VINTAGE

‘A SENSELESS, SQUALID WAR’

NORMAN ROSE

Contents

About the Book

The events in Palestine between the end of the Second World War in May 1945 and the declaration of the State of Israel in May 1948 ruptured Middle Eastern history and left an indelible mark on the modern world. Today, no conflict is felt to be more intractable or divisive, no dispute so fraught with passion or infused with so much hatred, despite the repeated attempts at reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians in the six decades since Israel came into being.

Yet how did it feel to witness and experience these momentous events? In '*A Senseless, Squalid War*' Norman Rose uses contemporary sources – letters, songs, diaries and stories as well as journalism and official propaganda – to reveal the attitudes and experiences of the participants from all sides of the unfolding drama. Be they foot-soldiers or generals, hawks or doves, politicians or diplomats, dissidents, terrorists, or simply men, women and children on the street, each is given their own voice.

'*A Senseless, Squalid War*' also chronicles the political context of these crucial years. In the immediate aftermath of the European war, amidst the horrific revelations of the Holocaust and a diplomatic stalemate over the partitioning of Palestine, militant guerrilla groups – plagued by internal divisions on both the Palestinian and Zionist sides – sought to undermine the British presence. Jewish refugees in their thousands had been trying to enter Palestine since the early 1940s, many on the notorious 'death ships' from Eastern Europe, with tragic – often fatal – consequences.

The massacre at Deir Yassin and the forced transfer of up to 700,000 Palestinians; the British withdrawal and the celebration of independence; the mounting tensions and the ‘war of extermination and momentous massacre’ – all this, and the voices of those who lived it, are recreated as never before in Norman Rose’s powerful and vivid work.

About the Author

Norman Rose is a graduate of the LSE and now holds the Chair of International Relations at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. A distinguished historian and Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, he is also the author of much-acclaimed biographies of Churchill, Chaim Weizmann, Harold Nicolson, Sir Lewis Namier, and studies of ‘The Cliveden Set’ and ‘The Gentile Zionists’.

‘The most complete and detailed account of the British and Zionists during the era of the mandate … All in all, a masterpiece.’ Wm Roger Louis, Editor in Chief of *The Oxford History of the British Empire*

‘Norman Rose’s eloquent, comprehensive, and even-handed book says it all, from Palestine in the late 19th century to Gaza right now … (his) typically vivid phrases resound in his truly excellent book.’
Jonathan Mirsky, *Spectator*

‘Norman Rose pulls together witnesses, official and unofficial, to the battering relations between Jews who were looking for Zion and the British who were trying to keep order in Palestine … Rose has written something close to a definitive version of how the British and Jews engaged in their dialogue of the deaf … if you want to know all the facts and their nuances and complications, Norman Rose has supplied them. And any new context for thinking about Palestine, that murderous stalemate, is a kind of intellectual miracle nowadays.’
Michael Pye, *Scotland on Sunday*

‘Norman Rose, of the Hebrew University, charts in meticulous detail the last bloody years of the Palestine Mandate. He neither conceals nor excuses the the excesses of the Irgun and the Stern Gang, but carefully places them in the wider contexts in which they must be seen … Professor Rose’s book is a work of scholarship.’
Geoffrey Alderman, *Jewish Chronicle*

‘Norman Rose, in his lively recounting of that period of history … with telling comments from the major players of the day - Jewish, Arab, British, American - extracts from

hitherto unpublished correspondence and archival material … Norman Rose, who holds the chair in international relations at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem has written a scholarly book … But it is no dry academic account.'
Hyam Corney, *Jerusalem Post*

'Norman Rose … makes excellent use of contemporary sources to give a generally dispassionate account, which is sometimes all the more hair-raising for that, whether he is describing the blatant anti-semitism of some British officials … or the behaviour of Zionist ultras who sent letter bombs to British politicians and planned to infect the London water supply with cholera.'
Geoffrey Wheatcroft, *London Review of Books*

