

British Mandate for Palestine

Introduction

The Arab-Israeli conflict goes back to the 19th century, well before Britain was given the Mandate for Palestine by the League of Nations in 1922. However, the conflict came to the fore during the mandate era and when it ended, the conflict had not been solved.

This conflict arouses great passion on both sides, including their supporters around the world. Sometimes this clash has been described as the result of competing narratives, with both sides wanting their national independence on the same piece of land. This series of lectures will not provide 'the answer' to this conflict, as there is no answer. Your take on the subject will depend on your point of view. What this lecture series can do is to describe the events, the personalities and the ideologies that make up this conflict, and allow you to decide what could have been done better, or what can still be done better, given all that has happened.

This paper is only a brief summary of the lectures and is intended to provide a guide and aide-mémoire. It will present the following: the timeline of the main events; the key organisations and personalities; and the key documents.

1. Timeline of principal events

1896 - **Theodor Herzl** publishes *The Jewish State*

1897 – **1st Zionist Congress** (in Basle). Political Zionism founded

1914 – WW1; the Turks side with the Axis powers and face Britain, France and Russia as enemies

1915 – **Sharif-McMahon correspondence** – dispute about whether Palestine was promised or not

1916 – **Sykes-Picot Agreement** – Britain, France and Russia divide up the Ottoman Empire

1916 - **The Arab Revolt** – First organised Arab rebellion against the Ottomans.

1917 – **Balfour Declaration** – British government pledges support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine

1917 – 1920 – British military administration of Palestine; pro-Arab sentiment

1918 – Turks defeated; Ottoman Empire soon falls

1920 – **San Remo conference** – Agrees to give Britain a mandate for Palestine.

1920 – 1948 – British civil administration of Palestine

1920 – **Jerusalem (Nebi Musa) riots** – first major riots by Arabs against Jews in Palestine

1921 – **Jaffa riots** – More riots by Arabs against Jews

1922 – League of Nations ratifies the **British Mandate for Palestine**

1929 – Palestine riots in Jerusalem (**Wailing Wall riots**), Hebron and Safed

1936 – 1939 – **The Great Revolt** (riots) – Arabs fight Britain and Jews. Led by the Mufti.

1938 - Captain Orde Wingate sets up **Special Night Squads**, a joint British-Jewish unit for night operations against Arabs.

1939 – **St James Conference** – an attempt by Britain to reach a compromise between Palestinian Arabs and Jews but this ended in failure. Partition not advocated. Followed by British white paper.

1942 – **Biltmore Conference** – The Joint Statement from this New York conference = the Biltmore Program; advocated the immediate establishment of a Jewish Commonwealth, i.e. state

1944 – 1948 – Period of anti-British violence mainly by the militant Zionists (**Irgun and Stern Gang**)

1944 – **Lord Moyne assassinated** by the Stern Gang

1946 – **The London Conference** – It followed the 1946 Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry report. Britain again tried to reach a compromise but failed. Decided to hand back the Mandate to UN.

1947 (November 29th) – **UN votes for partition** based on recommendations of the United Nations. Special Commission on Palestine (UNSCOP)

1947 - 1949 – Either the **War of Independence** for Israel or the Palestinian '**Nakba**' (catastrophe).

Phase 1: 1 December 1947 = civil war. Phase 2: 15 May 1948 = invasion of Israel by 7 Arab states

1948 (14 May) – **Israel declares independence** a few hours before the British leave at midnight

1948 (15 May) – **Britain leaves** Palestine

1948 (September) – **Count Bernadotte assassinated** by the Stern Gang.

2. Main organisations

Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) – established in the 1880s and became a political party after the efforts of the ‘Young Turks’ in 1908. Dissolved in 1918 when it was overtaken by Kemal Ataturk. Was a revolutionary movement, against the Caliph, and in favour of ‘Turkification’.

Zionist Organisation - The Zionist Organization was founded by Theodor Herzl at the First Zionist Congress in Basle in 1897; it was renamed the World Zionist Organization in 1960.

Jewish Agency - It was established in 1929 as the operative branch of the Zionist Organization. It fosters the immigration of Jews in the diaspora to the Land of Israel.

Histadrut – Trade union founded by Ben Gurion in 1920; became the dominant Jewish socio-economic organisation in Palestine.

Haganah - The main Zionist paramilitary organization of the Jewish population in Mandatory Palestine between 1920 and 1948, when it became the core of the Israel Defence Forces.

Irgun - The Irgun was a Zionist paramilitary organization that operated in Mandate Palestine between 1931 and 1948. The organization is also referred to as Etzel. Part of Revisionist movement.

Stern gang – Lehi (formally Lohamei Herut Yisra’el) = Zionist extremist organization in Palestine, founded in 1940 by Avraham Stern (1907–42) after a split in the right-wing Irgun.

