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DOSSIER

The Arab-Israeli Conflict and the Role of the British Mandate: 1919-1948

El conflicto árabe-israelí y el papel del Mandato Británico: 1919-1948

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the Arab-Israeli conflict by focusing on the often-overlooked period of the British Mandate in Palestine (1919-1948). While contemporary analyses frequently center on post-1948 developments, this study argues that the foundations of the conflict were laid during British colonial administration, whose policies were ambiguous, reactive, and primarily driven by imperial interests rather than local realities. The paper traces how conflicting promises made to Jews and Arabs, mismanagement of governance, and escalating cycles of violence shaped early political dynamics, fostering deep mistrust among all actors involved. By situating the Mandate within broader geopolitical shifts —from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire to the rise of fascism in Europe— the article demonstrates how British rule failed to provide political stability and instead catalyzed long-term polarization. Understanding this period is crucial to comprehending subsequent wars, refugee crises, and contemporary violence in the region.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza el conflicto árabe-israelí centrándose en el período a menudo ignorado del Mandato Británico en Palestina (1919-1948). Mientras que los estudios contemporáneos suelen enfocarse en los acontecimientos posteriores a 1948, este trabajo sostiene que las bases del conflicto se establecieron durante la administración colonial británica, cuyas políticas fueron ambiguas, reactivas y motivadas principalmente por intereses imperiales más que por las realidades locales. El texto examina cómo las promesas contradictorias hechas a judíos y árabes, la gestión ineficaz del gobierno y los ciclos crecientes de violencia moldearon las dinámicas políticas iniciales, generando una desconfianza profunda entre los actores implicados. Al situar el Mandato en el contexto de cambios geopolíticos más amplios —desde la caída del Imperio otomano hasta el ascenso del fascismo en Europa—, el artículo demuestra cómo el dominio británico fracasó en garantizar estabilidad política y contribuyó a una polarización duradera. Comprender este periodo resulta esencial para entender las guerras, crisis de refugiados y violencia contemporánea en la región.

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Keywords: Arab-Israeli conflict; British Mandate; colonial policy; Palestine 1919-1948; Middle East history.

Palabras clave: conflicto árabe-israelí; Mandato Británico; política colonial; Palestina 1919-1948; historia de Medio Oriente.

The October 2023 terrorist attacks perpetrated by Hamas against Israeli civilians and the subsequent military response by the Israeli military marked yet another phase in the now century-long openly militarized dispute over the territory claimed by both Israelis and Palestinians. The keyword here is *ongoing*. This is not the first time an escalation of this conflict has happened, and it is unlikely to be the last.

However, pundits, analysts, and news reporting over the last two years often treat this incident in isolation or even as a simple isolated incident independent of historical events. Many of the campus protests over the last few years serve as evidence of this. This ultimately fuels a fundamental misunderstanding of the underlying causes and history behind these events. This lack of a more complete understanding has, for example, fueled protests that have sometimes turned violent not only in the Middle East, but throughout the world. What stands out here is campus protests by students, where emotional responses seem to have overwhelmed any willingness to understand the roots of the conflict fully. What led to October of 2023 is not isolated, neither by Hamas nor the Israelis. Its roots go back to at least 1919, with the initiation of the British Mandate in Palestine in the dying days of the First World War (WWI). Curiously, and with specific reference to historical research, more emphasis seems to be placed on the millennial nature of the conflict. As such, research often focuses predominantly on *before* and *after* the Mandate, but not the British occupation period itself.

Tom Segev, in his seminal work on the Mandate Period, titled *One Palestine Complete. Jews and Arabs Under the British Mandate* (2000) explores the era of the British Mandate. He argues that British policy was driven principally by a desire to slow Jewish migration to the United Kingdom (UK) because of inherent British antisemitism. The argument presented here does support this thesis, but only to some extent. The central hypothesis presented below is that Mandate policy was driven more by a desire to colonize the region to serve wider British imperial ambitions. The reaction to the Mandate by the Arabs was unanticipated. The cooperation between Jewish authorities and the British early in the Mandate was due to the Jews' better organization, leadership, and willingness to work with the UK. This did not occur with the Arab leadership. Nevertheless, it is conceivable that the same would have been the case if the Arab communities had better leadership and accepted the transfer of the colony from the Ottomans to the UK. In other words, the British wanted and expected political stability. They did not get that for a variety of reasons, and events spiraled out of control, principally because of mismanagement, not because of outright ethnic or racial preference as suggested by Segev.

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The reader should also keep in mind that the article does not claim that the region's challenges are only the result of Mandate policy. Rather, the purpose here is to foreground a period that has often been ignored or underemphasized in other academic studies, especially in the context of recent events. Understanding the Mandate helps explain why violence reignited once again in 2023. The central thesis of the paper, then, is that the British Mandate between 1917 and 1948 played a crucial role in setting the stage for the events that the region has experienced since the creation of Israel in 1948.

