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One Land, Two Peoples: Could there have been a Jewish homeland in Palestine without conflict?

In the last 100 years (1910-2010) there has been much more conflict in Palestine than in the previous 100 years (1810-1910). There is no controversy in that fact. The question is why? Was it the result of the British Mandate to favor a Jewish homeland in Palestine? Was it impossible for the Jews and Arabs to get along as neighbors? This essay will argue that it was possible to establish a Jewish state adjacent to an Arab state living in harmony. Unfortunately, preexisting prejudices and the events leading up to the 1947 creation of Israel rendered this outcome impossible.

It is tempting to view the reason for conflict as the inevitable result of natural animosity between Jews and Muslims. However, religion cannot be the only issue. We can look at the Iran-Iraq war, in the early 1980s. This war caused more casualties than all the Arab-Israeli wars put together. The same holds for the Algerian Civil war and the current war in Darfur. All these wars were wars between Muslim peoples ("List of Wars and Disasters by Death Toll"). Moreover, relations between Jews and Muslims have often been closer than between Jews and Christians over the centuries (for example during the crusades and the inquisition). It is not just religious differences, it is a problem that was enlarged by the British and caused by the fashion in which the Jews and Arabs were forced together. This essay will explore the events up to 1947 through the actions taken by the three major parties - Jews, Arabs, and the British - to show how they contributed to peace or helped exacerbate the conflict in Palestine.

In 66 AD, the Romans, as punishment for insurrection, forced the Jews out of Jerusalem. However, Jewish communities survived throughout Palestine. Under the Ottomans, Palestine was extremely under-developed, so much that the only bridge connecting Trans-Jordan (modern day Jordan) to Cis-Jordan (modern day Israel and Palestine) was the one that was built during the Roman colonization (136-476 AD) (“Brief History of Palestine”). In 1880, there were 24,000 Jews living in Palestine. Their ancestors, in many cases, had been there for more than one thousand years. Still, the Jews constituted of only 5.4% of the population. The total population was 474,000 people (“Some Facts About Palestine”).

Historically, Jews and Christians living in Muslim-ruled countries were subject to a set of laws called the Dhimma. Dhimma was a status under Sharia Law that was enforced on the non-Muslim monotheists, by the Islamic government. The Dhimma gave Muslims legal superiority over the Jews and Christians and imposed a tax on them (“THE CONCEPT OF DHIMMA IN ISLAM AND ITS RAMIFICATIONS”). This historic Muslim dominance may explain why Muslims were later loath to negotiate with Jews over the status of Palestine. After all, if one group has enjoyed complete power over another group historically, why should they divide land with the supposed “inferior groups”.

Theodore Hertzl, a journalist born in Vienna, proposed the modern Jewish nationalistic movement into Palestine known as Zionism. He wrote an 86-page pamphlet in 1896 called *The Jewish State*, in which he advocated buying lands in Palestine so as to legally establish a Jewish state there. Partly influenced by that book, 20,000-30,000 Jews between 1882-1903 established homes in Palestine (Bregman 3-4).

Urged by Jewish pro-Zionist Chaim Weizmann, Christian pro-Zionist Prime Minister David Lloyd George who was motivated by the bible directed his Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour to write a letter to Lord Rothschild. This letter

became known as the Balfour Declaration. This Declaration written in November of 1917, stated: "His Majesty's Government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people...it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine..." ("Balfour Declaration"). Most of the Arabs living in Palestine were furious at the British because they were only referred to briefly in this quote and they amounted to 87% of the population of Palestine at this time (Bregman 6-7). Other Arab leaders were more understanding. In 1919, an Arab monarch, King Faisal of Iraq, signed the Faisal-Weizmann agreement, declaring support for Jewish aspirations in Palestine (Morad 5). This shows that anti-Zionism was not a unanimous sentiment among the Arab population.

Following the victory of the British over the Ottomans in WWI, the League of Nations approved the British Mandate for Palestine in June 1922, allowing the development of a Jewish homeland to be established in Palestine. At that time mandate Palestine included all of present day Israel, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, and Jordan ("Purpose of the British Mandate"). Theoretically, Jews could buy land anywhere in this area under British law. Throughout this period and starting in the 1800s, Jewish settlement of Palestine was peaceful. When the Zionists came to Palestine, they bought land from Arabs with their consent and increased the economic activity of Palestine (Bregman 5).

