

# The Arabs

*A History*

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*This book is dedicated to  
Richard Huia Woods Rogan*

dismissed his prime minister. Down but not out, Sidqi would remain one of Egypt's most influential politicians until his death in 1950.

King Fuad made a brief stab at absolute rule. He repealed Sidqi's 1930 Constitution by royal decree without restoring the earlier 1923 Constitution, and he dissolved the Parliament elected in 1931 without calling for new elections. The king assumed full power over Egypt for a transition period of unspecified duration. Needless to say, these measures were no more successful in restoring public confidence in the Egyptian government, and King Fuad came under pressure from both the British and the Wafd to restore Egypt's 1923 Constitution and prepare for new elections. On December 12, 1935, King Fuad conceded defeat and decreed the restoration of the original constitution.

The political deadlock between the British, the palace, and the Wafd was finally broken in 1936. In April of that year, King Fuad died and was succeeded by his handsome young son, Faruq. Elections were held in May and returned a Wafd majority. These two developments—the return of the Wafd to power and Faruq's coronation—were greeted with a great sense of optimism, a sort of Cairo spring. This was matched by a new British openness to renegotiate the terms of its relations with Egypt. The rise of fascism in Europe, and Mussolini's 1935 invasion of Ethiopia, gave new urgency to securing Egyptian consent to Britain's position. German and Italian propaganda against British colonialism had begun to turn some heads in Egypt. Ultra nationalist new parties like Young Egypt espoused openly fascist ideologies.

To counter these dangers, the British high commissioner, Sir Miles Lampson, opened new negotiations in Cairo in March 1936. A new treaty was concluded between an all-party Egyptian delegation and the British government and signed into law in August 1936. The Treaty of Preferential Alliance expanded Egypt's sovereignty and independence, though like the Iraqi treaty it gave Britain preferential standing among foreign nations and the right to keep military bases on Egyptian soil. It also left Sudan under British control. The gains were enough to secure Egypt's admission to the League of Nations in 1937, five years after Iraq's entry and the only other Arab state to join the international organization. But the compromises made, and the twenty-year duration of the treaty, pushed Egyptian aspirations for complete independence beyond the political horizon.

The experiences of the 1930s left many Egyptians disenchanted with the party politics of liberal democracy. Though the Egyptians rejected Sidqi's autocracy, they were never satisfied with the results the Wafd obtained. Zaghlul had promised to deliver Egypt from British rule in 1922, and al-Nahas promised the same in 1936, yet the elusive promise of independence remained a generation away.

The British mandate in Palestine was doomed from the outset. The terms of the Balfour Declaration were written into the preamble of the mandatory instrument issued by the League of Nations to formalize Britain's position in Palestine. Unlike all of the other postwar mandates, in which a great power was charged with establishing the instruments of self-rule in a newly emerging state, the British in Palestine were required to establish both a viable state from among the indigenous people of the land and a national home for the Jews of the world.

The Balfour Declaration was a formula for communal conflict. Given Palestine's very limited resources, there simply was no way to establish a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine without prejudice to the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine. Inevitably the mandate engendered conflict between rival nationalisms—the highly organized Zionist movement, and a new Palestinian nationalism forged by the dual threats of British imperialism and Zionist colonialism. Palestine would prove Britain's gravest imperial failure in the Middle East, a failure that would condemn the whole of the Middle East to conflict and violence that persist to the present day.

Palestine was a new country in an ancient land, cobbled together from parts of different Ottoman provinces to suit imperial convenience. The Palestine mandate originally spanned the Jordan River and stretched from the Mediterranean to the frontiers of Iraq through vast, inhospitable desert territory. In 1923 the lands to the east of the Jordan were formally detached from the Palestine mandate to form a separate state of Transjordan under Amir Abdullah's rule. The British also ceded a part of the Golan Heights to the French mandate in Syria in 1923, by which point Palestine was a country smaller than Belgium, roughly the size of the state of Maryland.