The article first presents the complementary hypotheses found in the literature, such as the creation of the state of Israel itself, the 1967 war, terrorism in the 1970s, and the intifadas starting in the 1980s. Only these three will be discussed, but many others exist. As noted, these are not alternative explanations; rather, they complement the Mandate period argument. The main idea here is that it is impossible to understand these post-1948 interpretations without a proper understanding of the Mandate period. The paper then discusses the importance of the Mandate period in understanding not only the Israeli-Palestinian conflict specifically but the Arab-Israeli conflict in general. It emphasizes not only the policies implemented by the British but also the behavior of the Palestinians and Jewish settlers. This section argues that the chaotic nature of the Mandate set the stage for what followed in the conflict. In that sense, understanding the Mandate period is a key and central factor in the explanation. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of the study and offering recommendations for future research.

1948, 1967, and beyond

1948 is often chosen as a starting point in attempts to understand the conflicts in the region. The creation of the state of Israel is frequently employed by those who tend to favor the Palestinian side of the conflict. The argument —that if only the United Nations (UN) had not created Israel, everyone in the region would be better off— is overly simplistic and conveniently ignores several important facts and geopolitical dynamics beyond the region itself. For example, the mufti of Jerusalem (a religious leader chosen by the Ottomans to locally rule a region or city) had pretensions of war against the Israelis to unify the entire region, including what we today know as Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Syria and of course Palestine under his control (Office of the Historian, n.d.). The regional Muslim leaders in Jordan (known as Trans-Jordan then) and Egypt went to war against Israel not only to stop the creation of the Jewish state, but also to ensure that the mufti did not achieve his goals of a unified Arab state in the entire Near East region. What is often ignored is the fact that Egypt, Transjordan, and Syria went to war not to defend the creation of a Palestinian state but rather to carve up the territory between them (Office of the Historian, n.d.). A final

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point worth mentioning here, which highlights the global geopolitical implications of the UN vote creating Israel in 1948, is the favorable position of the Soviet Union. Given the treatment of Jews and other minorities in Stalin's USSR, this is surprising (Rucker, 2005). The reason for the favorable vote was that Stalin saw this as an opportunity to further weaken the collapsing British Empire in the post-war era (Rucker, 2005; Gorodetsky, 2016). Ultimately, however, it was this war that created the massive refugee problem in the West Bank and especially Gaza, as Palestinians were either displaced by force or fled from the territory gained by the Israeli state (Morris, 1987; United Nations, n.d.). In sum, the events of 1948 were nothing more than an attempted *land grab* by multiple states and proto-states to the detriment of the Palestinians. The proof of this is that after 1948, there were ongoing secret talks between Israel and several bordering states —especially Jordan— to formally recognize Israel in return for territory that had been destined for a Palestinian state by the UN. In the specific case of Jordan, its government offered recognition in return for all the West Bank territories, including Jerusalem, which was rejected by the Israelis (Klagsbrun, 2017).

Another crucial moment —often used to defend the Israeli point of view— was the occasion of the 1967 war, where Israel preemptively launched an attack against Egypt, Jordan, and Syria hours before it was believed that Egypt would initiate an attack. This conclusion —that Egypt was on the verge of invading and Israel launched a preemptive attack— has been questioned by recent scholarship (Oren, 2002; Khalidi, 2020; Cohen, 2017). However, what is undeniable is that Abdel Gamal Nasser, Egypt's president at the time, most certainly created the perception that they were about to start a war by forcibly removing UN Suez observers that had been in place since the 1956 war (Oren, 2002; Klagsbrun, 2017).

The resulting Israeli victory led to the occupation of Gaza, the West Bank, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula. During the ceasefire and negotiations that ensued, Israel eventually returned the Sinai to Egypt. Subsequently, the Israeli government used the argument that through negotiation and recognition, all occupied territories would be returned. This was not to be the case concerning the West Bank and the Golan for two reasons. The first is that Israel began building settlements in the occupied regions (Golan and West Bank) partly to accommodate a growing population but also to make it practically impossible to return the territories for demographic reasons. Second, Israel kept these other territories because it considered them strategically critical. The Golan Heights, for example, are strategically important for both Israel and Syria. The country that controls the region has easy access to the other. Indeed, from the Heights themselves, Israeli forces can see Damascus, providing Israel with a tremendous strategic advantage. It is therefore extremely unlikely that even if Syria recognizes Israel, the Golan will be returned. The region also serves as a significant source of fresh water and other natural resources that Israel desperately needs and is unlikely to relinquish. It is worth highlighting that Egyptian president, Anwar Sadat, had decided that repeated wars were no longer in the country's interest. He was thus will-

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ing to negotiate and recognize Israel after the 1973 war. Syria's Assad regime maintained its extremist anti-Zionist views, which made negotiation impossible even if Israel had been willing to exchange the Golan for recognition and peace. The same applied to the Husseini family in Jordan until the 1990s.

