

British Mandate for Palestine

By [Avital Ginat](#)

Summary

The British Mandate for Palestine (1918-1948) was the outcome of several factors: the British occupation of territories previously ruled by the Ottoman Empire, the peace treaties that brought the First World War to an end, and the principle of self-determination that emerged after the war.

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Background

By the time [Britain](#) conquered Palestine at the end of 1917, it had made several conflicting agreements to gain support from various groups in the Middle East. These included: the [Husayn-McMahon Correspondence](#) (1915-1916), a series of letters exchanged during World War I in which the [British government](#) agreed to recognize Arab independence after the war in exchange for [Husayn ibn Ali, King of Hejaz \(-1931\)](#) launching the [Arab Revolt](#) against the [Ottoman Empire](#); the [Sykes-Picot Agreement](#) (1916), which divided the Middle East into British and French spheres of influence; and the [Balfour Declaration](#) (1917), in which the British government committed itself to a “national home” for the Jewish people.

Before the British occupation, Palestine was part of Ottoman Syria. The British army ruled Palestine until a civil administration was established on 1 July 1920. Britain was granted a Mandate for Palestine on 25 April 1920 at the San Remo Conference, and, on 24 July 1922, this mandate was approved by the [League of Nations](#).

The British were given a “dual mandate”, that is, on behalf of Palestine’s inhabitants on the one hand, and on behalf of “international society” on the other. The Balfour Declaration was incorporated into the preamble and second article of the Mandate for Palestine. Britain thus

also had a “dual obligation” towards both Arabs and Jews. While the mandate included the main parts of the Balfour Declaration, such as the proclamation of support for a Jewish national home, under the mandate’s terms Britain had an obligation to conduct its policy in Palestine in accordance with the needs of both Jews and Arabs. This included creating political, administrative and economic conditions that would facilitate the independent rule of the communities under British control. These objectives were an integral contradiction in the mandate.

The British determined the borders of Palestine according to other agreements they had made with their allies. For example, they transferred the eastern bank of the Jordan River to the control of [Abdullah ibn Husayn \(1882-1951\)](#) of the Hashemite dynasty and appointed him King of Jordan in recognition of his support during the war.

The Demography of Palestine

During the mandate era, two different social systems developed under one political framework, a Jewish one and an Arab one. Each society had its own welfare, educational, and cultural institutions and they gradually became politically and economically independent of one another.

The [Zionist](#) movement, for its part, operated along two main axes: the acquisition of land and immigration. Private capital and Zionist institutions purchased large-scale tracts of land, including from Arab landowners. Jewish immigration and the natural growth of the Arab population in Palestine dramatically transformed the demography of Mandatory Palestine as it grew from approximately 700,000 inhabitants in 1922 to around 1,800,000 in 1945. The Arab population doubled, while the Jewish population grew tenfold.

Jewish-Arab Conflict

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, violent confrontations between Jews and Arabs took place in Palestine, costing hundreds of lives. The events of 1929, known as the Wailing Wall Riots, are considered a turning point in the history of the mandate period for both Arabs and Jews. After the 1929 conflict, Arabs no longer distinguished between Jews of Arab origin and Jews of Eastern European origin, but instead viewed them as one homogenous group with the same national aspirations. As far as the Jews were concerned, the events led to the conclusion that a Jewish state was needed and political groups should work together to accomplish this objective. In the aftermath of the 1929 riots, the British set up a commission of inquiry to investigate the conflict. The results of the Shaw Commission, as it was called, led to a review of Jewish immigration and land purchasing, and thus marked a shift in British policy toward the Zionist movement and Balfour Declaration.

Another major Arab revolt, in 1936, was triggered by an economic crisis, Jewish mass immigration, which had increased in 1933 after [Adolf Hitler \(1889-1945\)](#) came to power in [Germany](#), and the continuation of Jewish land purchases. This revolt had two phases. The first started on April 1936 with a general strike by the Arab community and violent attacks on British and Jewish targets. It lasted until October 1936, when diplomatic efforts involving other Arab countries led to a ceasefire. A Royal Commission of Inquiry headed by [William Peel, 1st Earl Peel \(1867-1937\)](#) was established in 1937. It concluded that Palestine had two distinct societies with irreconcilable political demands, thus making it necessary to partition the land. The Arab rejection of the Peel conclusions led to the second phase in September 1937, when the Arab Higher Committee declined these recommendations and the revolt broke out again. The revolt then succumbed to internal struggles within Arab society. Additionally, Britain's heavy-handed response to the revolt was marked by violence and destruction. Estimates of the number of Arabs killed by the British armed forces and police vary between 2,000 and 5,000 people. Following the riots, the mandate government dissolved the Arab Higher Committee and declared it an illegal body.

In response to the revolt, the British government issued the White Paper of 1939. These events weakened Arab society to such an extent that after World War II it failed to recover and did not attain political achievements in the wake of the 1948 war.

Britain's Retreat from Palestine

The White Paper, issued in 1939, stated that Palestine should be a bi-national state, inhabited by both Arabs and Jews. Jewish immigration would be limited for five years, and any immigration required Arab consent. In addition, it called for restrictions on land purchases by Jews. British authorities set a limit on Jewish immigration to Palestine, but Hitler's rise to power increased the number of people looking for refuge from Nazi Germany. Yet their options were limited due to increasing restrictions and closed borders. Zionist organizations dealt with the situation by organizing illegal immigration to Palestine, which continued until British rule ended.

The negative publicity caused by the deteriorating situation in Palestine and the violence erupting on both sides made the mandate increasingly unpopular in Britain and was instrumental in the government's announcement of its intention to terminate the mandate and return the Palestine question to the United Nations (UN). After the UN General Assembly adopted the resolution to partition Palestine on 29 November 1947, Britain announced the termination of its Mandate for Palestine, which became effective on 15 May 1948. At midnight on 14 May 1948, the State of Israel declared its independence.

Conclusion

The British Mandate for Palestine was an outcome of the First World War, reflecting the collapse of pre-war [empires](#) and the emergence of nations demanding self-determination. The Middle East as we know it today still reflects and is influenced by the arbitrary partitions enacted by the war's victors.

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External Links

- [Banko, Lauren: Nationality and Citizenship in Mandate Palestine, Ottoman History Podcast Episode 272, 17 October 2016 \(Ottoman History Podcast\) \(Audio\)](#)
- [Draft mandates for Mesopotamia and Palestine: As submitted for the approval of the League of Nations, London 1921 \(Internet Archive\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Fenton, Damien: The Ottoman Empire. The Arab Revolt, 1916-18, 30 July 2014 \(New Zealand History\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Halperin, Liora: Linguistic Diversity in Mandate Palestine, Ottoman History Podcast Episode 235, 4 April 2016 \(Ottoman History Podcast\) \(Audio\)](#)
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- [Tamari, Salim: The Great War and the Remaking of Palestine, Ottoman History Podcast Episode 367, 17 July 2018 \(Ottoman History Podcast\) \(Audio\)](#)
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