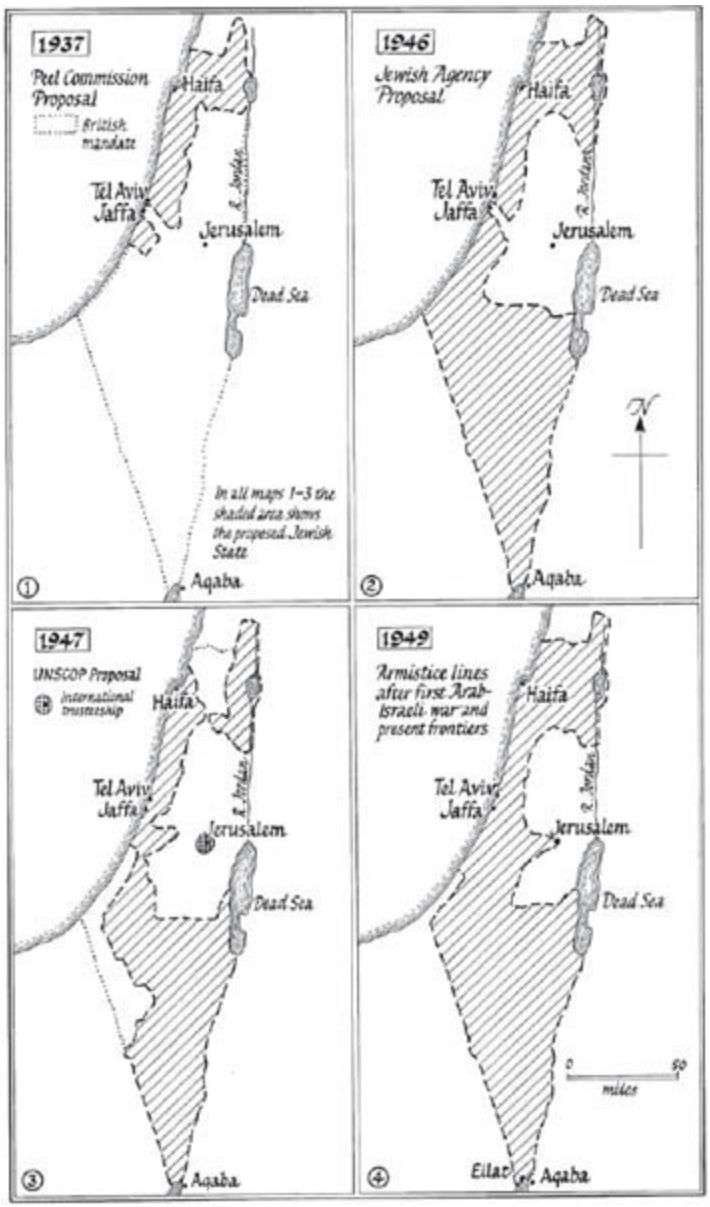
'Rose, a distinguished Israeli historian, writes objective, hard-hitting history … He gives a powerful, detailed and meticulously documented account of that violence, shaming to both the contending parties.'
Sir Martin Gilbert, *Standpoint*

'Rose's book is, to a considerable degree, a tripartite indictment, highlighting the cruelties and the ineptitude displayed not only by the Arabs, but also by the Jewish Zionist movement and the British mandatory authorities in Palestine … Rose's account of those three or four tortured years in the momentous history of the Middle East is both accessible and authoritative. It is not entirely sombre – among its smaller gems are the revelations of minor but significant roles in support of the Zionist cause played by Marlon Brando and Frank Sinatra.'
Gerald Jacobs, *Tablet*

'Norman Rose's excellent new history of the Mandate of Palestine offers a detailed account of the final years of British rule … Rose's history should be read by anyone

interested in the history of Palestine, as well as anyone who wishes to understand how not to wage a successful counter-insurgency.'

Calder Walton, *Times Literary Supplement*


1937
Peel Commission Proposal
British mandate
Haifa
Tel Aviv
Jaffa
R. Jordan
Jerusalem
Dead Sea
In all maps 1–3 the shaded area shows the proposed Jewish State
Aqaba
1
1946
Jewish Agency Proposal
Haifa
Tel Aviv
Jaffa
R. Jordan
Jerusalem
Dead Sea
N
Aqaba
2
1947
UNSCOP Proposal
International trusteeship
Haifa
Tel Aviv
Jaffa
R. Jordan
Jerusalem
Dead Sea
Aqaba
3
1949
Armistice lines after first Arab-Israeli war and present frontiers
Haifa
Tel Aviv
Jaffa
R. Jordan
Jerusalem
Dead Sea
0
50
miles
Eilat
Aqaba
4

‘A SENSELESS, SQUALID WAR’

Voices from Palestine 1890s to 1948

NORMAN ROSE

PIMLICO

‘£80 million since the Socialist Government came into power squandered in Palestine, and 100,000 Englishmen now kept from their homes and works, for the sake of a senseless, squalid war with the Jews in order to give Palestine to the Arabs, or God knows who.’

Winston Churchill, House of Commons, 12 March 1947

Every human benefit, every virtue and every prudent act, is founded on compromise.