The 1970s and 1980s were marked by a dramatic increase in activity by the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), and depending on which side of the divide one places themselves, the PLO was either a terrorist organization (Israel and the West in general) or "freedom fighters" by Palestinians and multiple Arab and Eastern European states. Suffice to say that the period ended when the PLO and Israel through the mediation of the UN, and particularly George W. Bush and Bill Clinton, eventually led to the signing of the Oslo accords where the PLO formally recognized the existence of Israel and in return the Palestinian Authority was created to provide limited Palestinian self-rule in the West Bank and Gaza. Despite initial optimism, the Accords failed, and tension and violence continued.

The failure of Oslo is multifaceted. First and foremost, Hamas —an extremist, Islamist, and anti-Zionist movement which has perpetrated terrorist attacks against Israel consistently since the 1990s and is openly supported by Iran— was formed in the 1980s, and it eventually emerged victorious in the Palestinian legislature in 2006. By *de facto*, it split political authority over the occupied territories by eventually controlling all of Gaza, leaving the West Bank to the PLO's political wing, *Fatah*. Palestinian leadership infighting is the primary cause of the failure of Oslo, but not the only one. As Khalidi (2024) said, "The Palestinian leadership has constantly found itself unable to exercise real sovereignty, and the structures that were imposed by the Oslo Accords". He argues, "each of these (including Oslo) gradually chronic problems undermined the legitimacy of the Palestinian leadership engaged in negotiations with Israel and stoked Palestinian popular frustration. Over time, the leadership's popularity declined precipitously in consequence" (Khalidi, 2006).

In response to the victory of Hamas, Israel isolated Gaza from the West Bank and continued its process of settlement construction in the West Bank, once again making it impossible to create a separate Palestinian state by altering the demographic profile of the region. The failure of Oslo can be seen as a proximate cause of the events of October 2023.

The role of the Mandate

As noted, the Mandate period is often ignored as a significant contributing factor to the instability and violence the region has experienced over the last 100 years or so. The purpose here is to redress that. The British Mandate began in the dying days of World War I in the wake of the collapsing Ottoman Empire. The 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement between Great Britain and France partitioned the Near East in anticipation of an Allied powers victory over the

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Central Powers and Ottomans. France would receive the northern part of the region —Lebanon and Syria— while Great Britain would receive the south —Palestine and Transjordan. In 1917, the British government sent what was to become the most debated and discussed historical document concerning its actual meaning. The vagueness of its wording was undoubtedly intentional, by promising some kind of "homeland" for the Jews in Palestine. The document states that "his Majesty's Government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a *national home* (emphasis added) for the Jewish people and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done that may prejudice the civil and religious rights of non-Jewish communities in Palestine" (Balfour, 1917). Did the British cabinet intend for an independent country? It is not clear, yet both the Zionists and Arabs took it to mean so (Khalidi, 2024).

What made matters even more confusing was that between 1915 and 1916, in a series of correspondence between Henry McMahon, the British High Commissioner to Egypt, and Hussein bin Ali, the Sharif of Mecca, the United Kingdom agreed to recognize Arab independence after the war in exchange for the Sharif of Mecca launching the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire (Kattan, 2009). Driven by desperation because the war in Europe was not going well, the UK was looking for allies and friends wherever they could be found. Regarding the Declaration, it has been suggested that it was fundamentally driven by European antisemitism and the desire to reduce Jewish migration from Central Europe to the UK and to also placate antisemitic feelings in Russia in the hope of keeping them in the war leading up to the Bolshevik Revolution. These contradictory promises, however, set the stage for what was to come during the formal Mandate period between 1920 and 1948.

As argued by the renowned Israeli historian and analyst, Michael Oren (2002), the Palestinians in the post-World War I period faced significant challenges. First and foremost, the end of 1 000 years of Ottoman rule and its replacement by a British mandate was a culture shock. The Ottomans, Muslim themselves, had maintained a relatively decentralized empire and allowed for significant local rule, which was immediately lost under the Mandate. Other Palestinians selected by the Ottomans made decisions affecting the daily lives of Palestinians. Now, it was British viceroys, commissioners, and military authorities. Second, the war itself had impacted the lives of Palestinians in a very direct way; their young men had fought in the war, the Near East was an active battleground, starvation and death were rampant, and ultimately, they lost that war. A profound sense of personal, cultural, and political loss was widespread. Finally, the post-war period was characterized by the rise of nationalism following Woodrow Wilson's announcements and the creation of a plethora of new states in Central Europe in the wake of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Even in the Middle East, nationalist movements emerged in Egypt and Syria, among others. It is not surprising, therefore, that Palestinian nationalism also began to take shape in this new global context. This is not to suggest that there was no Palestinian identity be-

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fore the war, but rather to highlight the combined effects of the war's outcome, the collapse of the Ottoman empire, the arrival of a new Western European colonizer, and the rise of *politicized* Palestinian nationalism after 1919. It is important to draw attention to the fact that Jews and Arabs had lived in relative peace under the Ottomans. Prior to the Mandate, the ethnic composition of the territory was approximately 78 % Arab, about 11 % Jewish, and the rest Christian (Rubenberg, 1989). These Jews, referred to as Palestinian Jews or Yishuv, were often described as "*arabasized,*" further suggesting that the different communities tolerated and even accepted the multi-racial character of the region. Jews principally lived in and around the holy cities of Safed, Tiberias, Hebron, and Jerusalem. The principal spoken languages were Yiddish, Arabic, and Spanish, and many had migrated over the centuries from Eastern Europe, other parts of the Middle East, and North Africa. In general, the Jewish population was extremely pious, much more concerned about maintaining tradition and religious practice rather than political ambition. Arabs in general often referred to these Jews as "compatriots" or "sons of Arabs" (Tamari, 2007), further enforcing the idea that tolerance and cooperation had existed for many centuries leading up to the Mandate. This only underscores the fact that a catastrophic failure in management occurred during the Mandate.