The population of Palestine was already quite diverse in 1923. Palestine was a land holy to Christians, Muslims, and Jews, and for centuries had attracted pilgrims from around the world. Starting in 1882 a new wave of visitors—settlers rather than pilgrims—began to arrive. Pushed by the pogroms of Tsar Alexander III's Russia and pulled by the appeal of a powerful new ideology, Zionism, thousands of Eastern European and Russian Jews sought refuge in Palestine. They entered a society that had an 85 percent Muslim majority, a Christian minority representing some 9 percent of the population, and an indigenous Jewish community. The original Yishuv (as the Jewish community of Palestine was known) did not exceed 3 percent of the population of Palestine in 1882 and lived in the four towns of rabbinical learning: Jerusalem, Hebron, Tiberias, and Safad.<sup>32</sup>

Two distinct waves of Zionist settlers reached Palestine before the First World War. The First Aliya, or wave of Jewish immigrants, entered Palestine between 1882–1903 and doubled the size of the Yishuv from 24,000 to 50,000. The Jewish

community expanded yet more rapidly under the Second Aliya (1904–1914), and by 1914 the total Jewish population of Palestine was estimated to have reached 85,000.<sup>33</sup>

The Arab population of Palestine had watched the expansion of Jewish immigration after 1882 with mounting concern. The Arab press began to condemn Zionism during the 1890s, and leading Arab intellectuals openly criticized the movement in the early years of the twentieth century. Legislation was drafted in 1909 to stop Jewish settlement in Palestine, and Zionist activity was twice debated in the Ottoman Parliament in 1911, though no bills ultimately were passed.<sup>34</sup>

These concerns intensified after support for Zionism became official British policy with the 1917 Balfour Declaration. The King-Crane Commission, which traveled the length and breadth of Palestine in June 1919, was overwhelmed by petitions opposed to Zionism. "The anti-Zionist note was especially strong in Palestine," explained the commissioners in their report, "where 222 (85.3 per cent) of the 260 petitions declared against the Zionist program. This is the largest percentage in the district for any one point."

The message from Palestine was clear: the indigenous Arab people, who had opposed Zionist immigration for years, did not accept Britain's commitment to build a Jewish national home in their land. Yet the message seemed to fall on deaf ears, as Britain and the international community determined Palestine's future without consultation or the consent of its people. Where peaceful means failed, desperate people soon turned to violence.

Jewish immigration and land purchase provoked growing tension in Palestine from the beginning of the mandate. Opposed to British rule and to the prospect of a Jewish national home in their midst, the Arab population viewed the expansion of the Jewish community as a direct threat to their political aspirations. Moreover, Jewish land purchase inevitably led to Arab farmers being displaced from lands they had tilled as sharecroppers, often for generations.

Between 1919 and 1921, Jewish immigration to Palestine accelerated dramatically, as over 18,500 Zionist immigrants moved to the country. Major riots broke out in Jerusalem in 1920 and in Jaffa in 1921, which left 95 Jews and 64 Arabs dead and hundreds wounded. Some 70,000 Zionist immigrants reached Palestine between 1922 and 1929. In the same period, the Jewish National Fund bought 240,000 acres of land in the Jezreel Valley in northern Palestine. The combination of high immigration and extensive land purchase was blamed for the next round of violence, which erupted in Jerusalem, Hebron, Safad, and Jaffa in 1929, claiming 133 Jewish and 116 Arab lives.<sup>35</sup>

After each instance of violence, British investigations led to new policies designed to assuage the fears of the Palestinian majority. In July 1922, following the first wave of riots, Winston Churchill issued a White Paper that sought to calm Arab fears that Pales-

tine would become "as Jewish as England is English." He claimed that the terms of the Balfour Declaration did not "contemplate that Palestine as a whole should be converted into a Jewish National Home, but that such a Home should be founded *in Palestine*."<sup>36</sup> Similarly, the gravity of the 1929 riots led to a number of new reports and recommendations. The 1930 Shaw Report identified Jewish immigration and land purchase as the primary cause of Palestinian unrest and called for limits on Zionist immigration to prevent future problems. This was followed in October 1930 by the Passfield White Paper, which called for restrictions on Jewish land purchase and immigration.

Following the publication of each British White Paper sympathetic to Palestinian Arab concerns, the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency of Palestine worked the halls of power in London and Jerusalem to overturn policies deemed inimical to their aims. By bringing great pressure to bear on Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald's minority government, the Zionists succeeded in getting MacDonald to repudiate the Passfield White Paper. Chaim Weitzman and his advisors more or less wrote the letter for MacDonald, which he signed on February 13, 1931. In his letter, MacDonald confirmed that the British government "did not prescribe and [does] not contemplate any stoppage or prohibition of Jewish immigration," nor would it prevent Jews from acquiring more land in Palestine. Arab expectations for an improvement in their situation were dashed by the MacDonald letter, which they called "the Black Letter" (in contrast to the White Paper).