The Zionists insisted that their presence was effecting a positive and beneficial change to Palestine and the Arab life within it. There was some truth to this, however the assertion "Zionism = Progress"(Kaplan 70) may be viewed as an arrogant overstatement even to non-Arabs. The Arab perception was different. An English commission reports the Arab testimony as follows: "You say we are better off: you say my house has been enriched by the strangers who have entered it. But it is my house, and I did not invite the strangers in, or ask them to enrich it, and I do

not care how poor or bare it is as long as I am master in it.” This is an unfair way to view the Jewish emigration because the Jews are legally and peacefully buying land from the numerous willing Arabs who want to sell it (Kaplan 70-71).

In Jerusalem, on March 1920, during Passover, anti-Jewish riots broke out in response to untrue rumors about Jews attacking Arabs. The British arrested Jews for organizing defense-militias, but for the first few days did not stop the Arabs from rioting. Haj Amin al-Husseini was the Mufti in Jerusalem supported by the British. He was one of the leaders of these Arab Riots of 1920-21 and encouraged the Arab masses to kill the Jews and pillage their homes (“Palestine Arab Riots 1920-21”).

In response, to try to placate the Arabs, the British temporarily halted Jewish immigration and issued the White Paper in June 1922 (“Palestine Arab Riots 1920-21”). The White Paper restated Britain’s support of the Balfour Declaration; but, it said Britain did not support the division of Palestine to create a new nation for the Zionists. It also banned Jews from settling in Trans-Jordan (modern day Jordan), which constituted 76% of the original British Mandate (“White Paper of 1922”). Each side learned a lesson from these riots. The Arabs were rewarded for instigating and carrying out violence. Furthermore, this set a precedent that violence was the most efficient way for the Arabs to get what they wanted from the British. On the Jewish side, the Riots and the White Paper instilled doubt about the true intentions of the British. They decided to learn how to defend themselves more effectively against the Arabs, leading to the founding of the Hagana (which means “defense” in Hebrew). The Hagana was a paramilitary force that would later evolve into the Israeli Defense Forces (Kaplan 65). The net result was that the Jewish and Arab sides drifted further apart.

These riots and the outcome that followed might suggest that the British favored the Arab side. Arab scholars think the contrary. For example, Rashid Khalidi says that, throughout the mandate period, the Zionists were able to bring in money,

whereas the Arabs were not allowed to. However, he does not give any evidence for this restriction. Khalidi ascribes this to the colonial powers' restrictions: "The lack of such practical assistance [to the Palestinian Arabs] was not surprising, since until 1948 most Arab countries were under colonial rule" (Khalidi 10). On the other hand, he does not cite any instance in which an Arab was actually prevented from bringing in money.

In the 1930s, Hitler rose to power and led the Nazi party in Germany to produce tremendous propaganda and anti-Semitism. This caused many Jews to flee from Europe and take refuge in Palestine. In 1935 sixty thousand Jews immigrated to Palestine. According to Khalidi, the Zionist Dr. Wolfgang von Weisl stated that if the rate of Jewish immigration continued as it did in the 1930s the Jews would be able to take over all of Mandate Palestine. Dr. Wolfgang von Weisl believed that more Jews meant military power and thought that conflict and war were inevitable if they were to establish a powerful Jewish nation. Weisl said, "[Israel would be] strong enough to defend itself all by itself" (Khalidi 12). It should be noted that during the entire mandate period there were never any restrictions on Arab immigration to Palestine.

There were some benefits to allowing Jewish immigration in Palestine for the Arabs. The Jews brought a substantial amount of capital to Palestine and had a quickly growing economy. The Zionists' general influx of revenue had a positive impact on the Arab-Palestinian economy as well. The Arab-Palestinians had a greater per capita income than Arabs in neighboring nations (Khalidi 10-17). Even during the depression Palestine had an economy that was doing well compared to the first world nations (Khalidi 10-17). However, the average Jewish incomes were 2.6 times larger than Arab incomes (Khalidi 14). This income disparity caused resentment among the Arabs in spite of their economic advantage over other Arab countries. Conceivably, there could have been an Arab leader who highlighted the

benefits of the Jewish immigrants rather than comparing the average Arab to the average Jew. Such a leader might have argued that peace with the Zionists would be advantageous for the Palestinian Arabs. Instead of doing this, the Arab Palestinian leadership started a strike.