The Jews had a head start on the politicization of identity with the creation of the Zionist movement in 1897 and the first Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897, organized by Theodor Herzl in response to the rise in antisemitism in Europe. At the congress, Herzl was elected to serve as its first president. Since its foundation, the organization pushed for the creation of a Jewish state, and Herzl had regularly met with world leaders leading up to the WWI. His successor, Chaim Weizmann, spoke at the Versailles peace conference in 1919 on the merits of a Jewish state. Thus, as the Mandate period began, Jews were better organized and better represented than the Palestinians. Not only were the Zionists unified politically through the Jewish Agency (JA) in Palestine, but they also created a paramilitary unit known as the *Haganah* in 1920 as a protection force for the settlements, which had been coming under increasing attack by Palestinian militants starting in 1919.

The first British High Commissioner, Herbert Samuel, proceeded to reform the legal system, combining Ottoman, Islamic, and British Common Law. Importantly, he approved the Criminal Law Amendment Ordinance, which criminalized opposition to the Mandate. He also attempted to establish local governing bodies composed of Jews, Palestinians, and Christians. Palestinians refused to participate in mechanisms that included Jews, confirming to the UK that working with the Arabs was going to prove challenging. The JA was formed to determine ways in which it could work with the British towards the goal of creating a Zionist state. This was well received by the British because the perception grew that the Jewish community was unlikely to create problems for the Mandate authorities.

The opposite was the case concerning the Palestinians. First and foremost, its leadership was divided between those families and individuals who had worked with the Ottomans

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and the new, younger, and more extremist Palestinian nationalists. This infighting between the Palestinians over who was to represent their perspective hurt the movement in favour of the Jews. "There is little question that Palestinian society suffered from deep internal divisions in the decades before 1948, and these divisions contributed to the debacle of that year" (Khalidi, 2006).

Palestinian political opposition began to organize in 1919 in the form of the Palestine Arab Congress. At the time, Palestine was envisioned either as part of an independent Syrian-Iraqi state —governed by Faisal I of Iraq of the Hashemite family— or under the influence of the Nashashibi clan, which favored uniting Palestine with Transjordan (later to be named Jordan). The Palestinians also saw themselves as part of a larger Arab state. To further complicate the matter, Egyptian nationalists viewed their ultimate independence from the UK to also include parts of Palestine, which did not necessarily complement the other two perspectives. To be clear, when the war started in 1948, the intentions of the other Arab states were not the creation of a Palestinian state but an attempt by Egypt, Jordan, and Syria at a land grab. What is important to highlight is that the only policy that united the Arab Congress and its Executive committee was anti Zionism. What many analysts refuse to acknowledge is that the Arabs were not able to create effective governance mechanisms because of infighting and a lack of leadership. Politically, they were divided and spent significant effort and energy over which group or individual would lead the overall Palestinian movement during this period. The Arab Executive Committee (AEC) can be viewed as the counterpart of the JA, but with an important difference: The JA recognized and worked with Mandate authorities while AEC did not. For the Arabs and Palestinians in particular, the Jews were simply an extension of Western imperialism. Indeed, eventually, Zionism came to be indistinguishable from the Mandate and perceptions of Western imperialism.

Multiple factors reinforced each other in these early years of the Mandate. The perception of the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate in general was well received by the JA because it permitted steadily increasing Jewish migration to the "Holy Land". As a result, the JA put into place mechanisms to work with the British Mandate authorities. This was welcomed by the UK because the perception grew that the Jews were cooperating. On the other hand, politically, the Arabs refused to recognize Balfour and the Mandate and resisted both politically and through violence against both Jews and British authorities.

This brought the Mandate authorities and the Jews even closer together, pushing the Arabs further to the margin politically. The British were interested only in the empire, and in particular, complete control through the Suez Canal into the Indian Ocean. The Jews seemed to be helping while the Arabs were not. This cycle ultimately has led to the perception that the UK *intentionally* favored the Jews over the Arabs (Winder, n.d.a). The argument here is that it was *not* intentional, but rather a series of *cyclical feedback mechanisms* that evolved over two decades between three actors —the Jews, Arabs, and British.