A vicious cycle then dragged the Palestine mandate into chronic violence: ever-increasing Zionist immigration and land purchase provoked communal conflict, which in turn led to British attempts to introduce limits on the Jewish national home, and Zionist politicking to reverse those limits. As long as this process persisted, no progress was possible in establishing institutions of government or self-rule. The Palestinians did not wish to legitimate the mandate and its commitment to create a Jewish national home; the British did not wish to confer proportional representation, let alone self-rule, on the Palestinian majority who were hostile to the aims of the mandate; and the Zionists cooperated with every aspect of the mandate that advanced their national aims. With each round of violence, the difficulties grew more profound.

The problems of the Arab community of Palestine were compounded by divisions within their own leadership. The two leading families of Jerusalem—the Husaynis and Nashashibis—vied for ascendancy over Arab politics in Palestine. The British played upon the divisions between the two families from the outset. In 1920 the notables of Palestine created an Arab Executive to represent their demands to the British authorities, headed by Musa Kazim al-Husayni. A second representative body, the Supreme Muslim Council, was headed by Hajj Amin al-Husayni, the grand mufti of Jerusalem. The Nashashibis boycotted these Husayni-dominated bodies and tried to work directly with the British. With their leadership divided, the Palestinians were disadvantaged in their relations with both the British and the Zionists.

By 1929 the shortcomings of the Palestinian nationalist leadership encouraged a host of new actors to take to the national stage. As in Egypt in 1919, nationalism provided a window of opportunity for the emergence of women into public life for the first time. Elite women, inspired by Huda Sha'rawi and the Wafdist Women's Association, responded to the 1929 riots by convening the First Arab Women's Congress in Jerusalem in October 1929. Two hundred women attended the congress from the Palestinian Muslim and Christian communities. They passed three resolutions: a call for the abrogation of the Balfour Declaration, an assertion of Palestine's right to a national government with representation for all communities in proportion to their numbers, and the development of Palestinian industries. "The Congress urges every Arab to buy nothing from the Jews but land, and to sell them everything but land."<sup>37</sup>

The delegates then began to break with tradition. Contrary to Palestinian custom, which frowned on women meeting with men in public, they decided to call on the British high commissioner, Sir John Chancellor, to present him with their resolutions. Chancellor received them and promised to communicate their message to London, to be shared with the government's Commission of Enquiry into the troubles in Palestine. After their meeting with Chancellor, the delegation returned to the Women's Congress, which was still in session, and held a public demonstration, further departing from accepted standards of female decorum. The demonstration turned into a 120-car parade starting at Damascus Gate and passing through the main streets of Jerusalem to distribute their resolutions to the foreign consulates in the city.

Following the congress, the delegates created an Arab Women's Association with both a feminist and a nationalist agenda: "to assist the Arab woman in her endeavours to improve her standing, to help the poor and distressed, and to encourage and promote Arab national enterprises." The society raised money to help the families of Palestinians who were imprisoned or executed for anti-British or anti-Zionist attacks. They sent repeated petitions and memoranda to the high commissioner seeking clemency for political prisoners, protesting Jewish arms purchases, and condemning British failures to reach a political agreement with the men of the Arab Executive—to whom they were bound by marriage and family ties.

The Arab Women's Association was a strange hybrid of the politics of Palestinian nationalism and the upper-middle-class culture of British county ladies. They addressed each other by their husbands' names—Madame Kazem Pasha al-Husayni, Madame Awni Abd al-Hadi—and met to strategize over tea. Yet, as in Egypt in 1919, women's participation in the national movement was of powerful symbolic value. These well-educated and eloquent women added a powerful voice to the nascent Palestinian nationalist movement. Take, for example, the speech of Madame Awni Abd al-Hadi berating Lord Allenby in the association's second public demonstration in 1933: "The Arab women have seen the extent to which the British have violated their pledges, divided their country and enforced a policy on the people during the

last fifteen years, which will inevitably result in the annihilation of the Arabs and in their supplantation by the Jews through the admission of immigrants from all parts of the world."<sup>38</sup> Her message was clear: the whole of the Palestinian nation, not just its men, was holding Britain accountable for the policies of the mandate.