Edmund Burke, *On Conciliation with America*

From abroad we are accustomed to believing that the Arabs are all desert savages, like donkeys, who neither see nor understand what goes on around them. But this is a big mistake … The Arabs, and especially those in the cities, understand our deeds and our desires in *Eretz-Israel*, but they keep quiet and pretend not to understand, since they do not see our present activities as a threat to their future … yet they mock us in their hearts … If the time comes when the life of our people in *Eretz-Israel* develops to the point of encroaching upon the native population, they will not yield easily their place …

Asher Zvi Ginsberg (Ahad Ha'am, 'One of the People') from *Emet me-Eretz-Israel (Truth from Eretz-Israel*, 1891), text in Alan Dowty, 'Much Ado About Little: Ahad Ha'am's "Truth From *Eretz-Israel*", Zionism and the Arabs', *Israel Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Fall, 2000)

Two important phenomena, of identical character but nevertheless opposed, which till now have not attracted attention, are now making their appearance in Asian Turkey: these are the awakening of the Arab nation and the latent efforts of the Jews to re-establish, on an extremely large scale, the ancient Kingdom of Israel. These two movements are destined to struggle continuously with one another, until one prevails over the other. The fate of the entire world depends on the result of this struggle between the two peoples, which represent two contradictory principles.

Najib Azouri, *Le Réveil de la Nation Arabe dans l'Asie Turque* (Paris, 1905) p.5, quoted in Yehoshua Porath, *The*

Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement, 1918–1929 (London, Frank Cass, 1974), p.26

1

The Promised Land

ON 3 SEPTEMBER 1897, a Jewish intellectual living in Vienna, an acquaintance of Freud, Gustav Mahler, Arthur Schnitzler and Hugo von Hofmannsthal wrote in his diary: 'If I were to sum up the Congress in a word – which I shall take care not to publish – it would be this: "At Basel I founded the Jewish State. If I said this out loud today I would be greeted by universal laughter. In five years perhaps, and certainly in fifty years, everyone will perceive it. The essence of a State lies in the will of the people for a State, yes, even in the will of one powerful individual – *l'état, c'est moi*: Louis XIV."'[1]

The diarist was Theodor Herzl. A month earlier, at the Basel Municipal Casino, feeding off the emotions his pamphlet *Der Judenstaat* (February, 1896) had stirred up – for its 'daring, clarity and energy', as the future first President of Israel, Chaim Weizmann, recalled[2] – he had, almost single-handedly, organised and convened the first Zionist Congress, moulding a disparate group of societies and associations into a spirited political movement.

Yet in 1897 the vision of an independent Jewish state was no more than the most fragile of hopes. The two hundred and eight delegates, representing sixteen countries, who had gathered at the Casino spoke for only the tiniest of minorities among the dispersed Jewish people: their ultimate goal, a Jewish state, fiercely opposed both by orthodox Jewry and the assimilationists. As for the Jewish masses, they regarded this outlandish venture with studied

indifference. From the 1880s to 1914, in the wake of a series of pogroms in Russia, there had occurred a mass exodus of Jews from eastern Europe – it being estimated that of the approximately four and a half million Jews who resided in the Pale of Settlement, well over two million had fled the organised anti-Semitism of the Czarist regime. But these persecuted Jews, voting with their feet, preferred the far-off, speculative attractions of western Europe, and in particular of the United States, to the hardships and uncertainties of life in Palestine under Ottoman rule. Even so, some fifty years later, on 29 November 1947, the United Nations General Assembly voted in favour of establishing a Jewish (and Palestinian) state. By any reckoning, this must be counted as one of the most remarkable diplomatic-political success stories of the twentieth century: one which half a century before had been but a figment of the wildest of imaginations, the aspiration of a zealous minority among the Jewish people. Although these visionaries – or romanticists – barely grasped it at the time, the road leading to a Jewish state would be strewn with unpredictable diplomat upheavals, considerable political skulduggery and much bloodshed.

Herzl was a most improbable candidate to lead the Zionist movement. Born in Budapest in 1860 to a well-to-do middle-class family, he moved, at the age of eighteen, to the bewildering and contradictory world of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna: elegant, sophisticated, cosmopolitan, intellectually stimulating, yet at the same time intolerant and violently anti-Semitic, a centre of Austrian chauvinism jealously bent on preserving its prerogatives. Viennese society reflected in an exaggerated and hysterical manner the internal stresses of a multinational empire coming apart at the seams. Herzl made his way in this milieu, and by the 1890s he had acquired a reputation as an established journalist, a minor playwright, and a widely read and popular *feuilletoniste*. Possessed of an extraordinarily complicated

character, subject to fits of depression, fascinated by the sense of physical danger – he was involved in at least three duelling incidents – Herzl was given to a vivid sense of high drama and mapped out for himself the role of martyr, tragically to be realised, as 'the Parnell of the Jews'.