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If the 1920s were characterized by increasing political violence and repeated failed attempts to control it by the Mandate authorities, the 1930s were marked by the beginning of the collapse of the entire system. In 1931, a more militant element of the *Haganah* splintered off and formed the *Irgun* (The National Military Organization). Whereas the Haganah's stated goal was to defend Jews and focus their reprisals only on violent Palestinian militants under the direction of the JA, Irgun attacked civilians, militants, and British authorities in an arbitrary, non-specific manner. Moreover, it is important to note that the Jewish Authority publicly opposed their tactics (Shavit, 1988).

Despite this, Irgun's attacks only led to a dramatic increase in violence by all sides. Because the Irgun did not recognize the Mandate, unlike the Haganah, they negatively impacted British perceptions of the entire Jewish community. Palestinian attacks against Jews were met by reprisals against Arab civilians by the Irgun, which in turn resulted in massive British arrests and executions against both Palestinian and Jewish militants. Thus, by the 1930s, every side viewed the other two as a potential threat.

The Irgun's emergence was at least partly the result of increasing attacks on Jewish settlers throughout the 1920s. When the Mandate began, Jews represented about 10 % of the population of the Palestine territory. This increased to 20 % by the early 1930s and to 30 % by the time the Second World War began (Halamish, 2018; Shavit, 1988). It resulted not only in a *quantitative* increase in the number of *potential* Jewish targets but also a *qualitative* change in the mindset of the Arabs that the settlers, along with the British authorities, were putting into place a policy of ethnic cleansing. To many Arabs, Jews were simply white European settlers.

At about the same time as the creation of the Irgun, a militant anti-Zionist, anti-Mandate, and Jihadist organization known as the Black Hand emerged. The group organized and executed multiple terrorist attacks against Jewish settlers and British authorities throughout the 1930s and had strong links to the openly Nazi supporter, the Mufti of Jerusalem, Muhammad Amin Al-Husayni, who had repeatedly called for the massacre of all Jews throughout the world. The Black Hand was probably the first religiously based (Jihadist) terrorist organization. Without going into detail, its legacy is important to this day.

Among the numerous intersectoral incidents of violence during this period, two stand out —the 1929 and 1933 riots. Religious tensions over the Western Wall in Jerusalem triggered the 1929 Palestinian riots. These riots —which predate the formation of the Irgun by only a few months and may have served as a contributing factor to its creation— lasted from the 23rd to the 29th of August. For the most part, the riots took the form of Arab attacks against non-Zionist affiliated Orthodox Jews. Although tension had been growing for months, its immediate trigger was the Palestinian belief that the Jews were about to seize the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and deny access to Muslims.

During the weeklong violence, 133 Jews were killed by Arabs and 340 were seriously injured. 115 Arabs were killed, with over 200 injured, mostly by Mandate authorities. Jews

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killed about a dozen Arabs. Particularly gruesome was the massacre of about 70 Jews in Hebron on August 24th. As a result of this, 17 other Jewish communities had to be evacuated. In the investigation that followed, 174 Arabs and 109 Jews were charged with murder or attempted murder, with 40 % of Arabs and 3 % of Jews subsequently convicted.

The 1933 riots were a turning point as well. They took place in October 1933 due to a significant increase in the number of settlers, coinciding with the rise of Nazi Germany. In just that one year, more than 30 000 Jewish refugees resettled in Palestine. The AEC called for a strike in Jerusalem in response to the increasing migration on October 13th, which resulted in some low-intensity violence between protesters and British authorities. Another general strike was organized for the 27th in Jaffa. The British High Commission offered to meet with the AEC in exchange for not pushing forward with the strike, which was rejected. Without going into much detail, violence in Jaffa erupted between protesters and the authorities, which spread to other cities. By the end of the rioting, 1 Palestinian policeman had been killed, along with over 50 British soldiers injured. Approximately 30 Palestinians died during the rioting, with close to 200 injured.

The combined effect of increasing violence against British Mandate authorities, rising inter-sectoral violence, and the emergence of the Irgun and the Black Hand led the UK cabinet to seek a way out of a situation that, in many ways, it had helped create (Oren, 2002). The Mandate directly contributed to the violence for three main reasons. First, as noted, the vague wording of the Balfour Declaration and the reference to the Arabs as the "native population" created the perception that the plan's goal was to ethnically cleanse the territory. This was worsened by mismanagement of the Mandate, to the point that the only strategy the British used to contain violence was violence itself. Finally, the massive migration of European Jews during the 1930s to the "Holy Land" was partly because they had no other options. The UK itself held strong antisemitic views (along with the United States [US], France, and other Western countries). Most of these German Jews were highly educated and probably preferred more developed countries that offered greater professional and economic opportunities. This is not to suggest that the migration was wrong, but that Jews escaping rising fascism had only one real choice. In fact, the Peel Commission (discussed below) even acknowledged this by stating in its final report that the drafters of the Mandate could not have foreseen the large Jewish influx, which was caused by "drastic restriction of immigration into the US, the advent of the National Socialist Government in Germany in 1933 and increasing economic pressure on Jews in Poland" (His Majesty's Government, 1937). This sharp rise in Jewish migration over a short period only reinforced Arab misinterpretations of the Mandate's ultimate purpose. As argued, it was about colonialism and imperialism, not *specifically* the creation of a Jewish state. However, Western colonialism, imperialism, and the creation of an Israeli state eventually became conflated.

