

THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

Revised second edition, November 1993

PART II, LESSON ONE: PARTITION AS A POLITICAL TOOL

It was during World War I that Britain and France decided to partition and control the Arab world. Before then, most of the region was part of the Turkish Ottoman Empire. To understand what Britain and France did and why their actions produced such bad outcomes, we must go back to the situation before World War I.

At that time, the countries that we know today did not exist so we must think in terms of geographic regions. In the southwest Asian part of the Ottoman Empire there were three such regions. We can call them Syria, Palestine, and Mesopotamia (or Iraq). Each region had several provinces, and although the Turks governed the whole area, they allowed some of their provinces considerable local autonomy. For example, Mount Lebanon north of Beirut in Syria had been largely self-governing since the 1860s and the province of Kuwait in Mesopotamia had been self-governing even longer.

During the war, Britain and France decided to partition the Arab world and make the various provinces into countries. They did this through the "Mandate" system created after World War I by the League of Nations, which Britain and France controlled. Initially the area was broken into three Mandates: Palestine under Britain, Mesopotamia under Britain, Syria under France. But in the 1920s Syria and Palestine were subdivided, Syria into the countries of Syria and Lebanon, Palestine into the countries of Jordan and Palestine. Also, Kuwait was kept separate from Mesopotamia.

To the south of Mesopotamia the independent Arabian peninsula (whose oil resources had not yet been discovered) was not brought under the mandate system. On the west side of that peninsula was the kingdom of Hejaz, which contained the famous holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Hejaz was ruled by Sherif Hussein of the Hashem family. But elsewhere in Arabia, the dynamic Ibn Saud was working to unite the peninsula under his leadership. Through arms and tribal alliances, Ibn Saud took over most of Arabia and created a country which he named Saudi Arabia after his family. In the act of uniting so much of Arabia he displaced the Hashemites, who had become allies of Britain during the war.

All of these events left the new Arab states weak and divided and set the stage for subsequent conflict. To see why, we must go back to World War I.

WORLD WAR I

This was a war of trenches and artilleries with human losses greater than the world had seen before. By 1918 over 10 million people had died. In 1915, in the Battle of Ypres (in Belgium, to block a German advance into France), Britain lost half of its army of 100,000 and was forced to raise an entirely new army. Also in 1915 Britain using mostly troops from Australia and New Zealand tried to knock the Ottoman Empire out of the war with an attack on Gallipoli south of Istanbul. The attempt was a disaster. In ten months of fighting British forces never got off the beaches. Their total casualties were 25,000.

Then in 1916 on the first day of the First Battle of the Marne in France Britain lost another 47,000 lives. The war was going badly.

The Arab Revolt

Britain had a scheme. The Turkish Ottoman Empire--which was aligned with Germany--was vulnerable because nearly half its population were not Turks. If Britain could persuade the Arabs to rise up against the Turks, they could weaken the Ottoman Empire, divert Turkish soldiers from Europe, and harm the Central Powers. Negotiations began with the Hashemite family of Mecca. The family leader Sherif Hussein was well respected throughout the Arab world. He negotiated with British diplomat Sir Henry McMahon. The revolt began in June, 1916, with Arabs believing Britain had promised a unified Arab kingdom under Hashemite leadership at the end of the war.

The Russian Revolution

In February, 1917 the Russian Revolution occurred and threatened to take Russia out of the war. (Note: There were two Russian Revolutions in 1917. The famous one in the fall was the Communist Revolution that brought Lenin to power; the one in the spring overthrew the Czar and brought to power a group of non-Communist reformers.) Russian neutrality would allow Germany to concentrate its armies on the Western Front, a disaster for the Allies. This created a panic in the Allied capitals, especially in Britain. They were desperately hoping American would enter the war and that Russia would stay in. Many British leaders were convinced that if Jews spoke up for the war it could make a difference. Starting in 1916 they began negotiating with Jewish leaders, promising British support for a Jewish Homeland in Palestine in exchange for Jewish support for the war. While some British leaders were sympathetic to Jews for humanitarian or cultural reasons, others thought an alliance with Jewish Nationalists (Zionists) would be strategically advantageous. The Balfour Declaration--pledging Britain to support a Jewish "homeland" in Palestine--was issued in late November, 1917.