Myth has it that the Dreyfus affair awakened him from his torpor as an assimilated Jew. The story, alas, as dramatic as Herzl's commanding presence, is merely legend. It was impossible to grow up in Vienna and remain immune from its anti-Semitism. At the age of twenty-three he had resigned from his student fraternity, handicapped, as he wrote, 'by the impediment of Semitism'. The Jews, he reflected, were 'living perpetually in enemy territory'. He concocted the most grandiose of schemes: the mass conversion of Jews to Christianity. He toyed with the notion of investigating the Jewish condition, analysing the state of Jewish communities throughout the world, including the new Jewish colonies being established in Palestine. These thoughts, never absent from his mind, surfaced when he witnessed the terrifying scene at the *École Militaire* in December 1894 when Dreyfus was publicly humiliated and degraded to the accompaniment of the menacing bays of the Paris crowd threatening '*À mort! À mort les juifs*'. For Herzl this was 'merely the last straw'.[3]

Whether Herzl – an assimilated German-speaking Hungarian Jew, with only a sketchy knowledge of Jewish ritual, tradition, literature or history – knew it or not, he was building on a rich heritage. The Judaeo-Roman wars, symbolised by their most dramatic act, Titus's destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, gave rise to the most enduring of the Jewish Dispersions. Defeated and scattered, the Jews continued to pine for their lost patrimony.

> There is no other example in history [wrote Arthur Koestler], of a community which has been chased

> round the globe quite as much, which has survived its death as a nation by two thousand years, and which, in between *autos-da-fé* and gas chambers, kept praying at the proper season for rain to fall in a country on which they have never set eyes, and drinking toasts to 'Next year in Jerusalem!' during the same astronomical stretch of time, with the same untiring trust in the supernatural.[4]

Where the majority of the Jewish people was located, in Europe, in particular in the Pale of Settlement in Russia, the promoters of the *Haskala* (Enlightenment) had introduced a new dimension into Jewish life, generating a climate for the introduction of freethinking, radical ideas. By the mid-nineteenth century, revolutionary nationalist sentiments, that stirred nationalist movements in parts of Europe, filtered down to excite the minds of Jewish intellectuals. In 1862 Moses Hess, a German socialist, drawing his inspiration from the Italian *Risorgimento*, published *Rome and Jerusalem*. Now a Zionist classic, it called for the rebirth of a Jewish state. Twenty years later Yehuda Leib (Leon) Pinsker, a semi-assimilated Russian Jew born in Odessa, who had abandoned the legal profession for medicine, published his pamphlet, *Autoemancipation! Mahnruf an seine Stammesgenossen von einem russischen Juden* (Auto-emancipation! a warning to his kinsfolk by a Russian Jew). Reeling under the impact of the pogroms of 1881, Pinsker perceived a pathological hatred of Jews everywhere, concluding that only by restoring a viable Jewish nationhood can full equality for the Jewish people be realised. 'A people without a territory is like a man without a shadow,' he wrote. And this would be achieved, not by the charitable efforts of others, but by self-help. Pinsker did not point specifically to *Eretz Israel* (the Land of Israel) as the future Jewish homeland, but neither did he exclude it.[5]

Herzl was pushing at an open door in another sense. In the latter decades of the nineteenth century groups of Jews – known as *Hovevei Zion* (Lovers of Zion) – drawing on the ideas of Hess and Pinsker, began to meet, often independently of each other, to discuss ways and means to promote immigration to Palestine. Located mainly in Russia and Romania, these associations, some secular, some religious, inevitably disparate in views and approach, often petered out into little more than talking shops. The most radical of these societies was formed in 1881 in Kharkov by a group of high-school and university students. These young idealists comprised the nucleus of the *Biluim*.[fn1] One of its founders, Ze'ev Dubnow, laid out an ambitious nationalist programme.

> The aim of our journey is rich in plans. We want to conquer Palestine and return to the Jews the political independence stolen from them two thousand years ago. And if it is willed, it is no dream. We must establish agricultural settlements, factories and industry … And above all we must give young people military training and provide them with weapons. Then will the glorious day come, as prophesied by Isaiah in his promise of the restoration of Israel. With their weapons in their hands, the Jews will declare that they are the masters of their ancient homeland.[6]

The *Biluim* formed the core of what became known as the first wave of immigration, or *Aliyah* (literally 'to ascend', 'to go up'). However, their youthful exuberance was matched only by the paucity of their skills in establishing 'agricultural settlements, factories and industry'. Largely sustained by the largesse of Jewish philanthropists – chiefly Baron Edmond de Rothschild – the colonies they founded – Rishon le Zion, Rosh Pina, Zichron

Ya'akov among others – survived, but only just, with bankruptcy a constant threat.

In Palestine they encountered a small Jewish community that viewed these intruders with foreboding. For two thousand years there had always been a Jewish presence in Palestine, sometimes in the thousands, at other times in the tens of thousands. Accurate figures for the number of Jews residing in Palestine circa 1880 are hard to come by: one source puts the figure at almost 15,000, another at 25,000, yet another at about 34,000.[fn2] These were mostly ultra-orthodox Jewish communities centered on Jerusalem, Safad, Tiberius and Hebron, praying and waiting patiently for the Messiah to arise and lead the dispersed Jewish people back to the Promised Land, His, and only His, prerogative. To many of these Jews the *Biluim* were an anathema, little more than heretics meddling in God's master plan to redeem the Jewish people.