The Arab elites of Palestine were eloquent, but talk was cheap. For all their fiery nationalist rhetoric and repeated negotiations with the British authorities, Zionist immigration continued apace, and the British showed no signs of granting independence to the Palestinian Arabs. Following the Passfield White Paper, between 1929 and 1931 Zionist immigration had slowed to 5,000–6,000 each year. However, the MacDonald letter of 1931 reversed British policy, and with the Nazi seizure of power in Germany, a massive new influx of Jewish immigrants began to flood into Palestine. In 1932 nearly 10,000 Jewish immigrants entered Palestine, in 1933 over 30,000, in 1934 over 42,000. The peak of immigration came in 1935, when nearly 62,000 Jews entered the country.

Between 1922 and 1935 the Jewish population of Palestine had increased from 9 percent to nearly 27 percent of the total population.<sup>39</sup> Jewish land purchases had begun to displace significant numbers of Palestinian agricultural workers—already a concern addressed in the Passfield White Paper, when the Jewish population of Palestine was half its 1935 size. The failings of the Palestinian leadership, composed exclusively of urban elites, were falling squarely on the shoulders of the rural poor.

In 1935 one man decided to channel the anger of the rural communities into armed rebellion. In the process, he provided the spark that revealed Palestine for the powder keg it had become.

Izz al-Din al-Qassam, a native of Syria, had fled the French mandate in the 1920s to take refuge in Palestine. He was a Muslim cleric who had become a preacher in the popular Istiqlal ["independence"] mosque in the northern port of Haifa. He also headed the Young Men's Muslim Association, a nationalist and anti-Zionist youth group. Shayhk al-Qassam used the pulpit to rouse opposition to both the British and Zionism. His popularity quickly grew among those poorer Palestinians most directly affected by Jewish immigration, who looked to al-Qassam rather than the fractious and ineffectual urban notables for leadership.

In the aftermath of the 1931 MacDonald Black Letter, al-Qassam began to promote the idea of an armed struggle against the British and the Zionists. His appeal met with an enthusiastic response from the congregants at his mosque. A number of men volunteered to fight, and others contributed funds for guns and ammunition. Then, without warning, al-Qassam suddenly disappeared in the autumn of 1935. His supporters were concerned. Some feared he had come to grief; others suspected him of running off with their money. In November 1935, a journalist named Akram Zuaytir was discussing al-Qassam's mysterious disappearance with a mason who was

friends with the shaykh. Zuaytir said it was shameful for people to make such accusations against al-Qassam. "I agree, brother," the builder replied, "but why then has he gone into hiding like this?"<sup>40</sup>

Their conversation was interrupted when a man ran up to tell them that there had been a major engagement between an Arab gang and British forces in the hills above Jenin. The bodies of the rebels and the policemen they had killed were being taken to the British fort in Jenin. The young Zuaytir recognized a scoop and called the head of the Arab press bureau in Jerusalem to alert him. The bureau chief set out immediately for Jenin, leaving Zuaytir to watch over the office and to notify the Palestinian newspapers that a big story was brewing.

The shocked bureau chief returned from Jenin three hours later, his speech reduced to headlines. "Important events," he gasped breathlessly. "Very dangerous news. Shaykh Izz al-Din al-Qassam and four of his brethren in the gang were martyred." In the Jenin police station, the bureau chief had interviewed a wounded survivor of al-Qassam's band. Though the man was in great pain, he managed to give a concise account of al-Qassam's movement.

Al-Qassam had created his armed band in 1933, the wounded man explained. He only recruited devout Muslims prepared to die for their country. They collected funds to buy rifles and ammunition and began to prepare for an armed struggle "to kill the English and the Jews because they were occupying our nation." In October 1935, al-Qassam and his men left Haifa in secret—prompting the rumors Zuaytir and the mason had been discussing earlier in the day.

Al-Qassam's armed band ran into a police patrol in the plain of Baysan and killed a Jewish sergeant. The British scoured the hills and surprised one of al-Qassam's men on the roads between Nablus and Jenin. They exchanged fire, and the Arab insurgent was killed. "We learned of his martyrdom," the survivor of al-Qassam's band explained, "and decided to attack the police the following morning." The insurgents found themselves outnumbered by a joint force of British police and soldiers and took refuge in the caves near the village of Ya'bad, close to Jenin. While a Royal Air Force plane circled overhead, the British engaged the Arabs in a two-hour gunfight in which Izz al-Din al-Qassam and three other men were killed. Four survivors were taken prisoner. One British soldier was killed and two others wounded.

