



## The Story of Palestine: Causes of Conflict

Palestine is an ancient land settled by many peoples over the millennia. The roots of the 'middle east problem' do not lie in the squabbling between two peoples over who got there first but rather a series of accidents through history and yet another classic example of Imperialist blunders with a map and a pencil. Following the blossoming of Christianity, first in the Eastern Roman Empire, centered on Constantinople, and then Rome, the religion spread East and West, there were many Christians as far away as China. The rise of Islam overran much of the area and spread along North Africa and up into Spain. The Byzantine Empire defended the Holy Land and provided an Eastern bulwark to the Muslim tides. Due principally to jealousy, when the Mongol and Turkic hordes

galloped out of Central Asia the western monarchies stood and watched as the Byzantine Empire was eroded. It was not until the 11<sup>th</sup> century that the Franks led the Crusades to get the Holy Land back, if they had supported Christian Constantinople earlier then this would have been unnecessary. The expansion of the Mongol and Turkic peoples was constantly facilitated by the riven factions of the West.

The Crusader Era lasted from 1099 to 1244, with the tide of superiority going back and forth. The Franks, as the Western Europeans were collectively known by the Levantines, set up a number of contiguous states; Armenian Cilicia, the County of Edessa, the Principality of Antioch, the County of Tripoli and the Kingdom of Jerusalem. These meandered round the Mediterranean coast from the Byzantine Empire in modern Turkey through Syria, Lebanon and Israel down to the Fatamid Caliphate of Cairo, later to become Egypt. Both sides acted abominably, massacring Moslems, Jews and Christians. The initial Christian advantage was soon squandered and the Muslims regained their lost territory. By 1453, the fall of Constantinople, there was no question of regaining the Holy Land, rather the Europeans watched as Balkan states fell like dominoes until the Ottomans stood at the gates of Vienna. In addition, through the 13<sup>th</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, the inhabitants of the Levant had to contend with the four horsemen, wars waged between Christian and Muslims, between Mongols and Egyptians, the Black Plague and drought and devastation. The result was that the traditional Christian and Jewish populations declined and, of the diminished total of some 200,000, the Muslims became the majority.

Ottoman rule was comparatively benign, the city walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt among other renovation projects and in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Sultan Sulaiman partially funded the rebuilding of Tiberias as a Jewish city under the guidance of Joseph HaNasi. Many of the Sephardic Jews, expelled from Spain, found a haven in Palestine. Unfortunately, as happens so often in history, the increase and success of the Jewish population, they were thought to number 25% of the total in the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century, led to resentment and, in this instance, massacre in 1660 at Safed and Jerusalem. The area continued in its fairly homogenous nature, undisturbed by the west, until Napoleon and his army of Savants decided to conquer Palestine and Egypt. From 1775 the local governor had been very ably assisted by a Jewish Vizier named Haim Farkhi and it was to him that Napoleon directed his precedent-setting duplicity with an offer of a Jewish state in exchange for his help in overthrowing the Ottomans. Haim recognized the lie and instead organized the defence of Acre which helped to stymie Napoleon's intentions. Coincidentally, the Ottomans were allied with the British at this point, strange bedfellows who would continue to sleep together for more than a century. Haim was poisoned in 1819 and his brother's attempt to exact revenge nearly resulted in a Jewish state in Galilee; further assassinations ended their attempt.

The rise of Zionism in Europe coincided with the increasing decline of the Ottoman Empire. Britain's interests lay in keeping Russia at bay, to which end the Crimean war was fought, and little credence was given to the Jewish nationalism by any of the 'Great Powers'. Jewish immigration had steadily increased through the 19<sup>th</sup> century but it was not until the outbreak of World War I in 1914 that British chicanery and hypocrisy reached a crescendo. General Allenby, the victor, was cheered by Jewish, Muslim, and Christians when he entered Jerusalem as each faction had great expectations. The Treaty of Versailles, 1919, formalized the breakup of the Ottoman Empire as well as effectively granting an Arab nation in exchange for The Arab Revolt. Simultaneously, the Balfour Declaration of 1917 had promised an independent Jewish state in the region in exchange for Jewish help! An agreement between Emir Faisal, the King of Hejaz, and Chaim Weizmann, President of the World Zionist Organization for the formation of both a Jewish state and a larger Middle East Arab nation was soon nullified by the actions of the British and French who had made a secret treaty in 1916, the Sykes-Picot agreement, which split the entire area into League of Nations mandates for the two powers to rule. From then on the story is really about two indigenous

and cheated peoples trying to attain what they had been promised and had striven for. Both the Jewish and Palestinian had to resort to guerrilla war and revolt to achieve independence in 1948, by which time any hope of co-operation had dissolved into rancour and belligerence.

Oh, perfidious Albion, look what you wrought.

Sources: Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews* (London 1987)

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