Palestine Arab Congresses - The Palestine Arab Congresses, occasionally referred to as the Palestine National Congresses, were a series of congresses organized by a nationwide network of local Palestinian Arab Muslim-Christian Associations, in Palestine, between 1919 and 1928.

Supreme Muslim Council – The highest body in charge of Muslim community affairs in Mandatory Palestine. Led by the Mufti al-Husseini from 1922 till he fled Palestine in 1937. Dissolved in 1951.

Arab Higher Committee – Organisation dominated by the Mufti formed to press for Arab independence. Established in April 1936 and outlawed by the British in 1937.

Arab League – Founded in 1944 when the Mufti was absent in Europe; created by Arab states who supported the Palestinians. A regional organization in the Arab world; now has 22 members.

3. Main characters

Theodor Herzl (1860 – 1904) – Founder of modern political Zionism. Formed the Zionist Organisation

Max Nordau (1849 – 1923) – Early Zionist who apparently coined the term ‘national home’ for Jews

Arthur Balfour (1848 – 1930) – British statesman (previously Prime Minister from 1902 – 1905) who, as foreign secretary, was the author of the Balfour Declaration of 1917

Sharif Hussein ibn Ali (1853 - 1931) – Arab leader based in Mecca and later King of Hejaz (western Arabian Peninsula); finally driven out by ibn-Saud who founded Saudi Arabia.

Amir Faisal (1885 – 1933) – Thrown off Syrian throne by the French but ended up King of Iraq. A son of Hussein.

Amir Abdullah (1882 – 1951) – King of Transjordan. Another son of Hussein.

Chaim Weizmann (1874 – 1952) – Leader of Zionist Organisation and person mainly responsible for Balfour Declaration.

Ze’ev Jabotinsky (1880 – 1940) – Revisionist (right-wing) leader. Profound influence on politics.

David Ben Gurion (1886 – 1973) – Founder of the Histadrut (trade unions), the Jewish Agency Executive and first PM of Israel

Haj Amin al-Husseini (1895 – 1974) – Mufti of Jerusalem and militant leader of Palestinian Arabs

Menachem Begin (1913 – 1992) – Leader of the Irgun and successor to Jabotinsky

Ernest Bevin (1881 – 1951) – British foreign secretary from 1945 – 1948. Oversaw Britain quitting the Mandate. Said to be antisemitic. Abrasive diplomatic style.

British High Commissioners – See separate table

4. British High Commissioners for Palestine during the Mandate

The High Commissioner for Palestine was the head of the British Mandatory administration in Palestine. On July 3, 1922, in an Order-in-Council, the High Commissioner was empowered to promulgate ordinances for the peace, order, and good government of Palestine, including the power of pardon or reprieve. His powers were not limited by any representative body in Palestine, but he was assisted by an advisory council appointed by himself. This constituted the 'Palestine Government'. In the table below, the temporary (acting) high commissioners are not included. (Note: Acknowledgement to www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/)

Image	Name (years alive and years in power)	Brief description
	Sir Herbert Louis Samuel (1870 – 1963) 1920 - 1925	The first – and only Jewish – High Commissioner, Sir Herbert Samuel, appointed in April, 1920, two years before the mandate of the League of Nations was officially confirmed, laid the foundations of the British civil administration in the country, including Transjordan.
	Field Marshal Lord (Charles Onslow) Plumer (1857–1932) 1925 - 1928	His term was characterized by tranquillity in the country and the development of local government, the promulgation of the religious ordinance, and the Palestinian Citizenship Order.
	Sir John Chancellor (1870–1952) 1928 - 1931	In his time the Arab massacres of August 1929 took place. He was said to have had a part in the framing of the new anti-Zionist policy as defined in the Passfield White Paper (1930).
	Sir Arthur Grenfell Wauchope (1874–1947) 1931 - 1938	Showed understanding for the Jewish work in Palestine. His plan to establish a legislative council proved abortive because of Jewish and Arab opposition. Major Jewish immigration because of rise of Nazism; the Arab Revolt (1936–39); and publication of the first partition plan for Palestine (1937).
	Sir Harold MacMichael (1882 – 1969) 1938 - 1944	He implemented rigidly the anti-Zionist policy of the 1939 White Paper, refusing to admit Jewish refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe. In August 1944, an attempt was made on his life by Loḥamei Ḥerut Israel (Lehi or the Stern Gang).
	Field Marshal (John Vereker), The Viscount Gort (1886 – 1946) 1944 - 1945	He served as the sixth High Commissioner only for one year, 1944 to 1945, and retired because of ill health.
	Sir Alan Cunningham (1887 – 1983) 1945 - 1948	The last High Commissioner while the future of Palestine was studied by the Anglo-American Commission of Inquiry in 1946 and by UNSCOP in 1947. Cunningham left Palestine in May 1948.

