine. Following this five-year period, Jewish immigration was to be stopped. Just as thousands of Jews were attempting to escape the growing horror of Europe, so the British were closing their major avenue of escape. Illegal

immigration, which existed throughout the period of the British Mandate, increased as the crisis in Europe worsened; the British imposed tighter controls, and as the Second World War approached these efforts were stepped up. The resulting bill from the White Paper was passed in the House of Commons by 268 to 179 votes, with 110 abstentions. Among those who condemned the actions of the British government was Winston Churchill, who argued that the bill broke a pledge to the Jews outside Palestine who sought a homeland. Opposition to the bill was not confined to Britain. The League of Nations Mandates Commission argued that the bill meant that Britain had reneged on its commitment to the League and the Zionist movement to support the principles of the Balfour Declaration. Events, however, overtook the League's criticisms as war loomed and the question of the future status of Palestine was no longer at the top of the agenda.

It is worth pointing out that though the proportion of Jews among the total population of Palestine increased steadily during the period of the British Mandate, the Arabs, by far, remained in the majority. For example, in 1930, Arabs accounted for 80 per cent of the total population of Palestine, and even in 1940 the figure was still as high as 70 per cent.¹⁴ During the period of the Mandate the Arab population, contrary to some propaganda, did grow, but did so at a slower rate than within the Jewish communities in Palestine. From this it is important to dispel any notion that there were dramatic shifts in the demographic balance of Palestine. The changes were in reality much slower, and reflected the efforts of the British to restrict the entry of Jewish immigrants into the country.

The Second World War and the Holocaust are two events that go beyond the scope of this book. The effects on the Zionist movement and the subsequent state of Israel were of both a practical and a more profound nature. On a practical level, as details of the Holocaust started to emerge there was an intensification of the efforts of the Zionist movement to convince the British to re-open Palestine to Jewish immigration. The Holocaust led to a weakening, and in some cases an ending, of

opposition to Zionism in most non-Arab countries. On the more profound level, the Holocaust had two effects on the Zionist leadership and on the subsequent state of Israel. First, the realisation that nothing was too horrible to happen, the shattering of the myth that these things just don't happen in a modern civilised world. As we shall see later, this fact affected Israeli foreign policy-making and Israeli national identity. Second, the development of the notion that the Jews must always be prepared to protect themselves – they could not rely upon others to do this for them. The European Jewry had been dependent upon someone else for their protection – the United States, Great Britain and others – and had perished as a result of the failure of that other party to defend them. The notion of self-sufficiency in defence was a cornerstone of Israeli defence doctrine, and played a role in the decision at the start of the 1970s to develop a military industrial complex (MIC) in Israel that would arm the Israeli military.

While the world was horrified by the Holocaust, most Western governments did little to increase Jewish settlement to their respective countries. This lack of an alternative host country made Jewish immigration to Palestine all the more important. The first post-war government in Britain led by Clement Attlee steadfastly refused to alter the policy on immigration to Palestine that had been laid out in the 1939 White Paper. Once more, despite the moral outrage in the international community over the Holocaust, the formation of British policy towards Palestine and the Middle East continued to be determined by British strategic interests. Indeed, as the war ended the British stepped up their efforts to stop illegal immigration to Palestine. They persuaded other governments not to sell boats or offer other forms of assistance to Jewish refugees. However, despite the best efforts of the British, some illegal immigrants did arrive in Palestine and were successfully absorbed by the Zionist movement.

During the Second World War, violence in Palestine had increased as the Jewish military forces became more active. In 1946 the violence escalated following the British decision to set up relocation camps in Cyprus for the Jewish refugees who had

survived the Holocaust. To make matters worse, all Jewish illegal immigration ships that were intercepted on the high seas or even when within sight of Palestine were taken to Cyprus and the immigrants detained in camps surrounded by barbed wire and guards. The British took this a stage further with the interception of the ship *Exodus*, which was carrying nearly 4,000 immigrants to Palestine. The ship arrived and was able to dock in the port of Haifa in northern Palestine, but the British would not let the passengers disembark, and insisted upon the ship returning to its French port of origin. When the Jews refused to disembark in France, the British government sent the ship back to Germany – the country that so many of the immigrants were attempting to flee.

The then Leader of the Opposition, Winston Churchill, speaking in the House of Commons on 1 August 1946, supported the case that the Holocaust survivors should not be resettled in Palestine. ‘No one can imagine that there is room in Palestine for the great masses of Jews who wish to leave Europe, or that they could be absorbed in any period which it is now useful to contemplate. The idea that the Jewish problem could be solved or even helped by a vast dumping of the Jews of Europe into Palestine is really too silly to consume our time in the House this afternoon.’¹⁵ Such speeches, and the actions of the new Labour government, brought much credit to the British, and international pressure continued to increase on the Attlee government to do something for the Jews. On top of this, the British garrison stationed in Palestine was coming under increasing pressure following a series of attacks from Jewish forces that ranged from hit-and-run guerrilla operations to bombings, and this low-intensity war showed little sign of being resolved.

It was against this backdrop that in 1946 an Anglo-American Commission of Inquiry was established to investigate the refugee crisis. In May 1946 it published its recommendations, at the centre of which was the call for 100,000 Jewish immigrants to be allowed to enter Palestine immediately. The British government subsequently proposed the Morrison Plan, which would have led to the British Mandate in Palestine becoming a trusteeship, the country being divided into Arab and Jewish provinces with

separate zones created for Jerusalem and the Negev Desert. Law and order, defence, foreign relations and the ports and airports were to remain under British control. The Morrison Plan accepted the one-off arrival of 100,000 Jewish immigrants, but from that point on, the old formula of immigrants having to prove their economic worth to the county was to be reinstated.

An illustration of the new political and economic realities in the post-Second World War period was that the United States was to finance the implementation of the immigration plan. Rather unsurprisingly, both the Zionist movement and the Arabs rejected the plan. Arab rejection was consistent with their previous hostility to any plan that allowed Jewish immigration, and Zionist opposition was predictable as the plan fell a long way short of realising their aspirations. The Morrison Plan marked the last major attempt of the British government to settle the Palestine question. Following the plan's rejection, the British handed over the problem to the newly created United Nations, which convened a special session on 2 April 1947 to discuss Palestine's future.¹⁶

Britain washed its hands of Palestine because the cost of maintaining a presence in the country, both financially and in terms of lives lost, was no longer outweighed by the strategic benefits of remaining. The withdrawal from Palestine should also be viewed as part of the process of de-colonisation that many British colonies underwent (for that was what Palestine had really become). As Britain departed, its forces left a country in chaos, on the verge of all-out war and with little chance of living in peaceful co-existence. Over 30 years of British rule had done little for Palestine except leave the traditional trappings of empire, such as an organised bureaucracy and legal system, much of which was adopted by Israel. This was not Britain's finest hour. From a Zionist perspective, Naomi Shepherd offers a more charitable summary of the period of the British Mandate. She argues that the Mandate offered protection to the Zionist beach-head in Palestine during its most insecure and vulnerable period during the 1920s and 30s. This, she goes on to suggest, was the fundamental political legacy of the Mandate, and was achieved in

spite of the hostility of so many British officials to Zionism and despite the armed confrontations with Jewish groups in the twilight period of the Mandate.¹⁷ There is some merit in Shepherd's conclusions, but to suggest that the Zionists survived as the result of British policy is overstating the argument. The Zionists survived, and indeed flourished, despite the actions and intentions of the British by, in effect, learning both how to cooperate with the authorities and how to circumvent them.