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The 1936-1939 period saw a generalized Palestinian revolt and riot, resulting from widespread Arab dissatisfaction with British rule. The uprising occurred during a peak influx of European Jewish immigrants (Sanagan, 2013) and is generally divided into two periods. The first phase began as a spontaneous popular resistance taking the form of strikes and other types of political protest (Laurens, 2002). By October 1936, this phase had been defeated by the British using a combination of some concessions, the involvement of Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Jordan as mediators and using threats (Norris, 2008: 27). The second phase, which began late in 1937, was brutally repressed by Mandate authorities (Norris, 2008: 39). According to official British figures, the army and police killed more than 3 000 Arabs either in direct action or by hangings. It is estimated that several hundred Jews were killed as well (Morris, 1999: 160).

The revolt was crucial in the thinking of the Cabinet in London. It is generally acknowledged that it was these events that convinced the British that the Mandate was no longer functional. This was formally recognized in the Peel and Woodhouse Commissions, established as a direct result of the revolt. The Peel Commission of 1937 recognized that the Mandate was no longer workable and recommended partition as the solution. The proposed plan would create a coastal Jewish state, a British-mandated corridor from Jerusalem to the coastal city of Jaffa, and the remainder of Palestine would be merged with Jordan into a new Arab state. It was estimated that the Arab state linked to Jordan would have 7 000 Jews and about 500 000 Arabs, and the Jewish state would have just over 300 000 Jews and about 295 000 Arabs. The Peel Commission recognized that one of the main reasons for the escalating situation was precisely the unanticipated dramatic increase in Jewish migration because of the rise of fascism and antisemitism in Europe. The plan envisioned a *population exchange* as had occurred between Greece and Turkey in the early 1920s to achieve this demographic distribution (Comu, 2018; Kritikos, 1999). The subsequent 1938 Woodhouse Commission presented several different partition plans that considered the recommendations of the Peel Commission. However, by design, it was more technical in nature; *partition* had already been decided upon as the solution.

Both the JA and AHC were internally strongly divided on the different plans proposed by the Peel and Woodhouse Commission, but ultimately, the JA accepted the idea that further discussion was necessary. Without going into many details, the different factions of the Arab side were opposed to partition because one faction favored union with Jordan, while the others did not. The Palestinian Arabs were shocked by the fact that statehood for them was not even considered and that under the plans, Arab denominated Palestine would merge with Jordan. The JA was divided as well, with some members accepting partition while others arguing that the new Jewish state was too small. Ultimately, however, the JA accepted the principle of partition on the assumption that the commission reports were an accept-

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able starting point for further negotiation (Morris, 2004). A more unified JA and internal strife among the AHC once again complicated the matter further.

What is striking, however, is the profound lack of thought put into the reports by British authorities. How they came to believe that partition was a viable option demonstrates this. They should have known —from the experience of almost two decades of the Mandate— that this is not what the JA wanted and that the Arabs were too disunified to reach any kind of consensus (Segev, 2001). The Commissions, along with the Mandate and the Balfour Declaration, demonstrated a profound lack of understanding of what was *actually* happening on the ground in Palestine. The commission's recommendations seemed to have been driven more by a sense of panic than by properly thought-out public policy.

In an about face, in 1939, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain of the UK presented a White Paper that stated that "the Jews were never promised a *National Home in Palestine*, but *a home in Palestine*", and that the Arabs had misinterpreted the meaning of Balfour and the Mandate (Novick, 1939; UK House of Commons, 1939). As noted above, the Balfour Declaration did in fact use the term *National Home*. Chamberlain also promised independence for the Palestinians by 1949 and began to severely limit Jewish migration. What drove this 180-degree turn in policy, of course, was the coming war with the Nazis. Once again, Britain was looking for allies, and Chamberlain wanted to appease the Arabs by recognizing their desire for independence (Novick, 1939). The British Mandate, based on the Balfour Declaration, was declared invalid, and the British government proceeded to create a more friendly relationship with the Arabs. This decision was, of course, based on the immediate needs of a war. The earlier Peel Commission essentially admitted that the situation was out of control. The Chamberlain White Paper only made things worse. The Arabs maintained their distrust, and now JA had been turned into an enemy as well. Chamberlain only managed to create more confusion and more violence.

Britain and the US met in 1943 in Bermuda to discuss the plight of the Jews under now much expanded Nazi rule after the conquest of Western Europe and the war in the East. 1943 was crucial in that it was the geographic high point of Nazi Germany's occupation (Mr. Lupton History, 2021), and there was increasing recognition that the *Schutzstaffel* (SS) was gassing Jews and other "undesirables" principally in the East (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2004; Peschanski, 2010). Despite this, during the conference, the British categorically refused to accept further Jews fleeing Nazi persecution (Mr. Lupton History, 2021), while by this point, US policy had shifted somewhat, and the country began accepting more refugees (Mr. Lupton History, 2021). However, on many occasions, boats coming from Europe were refused access to US ports, and many eventually were received by Latin American countries (Adams, 2021).