5. Main documents

Damascus protocol 1915 - a document given to Faisal bin Hussein on 23 May 1915 by the Arab secret societies al-Fatat and Al-'Ah on his second visit to Damascus. The secret societies declared they would support Faisal's father Hussein bin Ali's revolt against the Ottoman Empire, if the demands in the protocol were submitted to the British. These demands, defining the territory of an independent Arab state to be established in the Middle East that would encompass all of the lands of Ottoman Western Asia south of the 37th parallel north,^[2] became the basis of the Hussein–McMahon Correspondence.

McMahon–Hussein Correspondence 1915 – 1916 - is a series of letters that were exchanged during World War I in which the United Kingdom government agreed to recognize Arab independence after the war in exchange for the Sharif of Mecca launching the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire. With defeat in Gallipoli seeming inevitable, Sir Henry McMahon offers Sharif Hussein support for an Arab State excluding areas West of Damascus, if he helps the British against the Ottomans.

Sykes-Picot Agreement 1916 - Britain, France and Russia made a secret agreement to divide up the Middle East between them

Anglo-French Declaration 1918 (November) - Britain and France promised independence to the former subjects of the Ottoman Turks, including Palestine. The Anglo-French declaration implies that the indigenous populations, previously under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, would be granted self-determination.

King Crane Commission 1919 - The Commission was set up by President Wilson. It recommended Syria and Palestine should be under a single mandate and recommended serious modifications to the Zionist programme. The report was prepared in 1919 but suppressed until 1922.

Palin Commission 1920 – Set up to report on the Jerusalem riots of 1920. It foresaw increasing problems between the various parties and the administration and was never published.

Haycraft Commission of Inquiry 1921 - a Royal Commission set up to investigate the Jaffa riots of 1921.

Churchill White Paper 1922 - Churchill made a major intervention as Colonial Secretary that proved absolutely decisive to the survival of the government's Zionist commitment. He redrew the geography of the Levant and asserted, among other things, that there had been no promise of political independence to Palestine in the form of the war-time McMahon-Hussein correspondence.

Shaw Commission Report 1929 - a British commission of inquiry, led by Sir Walter Shaw, established to investigate the violent rioting in Palestine in late August 1929.

Hope Simpson Enquiry 1929 - a British Commission managed by Sir John Hope Simpson, to address Immigration, Land Settlement and Development issues in British Mandate of Palestine, as recommended by the Shaw Commission, after the widespread 1929 Palestine riots. The report recommended limiting Jewish immigration based on the economic absorptive capacity of Palestine.

Passfield White Paper 1930 - found this Zionist policy damaging to the economic development of the Arab population. It concluded that Jewish immigration to Palestine was taking land from the Arab fellahs; sales of land to Jewish settlers should in future be restricted, and Arab unemployment levels should be a factor in considering permitted levels of Jewish immigration to Palestine. Zionists claimed that it backtracked on commitments in the Balfour Declaration'

MacDonald Letter 1931 - It was considered a withdrawal of the Passfield White Paper by the Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald.

Peel Commission Report 1937 - The report admitted that the mandate was unworkable because Jewish and Arab objectives in Palestine were incompatible, and it proposed that Palestine be partitioned into three zones: an Arab state, a Jewish state, and a neutral territory containing the holy places. Although the British government initially accepted these proposals, by 1938 it had recognized that such partitioning would be infeasible, and it ultimately rejected the commission's report.

The Woodhead Commission 1938 - The new commission was instructed to gather evidence from the various parties and to recommend boundaries for two self-sufficient states, one Arab and one Jewish, to replace the British Mandate.

White Paper of 1939 - led by Neville Chamberlain, in response to the 1936–1939 Arab revolt in Palestine. After its formal approval in the House of Commons on 23 May 1939, it acted as the governing policy for Mandatory Palestine from 1939 to the 1948 British departure. Its main finding was for a unitary Palestinian state for Arabs and Jews, and this policy obtained until the UN partition plan of 1947. Britain announces severe restrictions on Jewish immigration and land purchases in Palestine. Violence erupts from Jewish militants. After the war, the Mandate was referred to the United Nations.

Anglo-American Committee of Enquiry (1948) – Considered Jewish immigration and specially the Jews who were in European displacements camps (DPs).

6. Conclusion: What went wrong and what could have been done better?

Assuming that 'done better' means leading to a peaceful outcome with Arab-Israeli coexistence, here are three questions for you to contemplate and answer:

- 1) What could the British have done better?
- 2) What could the Jews have done better?
- 3) What could the Arabs, especially the Palestinians, have done better?

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