WARTIME STATEMENTS, PLANS AND PROMISES

There are five wartime documents or agreements that are exceptionally helpful in understanding why things went wrong at the end of the war. Clearly, western leaders were not being honest or consistent about their true motives or intentions.

DeBunsen Report (1915):

Britain had historically backed Turkish control of the Arab world. Now it began to reconsider that policy. The DeBunsen report suggested that Britain should seize Ottoman territory in the Arab world after the war. British interests in India made the Persian Gulf and Iraq prime targets. Iraq was the most valuable place in the region with water, rich soil, and strategic location (also Iraqi oil had just been discovered). From Iraq, there were two ways to reach the sea--the Basra-Kuwait port area and across land to Palestine (particularly the port at Haifa). Britain concluded that these two areas had to be under their control if they were to control Iraq. Other places--such as Lebanon and Syria--were recommended for takeover but were less significant.

Hussein-McMahon Correspondence (1915):

The British alliance with the Arabs was worked out by Sir Henry McMahon and Sharif Hussein of Mecca. Their letters are controversial because of what was or was not promised. Arabs were convinced Britain had promised a unified Arab kingdom that would include Syria and Palestine. The British claimed Palestine west of the Jordan River had been excluded and that what was promised was just an Arab kingdom. Britain said its promises were fulfilled after the war by making Sharif Hussein's sons rulers in Jordan and Iraq.

Sykes-Picot Agreements (1916):

Britain and France agreed to divide up the Arab world after the war. These agreements were secret until late 1917 when the Russian Revolution occurred and the Communists released the documents to the public. (The release caused much diplomatic embarrassment since the agreements contradicted other promises.) In short, the Sykes-Picot Agreements led to these results: Britain would get what came to be known as Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine, France would get Syria (including Lebanon), and Russia would get Central Asia (currently independent republics).

Balfour Declaration (November 1917):

Britain committed itself to a Jewish "national home" in Palestine. It also promised to protect the rights of the non-Jewish inhabitants, including their "civil and religious" rights.

President Wilson's Fourteen Points (January 1918):

When America entered the war, President Wilson declared that this was not a war for territory but a war for the principles of peace, justice, and international law. He renounced the secret treaties and called for independence and self-determination for the various peoples then under the control of the Turkish Ottoman Empire and other great powers. Most Arabs assumed President Wilson was speaking for Britain and France.

THE MANDATE SYSTEM

At the end of the war, the new League of Nations (under the leadership of Britain and France) created the Mandate System. Under this system, conquered lands were placed into one of three categories (A, B, C) and were assigned to a victorious power to govern. The countries of the Arab world were declared to be Level A Mandates, meaning that they were at a very advanced stage of development and would have only a short period of British or French control. Level A Mandates were to be autonomous (self-governing) within a short time and were to choose their own leaders and shape their own destiny. (Mandates of the B and C levels were declared to be less advanced. Most of Africa was in the B category, some small islands in the Pacific were C, meaning that independence was unlikely in the foreseeable future).

In 1922 Palestine (west of the Jordan River) became a Level A Mandate under British control. (The original draft of the Mandate included Jordan and Palestine in one entity but this was changed in the final 1922 version.) The Mandate agreement specified that there would be a Jewish "homeland" inside of Palestine but that the rights of the native Palestinians would not be affected. These vague and contradictory statements were to cause much trouble.

Setting up Governments

Most Arabs were not happy to be under British and French rule. They much preferred to control their own affairs. In Damascus an independent Syrian government ruled for several months before being overthrown by a French army. In Iraq, Britain needed over 100,000 soldiers and several months of exceptional violence to suppress popular Iraqi resistance. And Sharif Hussein--Britain's ally during the war--was very upset at what he saw as British betrayal, especially in Palestine.

To control the Arab world, Britain and France had two options:

1. Bring armies into the region and rule it by force.
2. Find local allies that could be put in power.

Clearly the second option was better, but the question was how to find such allies. One technique Britain and France had learned while colonizing Africa in the nineteenth century was called "divide-and-rule."