A second *Aliyah* followed at the turn of the twentieth century. Stunned by a fresh wave of pogroms,[fn3] galvanised by Herzl's initiative, imbued with Tolstoyan ideas, inspired by the concept of a return to the land, of the sanctity of Jewish self-labour, these pioneers – who included among their number David Ben Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister – were, in the main, committed socialists. They founded Labour parties, established the first kibbutzim, laid the foundations for the renaissance of Hebrew as a living language. Plans were made to establish a Hebrew University on Mount Scopus, Jerusalem. By the outbreak of the First World War fifty-five settlements – including the new town of Tel Aviv – had been established. From the early 1880s to 1914 an average of 2,000–3,000 Jews entered Palestine each year – many of whom eventually left. By the latter date most authorities put the total Jewish population of Palestine at about eighty-five thousand.[7]

These were considerable achievements of which Herzl, who had set these breakthroughs in motion, could be justly

proud. But in one crucial particular he had failed: all his efforts to attain a Charter, a covenant that would grant international legitimacy for a Zionist entity in Palestine, came to nought. It was not from want of trying. He had stalked the chancelleries of Europe. Frederick, Grand Duke of Baden and uncle to the Kaiser, William II, received him, and through his good offices the Kaiser agreed to grant him an audience in Palestine in a scene recorded famously outside Mikveh Israel, an agricultural school on the road to Jerusalem, where a mounted William, clad in military uniform, complete with pickelhaube, gazes down on a bare-headed, seemingly humble Herzl.[fn4] In London he saw Joseph Chamberlain, the energetic Secretary of State for the Colonies, who expressed some sympathy for Herzl's ideas. In Italy he attended the King, Victor Emmanuel III, and secured an audience with the so-called 'peasant' Pope, Pius X: barren of concrete results, the parties simply exchanged pleasantries. Most provocative of all, he met Vyacheslav von Phleve, the Russian Minister of the Interior. Von Phleve, a notorious anti-Semite who had encouraged the pogroms of 1903, promised to intervene with the Sultan, Abdul Hamid II: his aim merely a more sophisticated means of ridding Russia of its Jews. But whatever von Phleve's purpose, his petition fell on deaf ears at Constantinople.

Obviously, the attitude of Constantinople, the hub of the Ottoman Empire, from where Palestine was administered, was the key factor. Herzl was an intermittent visitor at the Golden Horn, dangling before the Grand Vizier promises of economic aid and the visions of international support – which, in fact, were far beyond his reach – only to see his offers disappear in the quicksands of the byzantine politics of the Ottoman administration. Exhausted by this relentless, and ultimately fruitless, grind, frustrated by internal wrangling within the movement he had created and already subject to a heart condition, he collapsed and

died in July 1904. No leader of the same stature emerged to replace him until the appearance of Chaim Weizmann at the end of the First World War. Zionist diplomacy temporarily entered the doldrums.

Israel Zangwill's picturesque conceit, 'A land without a people for a people without a land', was entirely without foundation.[fn5] Estimates vary, but on the eve of the First World War the Arab population of Palestine, still overwhelmingly rural, was put at around 640,000–650,000.[8] In the late 1890s and early 1900s Arab nationalism began to take shape: first among intellectual and student circles centred in Damascus and Beirut, then in groups meeting in Constantinople, Cairo and Paris. Initially, few Palestinians participated in these debating societies. Over time, interest grew. At the first Arab Congress, held in Paris in 1913, out of 387 signatories, 130 Palestinians registered their support for its aims.[9] One factor that deeply affected their position was the policies of the 'Committee of Union and Progress', now in power in Constantinople following the 'Young Turk' revolution of 1908. The committee, pressing for reform, forced the despotic Sultan, Abdul Hamid II, to summon a parliament and restore the liberal constitution of 1876.[fn6] The high hopes invested in the 'Young Turks' were soon dashed: they proved to be very much like the 'Old Turks', their regime characterised by an aggressive pan-Ottomanism (that eventually shaded off into pan-Turkism and pan-Turanianism) and an inability, or unwillingness, to establish effective constitutional rule.