The situation had become so critical that the Polish Jewish resistance was requesting the Allied bombing of concentration camps in the east, yet both the American and British mil-

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itaries argued that they could not do so, as they would be purposely killing civilian Jews. Second, the Allies argued that the *Schutzstaffel* (SS) would be able to have the concentration camps operational again within a very short period. In sum, the war years (1939-1945) were comparatively quiet in Palestine, not so in Europe. It was not until after the war and the beginning of the collapse of the British Empire that the situation in Palestine deteriorated completely.

The British faced a devastatingly difficult situation after the war. Not only was the empire to experience decline, but the Nazis had killed at least 6 million Jews and others (Lipka, 2015) in the camps. The pressure for migration to the "Holy Land" had become insurmountable to the point that the UK put the Mandate under the authorization of the Trusteeship Council of the newly created UN.

Saving the empire became the top priority, and to achieve that, Britain sought closer relations with the Arabs. Post-WWII, British policy in many ways mimicked Chamberlain's 1939 white paper. Irgun-inspired Jewish violence against British authorities increased in response. In 1946, the British raided JA offices, removing documents that purportedly showed the agency's involvement in violence against the British. Dubbed Operation Agatha, the British arrested several JA leaders. To quote, "it has been necessary […] to occupy the premises of the Jewish Agency owing to the evidence in our hands as to the part it has played in the organization and direction of, and cooperation with the forces which have carried out acts of violence against the Government" (British Palestine Police Association, n.d.; Britain's Small Wars, n.d.). They also searched twenty-five Jewish settlements and detained nearly 3 000 Jews with help from the Palestinian Police services.

Also in 1946, a new partition plan was drawn up, which envisioned four provinces administered under a federated system. The four provinces were to be an Arab province, a Jewish province, the district of Jerusalem, and the district of the Negev. The new federal authority would administer migration and refugee claims. Geographically, this plan favored the Palestinians. Initially, the post-World War II hegemon of the international system, the US, appeared to endorse the plan. However, Truman's administration ultimately rejected it, succumbing to pressure from the Jewish lobby and concerns over the proposal's potential impact on upcoming midterm elections. What is worth highlighting here, however, is that although the US *politically* supported the idea of a Jewish state, it was still unwilling to accept refugee boats coming from Europe. Further, as noted, the British had essentially ceased access for Jewish refugees years earlier. European Jews had few if any options after the war.

On Monday, July 22nd, 1946, the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, the administrative headquarters of the British authorities, was bombed in a massive terrorist attack perpetrated by the Irgun. In response, the British established a *cordon sanitaire* around Tel Aviv where close to 200 000 Jews became subject to arbitrary search and arrest (Britain's Small Wars, n.d.). For the next year, inter-sectoral and anti-British violence continued to escalate, and

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in 1947, the UK formally vacated the entire situation by transferring political administration of the Mandate to the UN. The UN established the *United Nations Special Committee on Palestine* (UNSCOP), which initially recommended "the establishment of two independent states economically unified, following a transitional stage under United Nations supervision" (United Nations, 1947).

However, by November of 1947, UNSCOP was recommending partition into two independent states, one Jewish and the other Palestinian (Winder, n.d.b), detailing a plan that would create two states where one would have a predominantly Jewish population (55 % Jewish, 45 % Arab), and the other, Arab (99 % Arab, 1 % Jewish) (United Nations, 1947). A third international zone, predominantly in and around Jerusalem, never came to be because of the 1948 war. Voting in the UN was contentious but ultimately was approved with 33 states voting in favour, 13 against, and 10 abstaining. Ironically, Great Britain was one of the 10 abstaining votes (United Nations, 1947).

British presence in the area formally ended in May of 1948, and, fittingly, London released its final official statement on the matter indicating that "Although British responsibility for Palestine has ceased, it is the earnest hope of His Majesty's Government that, as both sides come to realize the tragic consequences of attempting to conquer Palestine by force, some compromise may yet be possible, which will prevent the destruction of all that has been achieved during the last thirty years and which will enable the people of Palestine to live at peace and to govern themselves" (Sachar, 1976). Large-scale sectoral war had already started by January 1948, but it was not until May 15 that the other Arab states announced that they intended to intervene militarily (Office of the Historian, n.d.; Beinin & Hajjar, 2025).

Final thoughts

British post WWI imperial occupation of Palestine in many ways created the problems the region and its people are still living through to this day. Moreover, it is not as simple as to argue that it is due to the Mandate period being inherently pro-Zionist or pro-Arab. The *management* and *implementation* of public policy were ineffective and often cross-cutting in nature.