The strategy was simple: find a local group or leader or ethnic minority that is in conflict with its neighbors, provide them with arms and support, and they will align with you and be loyal to you. In some cases, your ally may be from the majority group and will have popular support. But in many other cases leaders were drawn from ethnic or religious minorities. As a result, new rulers were often unpopular with most citizens, were seen in ethnic or religious terms, and were opposed to anything approaching democracy (except democracy within the ruling group).

Also, since big Arab countries were split into smaller countries, the states that were produced were weaker than need be. For example, when Lebanon was created, France added to the Beirut province several Syrian ports such as Tripoli in the north and Tyre and Sidon in the south. This made Syria weaker by leaving it landlocked and without some of its richest cities; it also left Lebanon weakened since most the Christian areas around Beirut were joined with Muslim areas to the north, south and east. Since the French put the Christians in power so as to control the Muslims, disputes between Christians and Muslims were inevitable.

Governments based on divide-and-rule strategies are seen by the public as representing the interests of one group rather than all the people. They have difficulty ever being accepted. Also, such governments can be easily manipulated by outsiders. If the rulers displease foreign powers, those powers can supply weapons or support to dissident elements within the country and create uprisings. In other words, instability and weakness are built into the very structure of the state.

Britain took members of the Hashemite family from Mecca and installed them as rulers in Iraq and Jordan. While this was not difficult to pull off in Jordan--which was close to Mecca and where the population was largely rural Bedouin--it was a far move from Mecca to Baghdad and was not popular with the more advanced elites of Iraq. Likewise, the introduction of European Jews into Palestine led to exceptional resistance from local Arabs.

QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES FOR LESSON ONE

1. Can you define these words and explain why they are important: partition, divide and rule, mandate.

2. The text mentions several famous cities, particularly Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus, Haifa, Jerusalem, and Mecca. Get an atlas and locate these cities. Choose one city and show how you would get from that city to the other five by land. Will you cross any mountains on any of your trips? If you were in a military convoy that traveled at 30 miles an hour, how long would it take to get from Baghdad to Damascus? How would you get from Britain to Turkey by water? By land?
3. Read the documents included in this section. Do you find conflicts in what the British promised Arabs, French, and Jews? Quote specific passages that you think conflict with other passages, and why you think they conflict.
4. Britain was afraid that if Russia left the war, Germany would concentrate its armies entirely on the Western Front. Locate Britain, France, Germany, and Russia on a map and see if you can figure out what the term "Western Front" means.
5. Churchill felt that if the Battle of Gallipoli were successful, pressure would be eased on the Eastern Front. Can you locate the Ottoman Empire on the map and figure out Churchill's logic?
6. Who were the Hashemites? Where did they rule before World War I? After World War I?
7. Class Project: Break into teams representing Britain, Russia, France, Hashemites, the province of Syria, the province of Palestine, and Zionists. Review the documents and state which one your group prefers as the basis for a settlement. Draw a map that illustrates your proposed solution. Explain to other teams what you want at the end of the war. Can you work out any arrangements that will satisfy all of you?
8. Things to discuss and think about regarding the mandate system:
 1. What do we mean by "colony" and "mandate?" How are they different or similar?
 2. Trace the course of events in the Arab World during World War I up to the establishment of French and British mandates. What role did the League of Nations play? Was the League making decisions based on the common good or was it just a symbolic figurehead for British and French ambition?
 3. To American public opinion, would a League mandate or a British colony over the same area be more acceptable? Why?
9. Extra Credit Assignment: Find a book from before World War I that has a map of the Middle East. Locate the roads that lead between major cities. Some roads in use then do not exist now. Which roads are gone? What do you think happened to them?
10. Thought Question: When Lebanon became an independent state with its expanded borders, Syria lost its major ports. What impact would this loss have on relations between Syria and Lebanon today? (It might help to find a map of Lebanon and see the major ports affected.)

Go on to [Lesson 2](#).

Go back to [Key Dates](#).

cmenas@umich.edu