Ruthless in its methods, the new regime's repressive measures generated a duel response: some Palestinians advocated decentralisation, greater local autonomy, to soften the process of Ottomanisation; others, perhaps apprehensive of outright confrontation with the 'Young Turks', rejected decentralisation – a stand adopted by

Filastin, a leading Palestinian newspaper in Jaffa, which wished to remain loyal to the Ottoman Empire.[10] This ambivalence was reflected in the equivocal comments of one prominent Palestinian intellectual. At first, Khalil al-Sakakini, an Orthodox Christian by religion and an educator by profession, greeted the 'Young Turk' revolution with joy, seeing it as a liberating force, freeing him from the parochialism that had frustrated him in the backwaters of Palestine: 'Now I can serve my country. Now I can found a school, a newspaper, and societies for Youth. Now we can lift up our voices without impediment.' Three months later he joined the local committee of 'Union and Progress', swearing allegiance in a melodramatic ceremony shielded by masked men, guns, and blood-curdling oaths. But which country al-Sakakini was alluding to is not entirely clear. Less than three weeks after these theatricals, he was inducted into the Arab Brotherhood, a secret society that opposed the Union. Much later, in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, he became a leading advocate of pan-Arabism, drawing inspiration from the Sharifian regime in Damascus.[11] One theme, however, remained constant in his world outlook. As early as February 1914, when addressing a Zionist official, Benjamin Ivri, he robustly defended his position as an obdurate Arab nationalist:

> If I hate Zionism, it isn't because I object to the revival of the Jewish nation, thereby allowing it to escape from the twin abyss of weakness and misery. Rather, it's because I despise its, Zionism's, underlying principle: its attempt to reconstruct its nationalism upon the ruins of others. For by seizing Palestine, it is as though it has conquered the heart of the Arab nation.[12]

Al-Sakakini was merely expressing what many of his compatriots felt. In 1891, a group of Jerusalem notables sent a petition to the central government in Constantinople calling for the cessation of Jewish immigration and land sales to Jews.[13] It was the first recorded political opposition to Zionism by Palestinians and its two central demands – to curtail immigration and land sales – remained at the heart of Palestinian grievances until the end of the British mandate. These early displays of open anti-Zionist hostility were sporadic and did not manifest themselves systematically until after the Young Turk revolution. Its standard bearers were the Arab press – *al-Karmil* in Haifa and *Filastin* in Jaffa, both owned by Greek Orthodox Palestinians, a position ardently adopted by the urban educated elite.[14] Over time the agitation spread to Syria and other centres of the nascent Arab national movement outside Palestine, including the Ottoman parliament, where Palestinians too were represented. Not that it did them much good as the Ottoman administration, hostile to any challenge to its pan-Ottoman programme, had no need of yet another national problem.

As early as the 1900s protests were being heard that the Zionists were busy laying the foundations of ‘a state within a state’. Together with the symbols of an ambitious nationalist movement – the Zionist anthem, *HaTikvah* (The Hope), and the Zionist flag (two blue stripes on a white background – representing a Jewish prayer shawl – with the shield of David in the centre) – the protesters could point to the dispossession of Arab lands, an expanding network of Jewish settlements, a financial institution – the Anglo-Palestinian Bank – and a separate educational system. Consistently exaggerating the extent of Jewish immigration, putting it at anything between 100,000 and 300,000, some Arabs suspected that the Zionists intended to create a Jewish state extending as far as Iraq.

Other matters intruded. Zionist mores were often at odds with Arab convention, threatening the customs and moral assumptions that lent cohesion to a socially conservative, traditional Palestinian society. The status of women, their active political role in the *Yishuv* (the Jewish community in Palestine), were judged particularly offensive. Although calls for more forceful measures to combat the encroachment of Zionism were voiced, it was still far too early to speak of a consolidated Palestinian national movement. The preferred options – neither, admittedly, sympathetic to Zionism – remained: either a pan-Arab movement or loyalty to Ottoman unity.[15]

While extremely nervous about wide-ranging Zionist goals, there was some talk of cooperation between the two communities, even expressions of admiration, perhaps envy. *Filastin*, for example, wrote admiringly of the revival of Hebrew as a living language and hailed the agricultural accomplishments of the Jewish settlements. Occasionally, friendships were formed, but purely on a personal basis. No support of Zionism took root among the Arabs. Quite the contrary, inflamed even further by what they viewed as unfair economic competition, there were calls for violent action against these overbearing colonists. Clashes over water rights or land boundary disputes were frequent; crops were often set on fire. Sporadic, uncoordinated acts of Arab violence broke out, leading every so often to killings. The Jews responded. Instead of relying on non-Jewish guards, often Bedouin or Circassian, they founded in 1909 *Hashomer* (the Watchman). Mounted on horseback and clad in Arab dress, these self-styled guards of the Jewish settlements had, for the most part, been active in Jewish self-defence in Russia in earlier times. At this stage, any talk of an inevitable conflict between the developing *Yishuv* and the Palestinian Arabs would have been premature; but the pattern for future discord can already be discerned.