Though he was shocked by these events, Zuaytir's first thoughts were of the funeral. In accordance with Islamic practice, al-Qassam and his men would normally be buried before sundown. However, the bodies of the "martyrs" were still in police custody. Zuaytir called one of his colleagues in Haifa to enter into negotiations with the British for the bodies to be delivered to their families, who would need to make arrangements for their funerals. The British agreed to cooperate, on two conditions: the funeral was to be held at ten o'clock the following morning, and the funeral cortege had to proceed directly from al-Qassam's home eastward to the cemetery,

without entering Haifa's city center. The British were all too aware of the volatility of the situation and wanted to avoid any outbreak of violence. Zuaytir, in contrast, wanted to ensure that the funeral would be a political event, to galvanize Palestinian opposition to the mandate. At the end of the day, he filed an article in an Islamic newspaper, *al-Jami'a al-Islamiyya* ("Islamic Society"), which called on all Palestinians to converge on Haifa to march in the funeral procession. He posted the challenge directly to the nationalist leadership: "Will the leaders of Palestine march with its young men in the cortege of a great religious scholar, accompanied by the faithful?"<sup>41</sup>

Zuaytir awoke early the next morning to check the coverage in the Arabic press and to prepare for his trip to Haifa. "When I read the newspapers and the descriptions of the battle, and saw my call to march in the funeral procession, I thought today would be a day of great historic importance in Haifa," he wrote. "It is the martyrs' day." He was right—thousands had flocked to Haifa to share in a day of national mourning. Contrary to British wishes, the funeral was held in the central mosque of Haifa and the funeral procession passed through the city center. "With great effort the martyrs were carried through the crowd from the mosque to the great square outside. Here the pen falters in describing the scene. Thousands accompanied the procession, with the bodies carried at shoulder height, shouting *Allahu akbar*, *Allahu akbar* [God is great], while the women ululated from the roof tops and the windows." The mourners sung fiery songs of resistance. "Then, while the bodies were raised, a voice cried out: Revenge! Revenge! The thousands responded with one voice like a roar of thunder: Revenge! Revenge!"

The enraged crowd stormed the Haifa police station, stoning the building and destroying police cars parked outside. They set upon every British soldier and policeman they found along the way, though the British withdrew to avoid casualties on either side. The crowd also attacked the railway station as another symbol of hated British rule.

The whole of the procession took three and one-half hours, at which point al-Qassam and his men were laid to rest. "Imagine the impact on the masses who witnessed the heroic martyrs buried in their blood-stained clothes of jihad," Zuaytir reflected. He also noted how all the towns and cities of northern Palestine were represented at the funeral—Acre, Jenin, Baysan, Tulkarm, Nablus, Haifa—"but I did not see the heads of the [nationalist] parties, for which they must be reviled."<sup>42</sup>

The short-lived revolt of Shaykh 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam changed Palestinian politics forever. The urban notables who had led the nationalist movement had lost the confidence of the population at large. They had negotiated with the British for fifteen years and had nothing to show for their efforts. The Palestinians were no closer to independence or self-rule, the British were still firmly in control, and the Jewish population was growing at a rate that would soon bring them to parity with the Arab population. The Palestinians wanted men of action who would confront the

British and Zionist threats directly. The result was three years of revolt that devastated the towns and countryside of Palestine.

In the aftermath of the Qassam revolt, the heads of the Palestinian political parties attempted to reassert their leadership over the nationalist movement. In April 1936 the leading parties united in a new organization called the Arab Higher Committee. They called for a general strike by all Arab workers and government employees, as well as a complete boycott on all economic exchanges with the Yishuv. The general strike was accompanied by violent attacks on British forces and Jewish settlers.