First and foremost, British policy was deliberately vague. Sometimes it seemed to favor the Jews (the 1920s) and sometimes the Arabs (1930s). Further, public policy often reflected who was in power in London. Some UK PMs, such as David Loyd George and Winston Churchill, favored Zionism, while others —Chamberlain in particular— did not. The Balfour Declaration itself was deliberately vague and provided little, if any, guidance to Mandate authorities.

The British often responded with excessive violence against both Jews and Arabs, mistakenly believing that it would pacify the situation. In fact, it only triggers a perpetual feedback

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mechanism of further violence. Indeed, the use of violence's only real effect was that it exacerbated inter-sectoral mistrust. Mistrust was created by the British because there were distinct periods where the focus was sometimes against the Arabs and others, against the Jews. For example, in the 1920s, the British often worked closely with the Haganah, supporting the Palestinian perception that the Mandate was pro-Zionist. In the 1930s and 1940s, as UK geopolitical priorities shifted, the British often targeted the Jews. Further, in many of these instances, the British were assisted by the Palestinian police. This seemingly inexplicable inconsistency in behavior can be explained by the fact that the decision to use violence against the Jews or the Palestinians was driven by global geopolitical imperatives, not by what was happening locally.

The use of violence also highlights another problem with the Mandate; as a tool, it is by nature responsive rather than proactive. With some very minor exceptions, the British public policy in Palestine was developed and implemented in an *ad hoc* manner. Rather than having a thought-out plan for the region and its future, the use of violence and the creation of post hoc commissions such as the Peel Commission or the Chamberlain White Paper were in response to what had already happened. The British did not attempt to preempt and prevent events, nor did they respond adequately and promptly.

Thus, policy was chaotic and *ad hoc*, and as a result, it ultimately failed. This is because the policy in Palestine was shaped less by the needs of the Mandate itself and more in response to the shifting global geopolitical events in the 1920s and 1930s. It was these global interests that explained the inconsistent policies implemented. In the 1920s, the UK was balancing three interrelated global factors: first, the victory over the Central Powers; second, the cost of the war; and third, protection of the empire. Great Britain was hoping that the costs of the war itself could be partially offset by the protection of its existing empire and by its expansion in the Middle East. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire offered the UK (and France) the opportunity to expand access to natural resources (Oil in the Middle East) and to protect trade routes through the Suez to the "Jewel of the Empire", that of India. A pacified control over the Mandate region was crucial to this empire-building and maintenance project post-WWI. The UK was therefore willing to go extreme lengths to pacify the region, even if it meant inconsistent and confusing regional policy. Control over the specific region of the Mandate was irrelevant —it was more about how the Mandate area fit into the overall global geopolitical interests.

Policy in the Mandate region was, therefore, dependent on global rather than local events. This becomes clearer in the 1930s with the rise of fascism. Ultimately, Hitler's rise prompted a significant shift in policy, making it more logical for the UK to support Arab nationalism openly. This shift resulted in the Chamberlain White Paper of the late 1930s, which effectively negated the Balfour Declaration.

As noted, the 1930s were particularly noteworthy for the dramatic increase in violence. A significant increase in Jewish migration and how the Arabs viewed this as an attempt by

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the British to ethically cleanse the Palestinians serves as an important explanation for the violence. Most of these Jews were migrating because of the rise of Nazism in Germany and antisemitism in Eastern Europe in general. These refugees were rarely, if ever, given the opportunity to migrate to the UK (or other Western countries for that matter), because antisemitic attitudes and policies were widespread there as well. This policy directly contributed to the worsening of an already bad situation. As such, not only was Mandate policy executed poorly, but so was the general UK policy. The hypothesis of this paper is that defective policy design goes a long way in explaining what happened during those crucial post-WWI years. Defective Mandate policy thus serves as an excellent starting point for understanding not only the 1948 war but subsequent events as well, including the attacks of October 2023.

What also played a significant role but has only been touched on in this paper is inter-Arab disunity and competition. As suggested, when the regional war began in 1948, none of the Arab states had any intention of creating a Palestinian state. As noted above, much of the literature does not acknowledge that Jordan and the UK were in secret talks to facilitate the annexation of all the West Bank by Jordan. Therefore, what was not examined in this paper —and is admittedly important— is the role of disunity and competition among the Arabs during the Mandate period. Such a study would complement the research presented here. This paper examined only one, but arguably one of the most important reasons —that of British Mandate policy.

It is not easy to evaluate whether better policy design during the Mandate would have made a difference. As highlighted throughout the article, other factors played a role, such as the lack of a united Arab leadership. However, what can be argued with certainty is that during the early years of the Mandate, the British overestimated their ability to manage, which ultimately led to reactive, *ad hoc,* and inconsistent responses to problems as they arose. Second, because the Mandate itself was not the priority, British policy eventually evolved into an unsuccessful attempt to merely contain the growing political complexity and violence, especially in the 1930s and 1940s. One thing is clear: mismanagement substantially contributed to the problems after the creation of the state of Israel —particularly the radical polarization— which in turn helps us understand the events of 2023. The chaotic nature of the Mandate created some of the perspectives, narratives, and mutual distrust that continue to this day.

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