The British government had long indicated an interest in Palestine, well before it ordered the occupation of Egypt in 1882. While noting Napoleon's incursion into Egypt, it was the Syrian crises of the 1830s, precipitated by Muhammad Ali's advance from Egypt into Syria, that first drew the attention of the British government to its strategic interests in Syria and Palestine. Compelled to intervene militarily at Acre and Beirut to safeguard its interests, Britain's role was crucial in bringing the crisis to an end. Averting the threat of war between Britain and France, the Straits Convention of July 1841 regulated relations between the Ottoman Empire and the Great Powers – Britain, Russia, France, Austria and Prussia. One unexpected by-product of the crisis was the setting up of a British consulate in Jerusalem in 1838 with instructions to British representatives in the Levant to protect local Jewish communities,[17] perhaps the first instance of British imperial policy merging with a benevolent interest in the fate of the Jewish community in Palestine. In the late 1870s British concern took another turn. Collaborating with the Palestine Exploration Fund, the War Office seconded officers – including one Horatio Herbert Kitchener – to conduct a detailed survey of Palestine, west of the River Jordan, an exercise with a clear military purpose. It resulted in a twenty-six-sheet map, on a scale of one inch to the mile, of western Palestine from Dan to Be'ersheva.[18]

With the British occupation of Egypt and control of the Canal, those areas to the north-east of Egypt, the Sinai peninsula and Palestine, assumed crucial significance. Indeed, most British observers would not have taken exception to the definition of Palestine as 'the Clapham Junction of the Commonwealth'. To protect the quickest and cheapest route to India and British interests in the Far East it was vital to preserve these regions as a buffer zone, free of any rival imperialist predators – France taking pride of place in British suspicions. The possibility of an

autonomous Jewish settlement in El-Arish – an area strategically located in northern Sinai astride the coastal route to Syria and the Lebanon – was raised by British ministers, Joseph Chamberlain and Lord Lansdowne, the Foreign Secretary, with Herzl in 1902. Nothing came of it. Asserting a lack of sufficient water supplies to sustain the project, the Egyptian government, presided over by Lord Cromer, Egypt's Proconsul, who also happened to be 'the most disagreeable Englishman' Herzl had ever met, effectively stymied the scheme.[19]

Fortunately Joseph Chamberlain proved far more amenable, though not in quite the way Herzl had envisaged. In August 1903 Herzl reported to Congress Chamberlain's latest proposition: a self-governing Jewish community in East Africa, 'everything of course under the sovereign jurisdiction of Great Britain'. Herzl emphasised to a hot-tempered Congress that the new territory could never dislodge the ultimate goal of Palestine, but this radical, unconventional, and temporary, solution would help alleviate the desperate situation of eastern European Jewry, still reeling from the effects of the Kishinev pogroms. Hoping to disarm his critics, he underlined his allegiance to Palestine. In a gesture of high theatre, Herzl raised his right hand and recited in Hebrew: 'If I forget thee, oh Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its cunning.'[20] But despite Herzl's vigorous advocacy, opposition was widespread – first and foremost among the Russian delegates, who viewed Herzl's strategy as little more than apostasy. Conveniently for the *nein-sagers* the government, under pressure from British expatriates in East Africa, began to back-pedal. Following a negative report by a Commission of Inquiry, the scheme was finally buried in 1905, but only after stirring up the gravest crisis yet experienced by the Zionist movement. For the Zionists the controversy over the so-called 'Uganda crisis'[fn7] had one positive outcome: it confirmed for them the centrality of

Palestine in the Zionist programme. Palestine remained very much on the agenda – and this filtered through to some British policy-makers.[21]

Factored into these political-strategic arguments were more scriptural considerations. Ever since Oliver Cromwell had decided to allow the Jews to return to England in December 1655, the concept of the Return of the Jews to Palestine had been a topic for public debate, much of it highly polemical. The restoration of the Jews to Palestine, it was held, was a necessary precursor of the 'Latter Days', when 'the Messiah would come once again to inaugurate the reign of righteousness and justice, brotherhood, freedom and peace'. Nurtured on the Scriptures and strengthened by a deeply held bond with the Old Testament, there emerged an influential school of British politicians and publicists who acted and felt as though they were fulfilling an historic mission when furthering the cause of the Return. A colourful assortment of Victorian personages took up this challenge: Lord Shaftesbury, George Eliot, Laurence Oliphant, Colonel Henry Churchill among others. Some prominent British policy-makers of the early twentieth century – Lloyd George and Balfour, Smuts and Milner among them – were the natural heirs to this rich inheritance. 'Towards such a people one has a feeling of awe,' recorded one gentile Zionist, 'they are so well known, and yet so old and eternal.'[22]

It was the First World War that afforded Britain the opportunity to define in earnest her intentions towards the Middle East in general and Palestine in particular. Only days after Constantinople had joined the Central Powers the Prime Minister, Henry Herbert Asquith, in a speech at the Guildhall, spelled out the 'death-knell' of the Ottoman Empire. 'The Turkish Empire', he proclaimed, 'has committed suicide and dug its grave with its own hand.'[23] With the western front frozen in a bloody stalemate, the

drive began to unravel the Ottoman Empire. Britain's purpose was defined early on, set out in the de Bunsen Committee report, an interdepartmental assessment of British interests, or 'desiderata', in their preferred term. Later, Britain's allies – France and Russia – were brought in by the Sykes-Picot agreement, a much maligned and misconstrued accord. And to round off the picture, the British also drew in the nascent Arab and Zionist nationalist movements, dispensing pledges distinguished only by a studied vagueness.

