

Introduction

Palestine has enjoyed geographic, religious and political centrality in the Middle East and has since the beginning of the last century been vulnerable to the plans and ambitions of foreign powers. The resulting conflicts have led to the dispersal and prolonged suffering of the Palestinian people, and during the past eight decades in particular the Palestinian people have fought continuously to defend their internationally recognized rights to freedom and independence.

The ambitions and policies of the various external powers involved over the years have had an undeniable impact on inter-Arab relations, and on the international relations of Arab states. They have also had a direct effect on shaping the history of Palestine and the evolution of its future. Despite this external pressure, the Palestinians have succeeded in defending and maintaining their Arab identity and political presence by organizing socio-economic institutions and a political infrastructure which have allowed them to challenge the power of the various conquerors in the ongoing national struggle. Having legitimate representation forced other parties to recognize and engage with them despite attempts to deny them their rights to self-determination and national independence.

This volume is one of a series that organizes key political documents covering the time from the pre-Ottoman period to 2007. This volume includes the texts or excerpts of over 130 documents, covering the Ottoman Era and occupation by Allied Forces, the British Mandate Era, to the UN Partition Plan of 1947. This introductory chapter outlines the history of this period to provide a framework to guide the reader to the historical context of these documents.

The Ottoman Period

Many historians recognize the history of Palestine as part of the geographic, demographic and political history of Greater Syria. Until the end of the First World War they see the Palestine Question as part of a greater Arab cause, while others emphasize its later development in the face of the challenge of the Zionist movement at the end of the 19th century.

The leaders of the early Palestinian national movement were leaders in the Arab awakening and challenge to Ottoman rule. They established and led various organizations in the joint Arab effort to revive their language and culture, and to express their aspirations for independence within a wider Arab cause. These Arab leaders were very aware of the threat that was posed by the colonial powers and the Zionist movement.

During the First World War the Western Allies pinpointed the weakness of the Turkish Ottoman Empire - an ally of Germany - which was partially caused by the unrest of the Arab people calling for autonomy and independence. In 1915 the British government commissioned Sir Henry MacMahon to correspond with the Hashemite leader Sharif Hussein Ibn Ali of Mecca to encourage him to rise against the Ottomans. In return MacMahon offered British support for a unified Arab kingdom under Hashemite leadership. This assurance contributed to the outbreak of the Arab revolt of June 1916.

In the same year the French and British reached a secret agreement (the Sykes-Picot agreement) dividing the Ottoman Empire under their control after the war. Britain would acquire Iraq and Jordan, while France would receive Syria (including Lebanon). Palestine was to be divided with France controlling the North and Britain the Haifa-Akko area, the rest (excluding the Negev) to be placed under international administration.

At the same time the British held talks with Zionist leaders and promised their support for a Jewish 'homeland' in Palestine. Formalized in the Balfour Declaration (November 1917), the British also promised to protect the rights of non-Jewish inhabitants of Palestine.

Allied Occupation

The First World War continued and Amir Feisal, son of Sharif Hussein Ibn Ali, led the Arab revolt forces alongside Allied troops into Damascus in October 1917 and within two months the British Army entered Jerusalem under General Allenby, ending 400 years of Ottoman rule. The British then established the Occupied Enemy Territory Administration (OETA) which controlled the area from 1918-1920.

The three British pledges (the MacMahon-Hussein Correspondence of 1915; the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916; and the Balfour Declaration of 1917) were contradictory and the British encouraged their allies – the Arab national movement under Amir Faisal, and the Zionist movement under Chaim Weizmann – to formulate an early agreement on Arab-Jewish relations. Faisal knew no English and Weizmann no Arabic so the British intermediaries, including T.E. Lawrence, drafted the documents according to their interpretation of what was agreed. Faisal added his own handwritten conditions in Arabic to the English document.

In 1920 the new League of Nations gave Britain mandated control of Palestine and Sir Herbert Samuel was appointed High Commissioner. In that year Amir Faisal was proclaimed King of Syria and Chaim Weizmann was elected president of the Zionist Organization.

From 1921 the Arabs in Palestine increased their resistance to the British Mandate and to Jewish immigration, and the British invited Arab delegations to London to meet with Weizmann to try and bring about an understanding. This and later meetings were unable to deliver what the British hoped for. In the same year the Haycraft Commission led to the publication of the Churchill White Paper which redefined the British interpretation of its responsibilities to the Mandate and the Jewish 'homeland,' and Transjordan was separated from the area eligible for 'homeland' pledges made by Balfour.

British Mandate Period and UN Partition Resolution

The Mandate document gave Britain control of Palestine and provided for a Jewish homeland therein, but stressed the rights of the non-Jewish native population. In 1929 the Arab Revolt broke out in Palestine and the Shaw Commission was formed to re-examine the immigration policy and to set up a committee to investigate the economic capacity of Palestine. In 1930 a combined paper (Passfield White Paper) drew the conclusions together and recommended that Jewish immigration be limited as it threatened Arab well-being and development. The Zionists reacted with a major campaign and Prime Minister Ramsay

McDonald wrote to Weizmann largely nullifying the immigration clauses in the Passfield White Paper.

The Palestinian Great Revolt began in 1936. Another commission was appointed under Peel to investigate the situation in Palestine. In its report in 1937, it concluded that Jews and Arabs could not live in peace and suggested partition into two states as the solution. Partition was largely rejected by the Arabs and divided the Zionists. The British accepted partition in principle and set up the Woodhead Commission to investigate its practicability. The revolt resurfaced in 1938 and at the end of that year the Woodhead Report concluded that partition was not practicable. This was followed by various proposals and discussions but none led to a solution.

At St James's Palace in London, the Round Table Conference of 1939 led to an impasse. The Zionist delegation called for increased immigration quotas and settlements, while the Arab delegation demanded rejection of the Balfour Declaration and an end to Zionist immigration. Colonial Secretary McDonald's White Paper of that year outlined the creation of a single Palestinian state and a five year immigration policy. This was rejected by the Zionist movement but it remained British policy until 1947.

In the early 1940s David Ben Gurion mobilized American Jewry and at the 1942 Biltmore Conference of American Zionists a call was made for the 'gates of Palestine to be opened for a Jewish Commonwealth'.

After the Second World War a joint Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry resolved that there should be increased Jewish immigration, and the adoption of a Trusteeship for Palestine. The British government rejected this proposal leading to a search for a solution on the basis of Federalization or Cantonization.

The Zionists in Palestine increased their military campaign against British rule, justifying their call for a state on the basis of the promises made by European leaders, especially following the Holocaust. In 1947, following the bombing of the King David Hotel by the Jewish Irgun terrorist organization and the hanging of two British sergeants, the British turned the Palestinian question over to the new United Nations.

In April 1947 the UN established a Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) which presented majority and minority reports of recommendations to the UN. In November 1947 the General Assembly passed Resolution 181 which followed the recommendations of the majority report, calling for the partition of Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state with an international enclave encompassing Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

A Final Note

Although we have endeavored to make this publication as reader/user friendly as possible, one should be aware that there is some inconsistency in terms of the spelling of non-English words - names and places (such as Haram Ash-Sharif or *Intifada*) – since we adhered, wherever possible, to the original version rather than apply our usual spelling rules. It is for the same reason that the volumes contain a number of minor typographical errors such as the omission of apostrophes, inconsistent capitalization, and spelling mistakes found in the originals.

Documents on Palestine – Volume I

Footnotes included in the volumes - excluding those marked “the ed.” - are mostly those that appeared in the original texts though the readership note that the numbering will not necessarily be accordance with the original version.

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