In response to the fear of a British sanctioned Jewish takeover, the Arabs in Palestine went on a six-month strike in 1936 from April to October (Khalidi, 106). This was the beginning of the Arab Revolt of 1936-1939. The Arabs boycotted any British or Zionist part of the economy. Violence erupted in September 1937 all over Palestine. In 1938, such chaos erupted in Palestine that the British military commander wrote: "The situation was such that civil administration of the country was, to all practical purposes, non-existent"(Khalidi, 107). The British were embarrassed because a few poorly armed peasants stood up to them and made the British Empire look weak. In retaliation, the British imposed curfews, blew up as many as two thousand homes, and destroyed crops (Khalidi, 107). This Arab insurrection caused the Arabs to suffer greatly. Not only were there many Arab casualties, but many important military leaders and national political leaders were imprisoned, exiled, or even assassinated. The Jews took over even more of the economy, due to the work stoppage of the Arabs and disorganization after the British retaliation (Khalidi, 108). The Jews gained jobs as law enforcement officials and acquired military training by the British. This brought the Jews closer to their goal of becoming an independent nation (Khalidi 109).

The British wanted to pacify the Arabs because they did not want to show that they were weak to their potential adversaries, the Germans and the Italians. The British thought they could resolve this dilemma in a conference. They invited Palestinian and Arab leaders to the St. James Palace Conference in London in March 1939. The Zionist leaders did not attend, but met with the British separately. The Arabs and the British concluded by issuing another White Paper two months later

that said the British promised to limit Jewish purchase of land in Palestine and Jewish immigration to Palestine, two developments which were extremely detrimental to the Zionist cause. They abandoned the 1937 Peel Commission plan, which stated that there would be a separate Jewish state made from the part occupied by the Jews in Palestine. According to the White Paper of 1939, there would be twice as many Arab officials as Jewish ones. Best of all for the Arab cause, there was a promise that the British would allow Palestine to become independent in 10 years (Khalidi 114). The Mufti, who was the religious and political Muslim leader in Palestine, rejected the White Paper even though the majority of the Arab higher committee wanted to accept this document (Khalidi 116). Khalidi agrees with the majority of the Arab leadership when he says: "Rejection [of the White Paper document] was certainly not advantageous to them [the Palestinian Arabs]. Its effect was to hand such initiative as remained in Arab hands over to the British, the Zionists and the Arab governments..." (Khalidi 117). In other words, the rejection of the second White Paper eliminated any Palestinian Arab influence on the future of Palestine. The Mufti rejected it because he wanted to be the leader of all of Palestine and compromising with the British in his eyes would have made him look weak (Kahalidi 117). Once again, the British, through the White Paper of 1939, rewarded the Arabs for the use of violence during the Arab revolt of 1936-1939 and caused extreme suffering among the Jews by preventing immigration during the Holocaust. This, in turn, led Zionist leaders to believe that Britain was no longer fit to govern Palestine. Instead, the Zionists should acquire the United States as their ally (Khalidi 122-123).

During the Second World War the Mufti became an ally of the Nazis and spent several years in Berlin. This caused the Allies to favor the Zionists in Palestine. This conveniently happened right before the 1947 partition. Once again the Arab leadership played into the hands of the Zionist cause and their decisions led to the

immediate recognition of Israel. The Soviet Union also supplied critical weapons to Israel (Khalidi 127-129).

Could there have been a Palestine in which Jews and Arabs could have coexisted peacefully? Khalidi poses this question himself. "Might it nevertheless have been advantageous for the Palestinians to try to come to terms with the idea that what they saw as their country, Palestine, might also be considered as a national home for what they saw as another people? Perhaps it might have been to their advantage..."(Khalidi 119). But it didn't happen. The events ultimately led to an Arab-Israeli conflict because of the absolutist Arab leadership and the British attempt to keep peace. The Arabs wanted all of Palestine and were unwilling to accept even a small Jewish homeland, which would have occupied less than 24% of the British Mandate for Palestine ("White Paper of 1922"). There were Zionist leaders, like Dr. Weisel, who were militaristic and who dreamed of an Israeli Nation that incorporated all of the original British mandate territory (Khalidi 12). Had Britain successfully repressed violence, accommodating leaders may have emerged and Palestinian-Israeli affairs might be peaceful today.

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