The future of Palestine was considered in all of these documents. Owing to the sensitivity of the Holy Places and the interests of the Great Powers, de Bunsen called for 'Palestine [to] be recognised as a country whose destiny must be the subject of special negotiations, in which both belligerents and neutrals are alike interested'. In the event of partition, de Bunsen went on, Britain's strategic position in the eastern Mediterranean would be maintained by controlling the area from the line 'Tadmor (Palmyra)-Acre' in the north and, following 'the coast as far as the boundary of Egypt, include the whole Sinai peninsula, and then run from Akaba to the Persian Gulf'. In effect, this would include all of western and eastern Palestine in the British sphere of interest. Sir Mark Sykes[fn8] – a prime mover also in the de Bunsen Committee – was more circumspect in his talks with the French diplomat François Georges-Picot and, while echoing de Bunsen's insistence on the international significance of Palestine, he made it abundantly clear that Britain required a foothold in Palestine. Accordingly, in the final draft of the document they drew up, Britain was awarded the ports of Haifa and Acre – naval bases in the making – together with the right to own and administer a railway link from an enclave around Haifa bay to 'Area B', which itself extended to Akaba in the South and to the Euphrates in the east, a zone designated as the British zone.[24]

British negotiations with the Arabs were conducted on an entirely different plane. Since February 1914, intermittent contacts between the parties had taken place, broaching ways of political, even military, cooperation against the Turks. Nothing came of these early gambits. Now, anxious to involve the Arabs in their war against the Ottomans, the British, through Sir Henry McMahon, High Commissioner in Egypt, pursued a labyrinthine correspondence with the Sherif Husayn of Mecca, the titular head of the Arab nationalist movement, who, together with his sons, Abdullah and Faysal, was intent on attaining the greatest measure possible of Arab statehood. The exchange ended in a stand-off. The original Arab demands, although recorded under Husayn's name, had in fact been formulated by Abdullah. He set out an audacious programme: a greater Arab state bounded by Persia and the Indian Ocean in the east, the Red Sea in the south, the eastern Mediterranean littoral up to Mersina (lying on the Turkish coastline) in the west, and in the north, on a line from Mersina and Adana to the Persian border.

The British agreed in principle, but with several reservations. They excluded 'portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo', and emphasised time and again that they were not free to enter into any obligations detrimental to the regional interests of their allies, the French. As these clearly included significant areas of the hinterland of the eastern Mediterranean coastline, Palestine, almost by definition – but never referred to by name in the correspondence – was also excluded. Husayn reluctantly accepted these caveats, but promised to return to his initial claims 'at the first opportunity after this war is finished'. Despite this proviso, Husayn launched his revolt against the Ottomans some months later, in June 1916.[25]

The Zionists barely entered into this dialogue at this stage. In England, Chaim Weizmann – not yet the dominant

figure in Zionism – was engaged in what he called ‘reconnoitring’, hobnobbing with influential socialites, politicians and journalists, his wartime work as an organic chemist on behalf of the British government smoothing his path into these exclusive circles.

Weizmann was an imposing figure. In almost every particular he differed from Herzl. Born in Motol, a shtetl near Pinsk, he was an authentic child of the Pale of Settlement. Steeped in Jewish ritual and tradition, his mother tongue was Yiddish. A convinced Anglophile in later life, he wrote as a child of eleven: ‘All have decided: THE JEWS MUST DIE, but England will nevertheless have mercy upon us.’ An active Zionist from his earliest days, he concluded in the same letter: ‘In conclusion to Zion! – Jews – to Zion! let us go.’[26] A truly charismatic figure, he possessed superb diplomatic qualities. Pragmatic in approach, he was ready for compromise without ever losing sight of the main aim. Unhappy at Herzl’s strictly political strategy, he set out his own formula: ‘synthetic Zionism’, combining practical work in Palestine with political canvassing among the nations.

But in these early days, neither the force of his personality nor the cogency of his arguments produced concrete results. Yet the notable contacts he made – Balfour, Lloyd George, Churchill among them – were to prove crucial in the future; and none more so than at one such reconnoitring session in December 1914 when he met Herbert Samuel, President of the Local Government Board and the first practising Jew to sit in a British Cabinet. Samuel astonished Weizmann. Although not a paid-up member of the Zionist movement, he spoke like a true Zionist, arguing on traditional Zionist lines for a Jewish state in Palestine, while, as a responsible cabinet minister eager to secure British imperial interests, he also maintained that it should fall under British protection. Samuel translated these ideas into an official memorandum