The nationalist leaders' strategy backfired badly. The Palestinian Arab economy suffered far worse than the Yishuv as a result of the boycott. Britain flooded the country with 20,000 new troops to put down the rebellion. Britain also called on its allies in neighboring Arab states to persuade the Palestinian leadership to call off the general strike. On October 9, 1936, the kings of Saudi Arabia and Iraq joined the rulers of Transjordan and Yemen in a joint declaration calling on "our sons the Arabs of Palestine" to "resolve for peace in order to save further shedding of blood. In doing this," the monarchs claimed implausibly, "we rely on the good intentions of your friend Great Britain, who has declared that she will do justice."<sup>43</sup>

When the Arab Higher Committee responded to the kings' declaration and called for an end to the strike, the Palestinians felt betrayed by their own leaders and their Arab brethren alike. Their views were captured by the Palestinian nationalist poet Abu Salman, whose acerbic verses accused both the Palestinian leaders and British-backed Arab monarchs of selling out the Arab movement:

*You who cherish the homeland  
Revolt against the outright oppression  
Liberate the homeland from the kings  
Liberate it from the puppets  
I thought we had kings who could lead the men behind them*<sup>44</sup>

Abu Salman spoke for the disenchanted Palestinian masses when he asserted that the liberation of Palestine would come from its people, not its leaders.

In the aftermath of the general strike the British responded once again with a commission of enquiry. The report of the Peel Commission, published July 7, 1937, sent shock waves through Palestine. For the first time, the British acknowledged that the troubles in Palestine were the product of rival and incompatible national movements. "An irrepressible conflict has arisen between two national communities within the narrow bounds of one small country," the report acknowledged. "About 1,000,000 Arabs are in strife, open or latent, with some 400,000 Jews. There is no common ground between them."

The solution proposed by the Peel Commission was partition. The Jews were to gain statehood in 20 percent of the territory of Palestine, including most of the coastline and some of the country's most fertile agricultural land, in the Jezreel Valley and the Galilee. The Arabs were allotted the poorest lands of Palestine, including the Negev Desert and the Arava Valley, as well as the hill country of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

The population of Palestine did not correspond to the geography of partition. This was particularly problematic as major Arab towns and cities were included in the proposed Jewish state. To iron out such anomalies, the Peel Commission held out the possibility of "population transfers" to remove Arabs from territories allocated to the Jewish state—something that in the later twentieth century would come to be called ethnic cleansing. Britain's recommendation of forced transfer won the chairman of the Jewish Agency, David Ben-Gurion (1886–1973), over to the partition plan. "This will give us something we never had, even when we were under our own authority" in antiquity, he enthused—namely, a "really Jewish" state with a homogenously Jewish population.<sup>45</sup>

To compound Arab grievances, the partition plan did not envisage an independent Palestinian state but called for the Arab territories to be appended to Transjordan, under Amir Abdullah's rule. The people of Palestine had grown deeply distrustful of Abdullah, seeing him as a British agent who was covetous of their lands. For the Palestinians, the Peel Commission's recommendations represented the worst possible outcome for their national struggle. Far from securing their rights to self-rule, their population was to be dispersed and ruled by hostile foreigners—the Zionists and Amir Abdullah.

The Jewish Agency accepted the terms, Amir Abdullah agreed with the Peel Commission, and the Palestinians went to war against both the British and the Yishuv.

The second phase of the Palestinian Arab Revolt lasted two years, from the autumn of 1937 through 1939. On September 26, 1937, Palestinian extremists murdered the district commissioner in Galilee, L. Y. Andrews. The British arrested 200 Palestinian nationalist leaders, deported many to the Seychelles, and declared the Arab Higher Committee illegal. Without central leadership, the revolt degenerated into an uncoordinated insurgency that ravaged the Palestinian countryside. The insurgents attacked British police and army patrols and Jewish settlements, assassinated British and Jewish officials, and killed Palestinians suspected of collaborating with the occupation authorities. They sabotaged railways, communications, and the oil pipelines that crossed through Palestine. Villagers found themselves caught between the insurgents, who demanded their support, and the British, who punished all those suspected of aiding the insurgents. The effects on the Palestinians were devastating.

Every Arab attack against the British and the Yishuv brought massive reprisals. The British, determined to suppress the revolt militarily, dispatched 25,000 soldiers

and policemen to Palestine—the largest deployment of British forces abroad since the end of the First World War. They established military courts, operating under “emergency regulations” that gave the mandate the legal trappings of a military dictatorship. The British destroyed **the houses of all persons involved in attacks**, as well as all persons known or suspected of **having aided** insurgents, under the legal authority of the emergency regulations. An estimated 2,000 houses were destroyed between 1936 and 1940. Combatants and innocent civilians alike were interned in concentration camps—by 1939, over 9,000 Palestinians were held in overcrowded facilities. Suspects were subjected to violent interrogation, ranging from humiliation to torture. Younger offenders, of between seven and sixteen years, were flogged. Over 100 Arabs were sentenced to death in 1938 and 1939, and more than thirty were actually executed. Palestinians were used as human shields to prevent insurgents from placing land mines on roads used by British forces.<sup>46</sup>

The use of overwhelming force and collective punishments by the British degenerated into abuses and atrocities that would forever stain the mandate in the memory of the Palestinians. The most heinous atrocities came in retaliation for the killing of British troops by insurgents. In one well-documented case, British soldiers took revenge for comrades killed by a land mine in September 1938 by loading more than twenty men from the village of al-Bassa into a bus and forcing them at gun point to drive over a massive land mine the British themselves had buried in the middle of the village access road. All of the occupants were killed by the explosion, their maimed bodies photographed by a British serviceman before the villagers were forced to bury their men’s remains in a mass grave.<sup>47</sup>

The Palestinian Arabs had been thoroughly defeated and by 1939 had no fight left in them. Some 5,000 men had been killed and 10,000 others wounded—in all, over 10 percent of the adult male population was killed, wounded, imprisoned, or exiled. However, the British could hardly claim victory. They could not sustain the cost of suppressing the revolt, and they could not impose their policies on the Palestinian Arabs. With war looming in Europe, Whitehall could no longer afford to deploy so many troops to suppress a colonial war. To restore peace to their troubled Palestine mandate, the British shelved the Peel Commission’s partition plan of 1937. Once again, a royal commission was convened to reexamine the situation in Palestine, and once again, the commission published a White Paper that sought to address Palestinian Arab grievances.

The 1939 White Paper was the best deal Britain ever offered the Palestinian Arabs. The new policy capped Jewish immigration at 15,000 each year for five years, or 75,000 total. This would raise the population of the Yishuv to 35 percent of the total population of Palestine—a minority large enough to look after itself, but not so large as to take control of the country as a whole. There would be no further Jewish immigration without the consent of the Arab majority—which all parties ac-

knowledgeed was unlikely to be forthcoming. Jewish land purchase was to be banned or severely restricted, depending on the region. Finally, Palestine would gain its independence in ten years under joint Arab and Jewish government “in such a way as to ensure that the essential interests of each community are safeguarded.”<sup>48</sup>

The 1939 White Paper was unsatisfactory to both Arabs and Jews in Palestine. The Arab community rejected the terms because it allowed Jewish immigration to continue, if at a reduced rate, and because it preserved the political status quo and delayed independence by a further ten years. The Yishuv **rejected the terms** because it closed Palestine to Jewish immigration just as Nazi atrocities against Jews were escalating. (In November 1938, Nazi gangs had terrorized **German Jewish** citizens in *Kristellnacht*, or the “night of broken glass,” Europe’s worst pogrom to date.) The White Paper also ruled out the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, relegating the Yishuv to a minority status in a future Palestinian Arab state.

The leadership of the Yishuv itself was divided by the 1939 White Paper. David Ben-Gurion made clear his opposition to the White Paper from the outset. However, he identified Nazi Germany as the greater threat to the welfare of the Jewish people and famously vowed to fight on Britain’s side against Nazism as though there were no White Paper. The extremists in the Zionist movement—the Irgun and the Stern Gang—**responded to the White Paper by declaring Britain the enemy**. They fought against the British presence in Palestine as an illegitimate imperial state denying independence to the Jewish people, and they turned to terror tactics to achieve a Jewish state in Palestine. By the end of the Second World War, when Nazism had been eradicated, Britain would find itself combating a Jewish revolt of far greater magnitude than the Arabs had ever mounted against British rule.

**A**t the end of the First World War, Britain’s mastery over the Middle East was unrivaled. Its troops occupied the Arab world from Egypt to Iraq, and its control over the Persian Gulf was unassailable. Although few in the Arab world had wanted the British to rule over them, most viewed their colonial overlord with respect, however grudging. The British were efficient, inscrutable, orderly, technologically advanced, and militarily strong. Britain was truly great, a colossus that towered over its colonial possessions.

Two decades of colonial rule revealed the colossus to have clay feet. Across the region the British faced a gamut of opposition, from moderate nationalist politics to radical armed insurgency. In Iraq, Palestine, and Egypt, the British were forced to negotiate and renegotiate the terms of their unwelcome presence. Each British concession to Arab opposition, every reversal of policy, revealed the fallibility of the imperial power.